

POSTCARD

28. Challenging intersecting inequalities around access to water

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Around the world, inequalities in access to water remain a critical daily issue of survival. Challenging cultural values, gendered roles and power structures is critical to reducing intersecting inequalities of access to water. In turn, these inequalities are exacerbated in many places by climate change. Climate variability via severe drought or flooding is predicted to bring about significant changes to food production systems in sub-Saharan Africa, leading to millions of people being threatened by hunger if the temperature rises by between 2.5 and 4.0 °Celsius. In this scenario, access to water is critical for survival.

However, marginalized groups, and women and children from within these groups, particularly in rural communities, suffer from appallingly low levels of access to safe water. They continue to face major challenges; walking 3–4 km daily to public water points, carrying 20–25 litre containers on their heads, and having to stand and wait in long queues. There is an urgent need for a collective voice calling for dignity, compassion and solidarity for access to water for all.

In Siavonga, Zambia, in a village known as Sanjemuleke, women wake up at 5 a.m. and queue for water. This can take up to five hours and may not guarantee that they will access water, as it is not shared equally but on a first come, first served basis.

In the Chirundu District, in Lusitu Village, the Siavonga River has dried up and people rely on digging scoop holes in the dry river bed. Pregnant women going to deliver their babies have to bring their own water to be accepted onto the maternity ward in the local clinic.

Water from the scoop holes makes our children sick and when we go to the clinic sometimes there is no medicine to treat them (from a focus group discussion with women, Namasheshe Village, Zambia, August 2015).

The water from the scoop holes is never enough . . . we have to ration how we draw water (from a focus group discussion with women and men, Chinkome Village, Zambia, August 2015).

Our research in Zambia and Malawi suggests that such inequalities regarding access to water are deeply rooted in cultural and gendered inequalities and power structures.

It would be good to see more men helping us with this chore because the 20-litre containers are heavy to carry (from a focus group discussion with women, Chitete Village, Zambia, August 2015).

‘Getting water is women’s work – a man will never do this job if he wants to keep his reputation.’ The reasons for this, described by Ruth Mwyene, a farmer from Malawi attending the World Social Sciences Forum in Durban in 2015, come down to ‘cultural values and traditional belief systems. Men are “providers” of the household with women’s roles being described as “caring” for the house: cooking, collecting water, looking after children.’

Feedback from poor and marginalized groups in these communities also indicates their feelings of being helpless and worthless, which implies being seen as low-class people by the headman, and considering themselves abandoned by society. There is also a sense of being cut off from government interest as if they are an ‘insignificant’ people.

In this village, we live like orphans. We are like refugees in our own country. The government doesn’t seem to care about us and our welfare. They only think about us during elections when they come to beg for our votes (from a focus group discussion with women and men, Suluba Village, Zambia, August 2015).

Challenging such deep-seated social inequalities will require a collective voice. Our evidence from dialogue and discussion with marginalized farmers in Malawi and Zambia suggests that this voice will require demands for greater access to water supply services, but also demands for dignity, compassion and solidarity, with the aim of reducing deeper forms of intersecting inequalities.

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