

WATER GOVERNANCE AND GENDER. A CASE STUDY IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

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Abstract

This article discusses how gender segregation is expressed and recreated in water management in the formal institutions of decision-making in Cuxtepeques Irrigation District 101, located at the municipality of La Concordia, Chiapas, Mexico. It examines the cultural barriers associated with masculinity that prevent rural women consider as legitimate farmers and water users for domestic and productive, able to be awarded the right to participate on equal terms in the processes of water management. We conclude that water governance in the District is far from equitable and inclusive. To reduce the gender gap in water management are not enough policy changes, but requires challenging the strong association between cultural and ideological spaces and domestic production-male-female water management, deconstruct cultural symbols organized and structured practices and representations about the links between gender and water.

Keywords: water governance, gender and water, equity, social participation, Chiapas.

Introduction

Public policies continue to adopt two approaches in addressing the linkages between gender and water. On the one hand, the predominant approach to meeting basic needs in the sector of water supply and sanitation, and on the other hand, is this productivist approach in the field of water for economic activities. While women have a clearly identified in the field of water for domestic uses in water management policy for agricultural production women become invisible due to agriculture and irrigation activities are associated with masculinity and work are identified as exclusively male. The apparent gender neutrality of laws and policies on water management should be questioned to understand the role played by the rules, norms and practices of gender in the allocation of resource rights and governance structures.

The article discusses how to express gender segregation in the formal institutions of water management and decision-making, such as Water Users Association, in four communities in an area irrigated by the tributaries of the Grijalva River, located in the municipality of La Concordia, Chiapas, southern Mexico. We examine the legal and cultural barriers associated with masculinity that have prevented women from being recognized as users of water for domestic and productive purposes and to exercise their right to participate on equal terms.

Methods

Interviews and questionnaires to women farmers and water users, interviews with members and officials of the Water Users Association and other key subjects. Also, information was obtained through my participation as an observer at many meetings in the management of water bodies and through participant observation in the study communities.

Results and discussion

International institutions that design water policies argue that the water crisis being experienced by humanity is due to a depletion in models of management and centralized management of the resource, "the water crisis is primarily a crisis of governance" (GWP, 2000). The Dublin Principles have established social participation in water management and the World Water Vision (WWC, 2000) identifies three primary objectives for the integrated management of water resources, including empowering women, men and communities to can organize and decide on access to water for economic activities.

Despite the clear reference to the participation of men and women in decision-making on water management, the reality is that water policies in Mexico have not incorporated a gender perspective and there are still strong resistance to recognizing women as users of water and accept their participation in decision-making on resource management. Water policies tend to separate water uses under productive space-male and domestic-feminine. This impedes understanding gender relations and diversity of uses and users of water that is found in close connection on a daily basis. Because women do domestic work, is supposed to only use the water to meet household needs, but does not recognize the use of water for productive activities they do, it is considered that agriculture is a male activity (Zwarteveen and Bennett, 2005).

In 1992, water management policies promoted the transfer of the operation of the irrigation infrastructure to water users, for which Users Association was formed in the study area. The laws and policies recognize as users who have a title to land, which excluded women, since they represent only 12% of total farm holders (Ruiz, 2009). Women use irrigation water for domestic use and productive, but lack opportunities to participate in water management bodies. Not having land and not be recognized as water users are also excluded from participating in the management areas of water resources, such as the Users' Association. This discrimination is multiplied by the obstacles women face in accessing funding, training and technical advice.

Rural women have always used water in various productive activities and this type of work has increased from the increasing migration of men. However, as a result of the artificial division between male and female areas with respect to land use and water management, the role of women as farmers is not recognized and are not endowed with water rights. Gender bias could not be viewed women as

legitimate users, with capacity to be creditors of water rights and to participate as members of the Water Users Association.

On a daily basis, rural women face many problems in accessing water for household and productive work in conditions of equity. Although they are the main users of the resource, lack of space and opportunity to present their problems and needs.



Fig. 1 Peasant women washing clothes in the canal irrigation

In the driest periods of the year the shortage of water is higher, so that poor women tend to use water for irrigation to meet their domestic needs, like washing clothes, but the water is contaminated by heavy use of agrochemicals. Farmers, who are adversely affected by the polluting effects of detergents and chlorine, have aggressively sought to take action against these women. They, unlike men, have no space to make their voice heard and only get threats and prohibitions which do not solve the problem of water shortages and the spaces of representation in management and decision formally established. So says a peasant woman:

“Women are not in the water committees, we do not take into account when there are problems with water supply. Also people think badly of women who leave their community and go to work away from home”.

The gender norms and practices are a major constraint for women to exercise their right to own resources and engage in public spaces. Through inheritance customs and practices that favor males, there has been an unequal distribution of land and water between the genders. For its part, the patterns of sexual division of labor invisible women’s involvement in community activities and productive outside the home. The assignment of women to the private sector assumes that male meeting places are not appropriate for them and the risk of not following this policy has costs in its moral integrity. The roles and opportunities for social and culturally defined action for men and women do not contribute to facilitate women’s participation in water management bodies.

Conclusions

We conclude that the institutional framework around which are made of water management processes in the Irrigation District 101 Cuxtepeques is not inclusive, representative and equitable consensus building. Governance seen from a gender perspective highlights the obstacles faced by women to ensure their effective participation in decision-making processes. Continue to narrow the opportunities for women to articulate their interests and translate them into the exercise of their right to water, to enforce their right to participate in public decision-making as an expression of genuine participation.

Reducing the gender gap in control over the water not only involves changes in laws and policies, can not be reduced to the participation of rural women in management bodies, but requires deep cultural changes of all actors social groups involved in water management, including women themselves. A key factor in the control of rural women on the water is the recognition and social legitimacy of their needs and priorities in water management. To discern changes must deconstruct cultural symbols that organize and structure the practices and representations of the linkages between gender and water, subvert androcentric culture built around the use of water for productive purposes (Zwarteveen, 2008).

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