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Women and Rural Water Management: Unequal Power Relations and Gender Stereotypes, Ondo State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT. Inadequate access to potable water continues to be a serious problem in villages in Nigeria. Due to cultural and religious perceptions with regard to gender roles in rural water management, the marginalisation of women from rural water management (RWM) has continued to hamper rural development, reinforcing subjective perceptions of the social construction of gender roles in water management. This study proceeded using a purposive sampling technique with 30 In-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions comprising of eight males and eight females in each of the three study sites. The study draws from a gender-based participatory paradigm that conceptualised gender roles and women's participation as representing partnership and ownership. Findings from this study revealed that rural women are solely responsible for the sustenance of their family's potable water provision. Further findings show that perceptions about gender roles in RWM and the time women spend in water provision make their inclusion in RWM impossible. Therefore, the gender power differential which re-emphasises the culturally perceived role of women in water management could be partly responsible for prolonging water challenges faced by rural communities.

KEYWORDS: gender stereotypes, gender equality, women, water, rural water management

Introduction

Access to potable water is critical to survival and is a particular challenge in Nigerian rural communities where clean potable water is scarce. Rural women who, although known within the local communities as primary collectors of water and directly affected negatively by the scarcity of potable water, are seldom involved in essential water management activities (Dang, 2017). The domestic (female) and productive (male) do-

mains have created a false dichotomy that allows for women to be seen only in their reproductive role as wives, mothers and caregivers and not as actors who could participate effectively in the issues of rural water management and development. Conventional development has focused on men and “marginalised the women to the more marginal welfare sector” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13–24). This paper therefore examines perceptions about the management of unclean water among rural dwellers and the participation of women in RWM beyond the household level. Potable water, which can reduce the “burden of water provision on women and girl children thereby increasing their efficiency measures that in the end will reduce health-care costs” (Mehta, 2006, p. 63–78), is either scarce or not available. Aromolaran (2013, p. 631) argued that potable water can be made more easily available in the rural areas, and without ‘modern chemicals’ which are not affordable, by intensifying indigenous practices. Indigenous/rural approaches, like the use of *Moringa oleifera* and other local practices, are considered to be cost-effective and safe. Moringa seeds have been traditionally used to successfully purify “highly turbid water with 90–99 per cent of the bacteria removed from streams or river water, making it safe for drinking in place of the regular materials like chlorine and alum”, which are often not available for rural dwellers (Sajidu et al., 2005, p. 251). A study involving gender analysis that covers the broad context and the various dynamics of a rural water project including indigenous approaches was therefore carried out. This analysis involved arranging various groups of women and men into diverse situations and at different times, in different bargaining positions in relation to their approval and acceptance of different roles. It was hoped this would make it possible to anticipate better how new ways of using water and managing it can bring about much-needed changes in the complex socially negotiated construction of roles (IUCN & Oxfam, 2018).

Like other communities across the globe, Ondo operates within a patriarchal system, especially in rural areas. It was observed at the research sites that women’s voices remain invisible beyond their homes. This was expressed and investigated during focus group discussions and in-depth interviews when male and female respondents were asked about their perceptions of the role of women in rural water management, both at home and in the community. At the household level, the burden of the provision of potable water falls on the shoulders of the women. This makes it impossible for the women, due to their weak and unequal socio-economic power and lack of education, to productively engage with their male counterparts

or actively participate in water management activities at the community level. By way of community awareness movements and engaging of the women in supervisory positions, stereotypical sentiments around women can be dismantled, with respect to their involvement in rural water management. However, research has argued that the varying gender roles in rural water management beyond women's household responsibilities, have not been extensively acknowledged. This is the point of insertion for this particular study. This paper, therefore, aims to examine the effects of gender stereotypes and gender power differentials as seen in RWM practices in selected rural communities in Ondo. The concluding section considers ways to increase women's involvement in rural water management and reduce the impact of cultural and religious perceptions which are critical issues around a participatory approach in RWM.

1. A Gender-Based Participatory Paradigm in Water Management

This paper adopts a gender-based participatory paradigm (Izueke & Ezichi-Ituma, 2018) as a conceptual framework in which participation can be conceptualised as representative of partnership and ownership; this is a 'bottom-up' approach involving people at different levels, ensuring that decisions are soundly made and based on shared knowledge. A process is required that emphasises people's empowerment and participation, gender equality, legitimacy, transparency, responsibility and effectiveness. The new institutional structures introduced under gender equity based participatory models of local governance seek to balance out gender inequalities by presenting a platform where women can be organised alongside men and be allowed to express their opinions as well as contribute effectively in decision-making processes. With respect to rural water management, women's participation seeks to correct inequalities perceived in terms of access to water resources and benefits from rural water development projects as well as the exercising of decision-making powers with respect to the management of these resources (Kabeer, 2005). To translate the ethics of enhancing stakeholders' participation, especially that of women in local water governance processes, new institutional spaces have been created through, for example, decentralisation. However, in the context of local governance, this implies interaction among participants (mostly women and sometimes men) and stakeholders (mostly men) in determining their

development agenda and in managing resources to implement the delivery of potable water among households, which is their development priority (Blackburn, Chambers & Gaventa, 2000).

The European Commission has posited that participation and the rise of this notion have resulted from the expansion in development discourse while its agenda beyond the technical arena was to include institutional designs for facilitating the involvement of stakeholders in the maintenance of technologies and management of resources. The unification of the concepts of active participation and local management for improved operative and unbiased development is further engendered by advocating equitable participation of women. A very important hypothesis here is that women symbolise a relegated group in society whose lives are trapped in a formal framework characterised by gross inequalities of prescribed supremacy and authority in the community and deprived of equal admittance to and management of resources. There are various stages and perceptions of stakeholder participation. The first stage is discussion, where managerial bodies consult with the public to learn from their knowledge, opinions, experiences and concepts—here the procedure does not allow any share in decision-making. The second stage involves participation in the development and execution of strategies and programmes. The public participates actively by debating problems and jointly contributing to their solutions. At the third and highest stage, active involvement has to do with collective decision-making. Here, community members are equally granted an opportunity in the decision-making and are also responsible for outcomes (adapted from European Commission, 2003).

2. Qualitative Research Methodology

2.1. Research Methodology

2.1.1. Study Location

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods which are useful for investigation where social and physical issues interrelate. These have been applied in several water-related fields such as ‘drought’, ‘water politics’ and ‘water and gender’. The study started in November 2019 and ended in February 2020 by engaging three rural communities in Ondo State, Nigeria. The first research phase started in Ile-Oluji which has a latitude of 7°12’6.27” N and a longitude of 4°52’3.44” E. The residents of this village

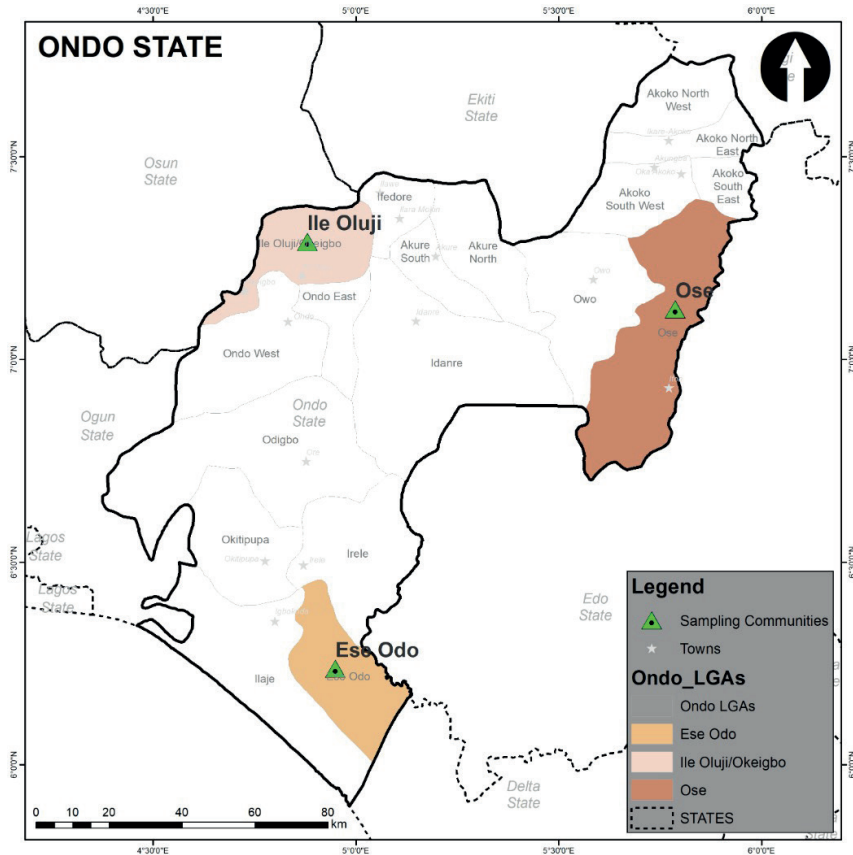


Figure. Map of Ondo State and the Selected Study Communities

(Agric Farm Settlements) are a mixed population in the sense that most of the resident are people from the neighbouring states with only a few native. We then proceeded to the second study site which is a village in Ose, located in the eastern part of the state with latitude $6^{\circ}55'47.03''$ N and longitude $5^{\circ}46'25.25''$ E. This area is predominantly occupied by farmers who were also involved with other jobs like trading. Farming here is practiced at a much larger scale in comparison with Ile-Oluji. The study finally ended at Ese-Odo, which is located at a latitude of $6^{\circ}13'2.7''$ (6.2174°) north and longitude $4^{\circ}57'52.5''$ (4.9646°) east. Although this area is surrounded by a very deep large river, the residents still need to manage their water locally, to make it potable. The major occupation here is fishing and farming.

2.1.2. Study Sampling

A simple random sampling method was used in this research and the selection of participants was based on those whose ages were above 35 years. The researcher thought that this age group would provide rich historical evidence around indigenous water management in their community. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions (FGDs). These assisted in gathering experiences around the water insecurities, livelihood of women, and gender sensitivity of the community in rural water management. In-depth interviews with five males and five female participants from each of the three rural communities, totalling 30 participants in all including the key informants, were held across the research sites. FGDs were also conducted at the village centre between women and men separately across the study sites. These comprised eight males and eight females in each study area totalling 48 participants across the three study communities, most of whom were drawn from the participants of the in-depth interviews.

2.1.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were mainly done in English which is the predominant language in the selected villages. However, where respondents felt that communicating in the local language (Yoruba) would aid their understanding in interviews and FGDs, interviews were conducted in Yoruba and then translated to English. All interviews were recorded with the consent of interviewees, and those in Yoruba were translated and transcribed by the researcher. Excerpts of narratives are presented verbatim and were used in thematic analysis. Sets of themes described in the result and discussion section were decoded from the transcription of the audio recording during the interview and FGDs. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

2.1.4. Limitations and Ethical Issues

The limitations in data collections in this study were minimized by using the individual in-depth interview, FGDs and undertaking all the interviews in the individual villages or home settings of the interviewees. However, gender sensitive questions could not be addressed properly in the FGDs across the study sites especially in the women's group but were dealt with at the individual in-depth interview. Hence, to protect participants, sensitive issues around gender and water management were not discussed in open groups and informed consent was given before com-

mencing the study. Pseudo names were adopted in the entire study area with each name representing a collective or similar perception around each interview question.

3. Contextual Background

In the global and developed countries, the importance of a potable water supply and management systems has been the subject of serious attention which is reflected in the measurement of human developments and their inclusion in the Sustainable Developments Goals. According to Mehta (2006), development discourses and practices in the global south are being permeated by community participation both within organisational structures and rural water management. This moves away from gender stereotypes into community-based participation, although gradual, is becoming global discourse which is also trickling into the life of the rural dwellers. This move that seeks to include women has been as a result of the failure of extensive water focused and development projects which has consistently come under huge criticism (Agarwal, 2001). After the projected resolution that led to the development of the Women in Development (WID) approach and the declaration of a decade for women between 1975 and 1985, women became the target for developmental assistance. It was hoped this would address several areas by making development more effective, decreasing poverty, targeting basic needs and improving gender equity (Moser, 1989). However, social transformation was not presented; hence WID was strongly critiqued (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead, 2004) for its technical approach and for evading issues of power and inequality. Kabeer claimed it was like “treating cancer with Bandaid” (2005, p. 20). This did, however, affect the approach of Gender and Development (GAD), which now allows for a better understanding of power relations, diversities of race and class. This gender analysis contributes to ‘deconstructing’ the internal activities of the household and relating these to wider societal procedures.

Stereotyping among the rural population in Ondo has become entrenched. Therefore, whatever does not conform to the norm is seen to be defiant of culture and the way of life. Issues around water management and the scarcity of potable water are experienced by all, irrespective of gender, and one might therefore assume that everyone would be almost equally affected. Both males and females across rural communities have been

moulded either by fate, class or education into a particular role around indigenous/rural water management practices, which has continued to affect the availability and access of potable water among rural settlers. While the women are continuously mentioned as the “beneficiaries of water management and approaches”, they are never involved in the decision and planning process of indigenous water management, which is always dominated by men (Finn & Jackson, 2011, p. 1232–1248). However, Resurreccion (2006) argued that such approaches, due to the ways in which they support gender stereotypes, create additional burdens for women by reinforcing male hegemony in indigenous water management. The gender and development (GAD) approach aims to re-integrate gender into all development systems, structures and practices by promoting changes in institutional practice, women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Furthermore, Hope, Dixon and Von-Maltitz (2003, p. 94–110) explored men’s communal responsibility which is so different from the responsibility of the women as well as the cultural perception of the role of men in rural water supply and management, “making it easy for the males to continue to dominate the water sector and overlooking/underplaying the possible contributions of the women”. As a result of this non-participatory approach, many rural water projects failed both in the 1970s and 1980s due to established cultural norms and management gender bias (see Van Wijk-Sijbesma, 1998). Consequently, the 1970s through to the 1990s experienced a major and definitive shift into gender mainstreaming and incorporation by addressing the concerns of water management and the involvement of men and women from very low community settings (rural) to the highest points in government (urban). This intervention was based on the appropriate connections that should exist between gender equity and sustainable management of rural water (ibid.). Due to growing concern at little to no female presence in rural water management, women are now gradually being co-opted into local structures managing water in regions of Eastern Africa, like Tanzania, and in West Africa, like Nigeria.

Therefore, to attain the Sustainable Development Goal of halving the number of people not having access to potable water, one can maintain that what is required is a gender-based collective and participatory framework between women and men in rural water management practices which is devoid of stereotypes. While scholars (Moser, 1989; Agarwal, 2001; Singh, 2006) have widely explored the impact of gender differentials of rural communities, little has been done with respect to gender stereotypes and unequal power in rural water management. O’Reilly (2006, p. 958–972)

also agreed with the notion that gender stereotypes can be “dismantled during rural projects by making desirable alternatives available to the women which could be constructed through awareness raising targeted at specific group like the traditional heads”. Likewise, the assessment of the role of gender and the changing gender relationships in organisations are becoming better understood in research and development through gender analysis (see Coles & Wallace, 2005).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Social Construction of Gender Roles in Rural Water Management

While women are continuously being cited as the “beneficiaries of water management and approaches”, they are never involved in the decision and planning process of indigenous water management, which is always dominated by men (Finn & Jackson, 2011, p. 1232–1248). Elmhirst and Resurreccion (2008) argued that such approaches create additional burdens for women by reinforcing male hegemony in indigenous water management.

Both males and females across rural communities have been moulded either by fate, class or education into particular roles around indigenous/rural water management practices, which has continued to affect the availability of potable water among rural settlers without access to pipe-borne water. Apart from the challenge of access to water, access to some of the materials used for water management (also the responsibility of the women) is another problem. Men do not take on this role and the women have somehow accepted this as a further burden. One might assume that stereotyping would not be evident in issues around water management because the scarcity of potable water is experienced by all, irrespective of gender, and it affects everyone almost equally (Evertzen, 2001). Stereotyping among the rural population in Ondo has been entrenched into the way of life so that it has become a norm. Whatever does not conform to this norm is therefore seen to be defiant of culture and the way of life of the people.

Community-level meetings comprising of men only relate to the women through the wife of the community high chief. The only responsibility given to the women at the community level is to cook during the meeting, which the men believe is one of the fundamental roles of the women. Hence, the need to enhance community participation where women and

men both have an input into their development conflicts with local socio-political complexities (Agarwal, Delos-Angeles & Bhatia, 2002; Zwartveen, 2008). While the core role of women in water management in the 'Global South' has been widely studied (Agarwal, 1997; Bakker, 2007), it is not yet clear how exactly 'gender and power' are being maintained by 'social hierarchies and stereotypes', according to Shah, Scott and Buechler (2004, p. 361–370). Narratives from women participants across the selected rural communities reveal how gender stereotypes are being practised unconsciously among the rural dwellers and the way in which this has impacted on the availability of and access to potable water in the villages.

Before 10:30 I am through with all the water activities. I think these days, things are changing and some of our women want to be doing what the men are doing, I think that is against God and reversing the order of God (interview with female member in Ile-Oluji, November 2019).

Really, we are helpless, because a woman does not have a voice in this community and so there is no point trying to make a point. After every day's activity of getting water and making some of it potable, we are so tired and useless such that most women are sleeping between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. (interview with female member in Ese-Odo, December 2019).

In Ese-Odo, women also wake early to fetch water from the "Yemoja"¹ spring. They then need to wait or come back in the evening so that the spring can replenish itself. The other option is to use a boat to go further from the main riverbank but this is dangerous, as the water is very deep. The women all stated that their men do not fetch water or engage in local water management; they regard their efforts as primarily for their children's future. The committee that looks after the water does not allow the women to take an active role in the rural water management meetings.

The narratives above reflect women's views with respect to their cultural role in rural water management activities. One response stood out: a woman participant was curious to know what the questions about equal participation would achieve in the management of their water. She did not see the usefulness of equal participation; she believed that the issues around water can only be successfully managed by men as this is part of a role given to them by God. She observed that recently women had started to grumble about their IWM activities, which she viewed as unnecessary.

¹ Yemoja is a water goddess that is believed among this community to supply water.

Another female participant reiterated that it was culturally acceptable for women not to complain or expect assistance from men in water management. This she supported with her strong religious sentiments, revealing that, from Creation, God had already made the man above the woman, and that a woman was supposed to learn and serve with submission “like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord” (1 Peter 3:6), she quoted from the Bible. She argued that women who are pushing for “all that nonsense” (interview with the female member in Ese-Odo, December 2017) about equal participation do not understand the order of God in the way things should be done. Although she agreed that the burden of water provision is huge and that assistance should be sought from the government, she felt it should not be sought from the men because, by doing so, one is trying to rearrange the order of God.

As noted by Singh (2006, p. 357–366), men’s communal obligation and the huge difference from the obligation of the women as well as the cultural and religious perception of the role of men in rural water supply and management, make “it easy for the males to continue to dominate the water sector”. This study observed that no matter how highly “educated”² a woman may be, she can never rise above the traditional, religious, and customary practices which make rural women subservient to men in Nigeria. There has been a shift in gender mainstreaming by addressing the concerns of water management and the involvement of men and women, from community settings (rural) through to the highest points in government (urban) from the 1970s through to the 1990s. This focus on gender equity and sustainable management of rural water is based on a growing concern regarding the lack of female presence in rural water management (UNICEF-WHO, 2011).

4.2. Gender Power Relations in Water Management

According to Lawuyi (1998), women are believed to have a special closeness with water which is deeply connected with feminine power. Across cultures, women bear the burden of water collection and they are also usually the managers of domestic/household water, responsible for household health and wellness, and water users in their own right (Strang, 2005). This study noted that women were situated in these roles

² Education among rural people is often measured by the ability to read and communicate in English or by attendance at colleges or universities (interview with key-informant, Ose, December 2019).

by virtue of their gender, age and household status. Hence, household resource use, distribution and structural inequalities in a community can be better understood using gendered analysis. The community involvement of women and men in projects and various water management tasks have to be evaluated in terms of their decision-making powers and the various advantages accrued to them (Agarwal, 2001; Cleaver, 2001; Coles & Wallace, 2005). The participation of women in funded water projects is usually a prerequisite; this does not, however, resolve power issues between rich, poor and educated women and between women and men. Power relations between the women and men across the study community were grossly unequal with most female participants confirming their exclusion from rural water management. It was also noted that sometimes the rich and educated but not the poor women were consulted in aspects of rural water management decision-making. Female participants described how women are side-lined in the issue of rural water management:

It is a difficult life; the women are all alone in the household water management. We are never allowed to say anything publicly that can help improve our water crisis. I am just saying this, I cannot say it louder than this because I would be labelled as a bad woman, not even by the men, but by my fellow rich women (interview with a female key informant in Ese-Odo, December 2019).

This is a woman's role but if the men can give us some assistance, this would mean the world to us. It is hard and not fair, and I believe there are more meaningful activities a woman too can be engaged with (interview with a female participant in Ose, November 2019).

These female participants described the process of daily collection of water as starting very early in the morning (some as early as 3.30 a.m.) until around 7.30 a.m. followed by about two hours to make the water potable. Thus, water management activities can take up to six hours and must be done in addition to other regular daily household chores like cooking. These women lamented how much else they could do with this time. Furthermore, it was observed that at community meetings and for any planning with respect to water management and community development, women only had as their representatives, the wife of either the king or the high chief (who is rich and educated), who thereafter would call a women's meeting to give them feedback on the developments in the community.

Generally, women across these villages do not have a voice. Cornwall (2003) also noted that the way people experience exclusion and inclusion can be complicated by social relations of class, kinship, marriage and household relations. He further noted that patterns of exclusion exist in water management in a situation where men exclude women from decision making roles and richer men and women limit the access of the poor to potable water. However, Ramamurthy (1997) argued that women can scheme a way through the patriarchal structural influence by resisting, inspiring and replicating power relations that function in a way that participation is enforced in water management. "Observing subjectivities of femininity and masculinity which relates to the activities of inclusion" in water management helps explain why men and women respond to community participation in the ways they do (Resurreccion, 2006, p. 375-400).

Male participants also shared their challenges with respect to water management and their perceptions about the role of women in water management in their community. One male participant (35 years old) commented that women's involvement in indigenous water management differed from that of men. He was from Ose, where they depend on a borehole of about 300 feet deep, unlike the well in Ile-Oluji that is only 60 feet deep. A further difference here is that water is predominantly sold from the compound or by individuals who can afford the cost of having a borehole at their houses. Another 57-year-old male participant claimed that women, or at least his wife, have no other role other than to look after the children and ensure potable water is readily available for the family. Women must queue to buy and fetch water from the nearest borehole. The two narratives below are intended to give the reader a sense of the lived experiences of the villagers.

She wakes up very early in the morning (4 a.m.) to fetch water and would not be through with just fetching until around 9 a.m., because she has to go to more than one point to buy. If I put the distance from all of these points together, daily she covers about 3 km just to fetch or buy water, I can tell you that the men do not do this because this role has been designated to the women (interview with a male participant in Ose, November 2019).

My three wives make the water management activities a little better because they rotate that role among themselves. You can see that the women are useful in taking care of the house most importantly in our water crisis (interview with a male key informant Ese-Odo, December 2019).

Men in all the study sites claimed that issues around water management are the women's responsibility and that it has always been like this and always will be. They acknowledged the scale of the work, but the men do not participate in these activities; this is not an act of 'deliberate wickedness', simply a way of sustaining the culture that has been handed down. It would be strange to see a man participating in household activities, most especially in the fetching of water or the household management of water. It was observed that while the men claimed to appreciate the efforts of the women, this was rarely communicated to the women for fear of affecting their water management activities. The men expressed their concerns about the interviews for this research, especially among their women, because they feared these kinds of questions might affect the women in their normal daily activities.

The rights of women with respect to water are not acknowledged. Gender divisions that apportion water responsibilities to women but confer most controls and rights to men, are experienced in most water issues. Dávila-Poblete and Nieves (2005, p. 49) agreed with this claim and maintained that most water sector decisions continue to be made based on the "false assumption that they are gender neutral", that the population is a 'homogenous whole', and that benefits reach everyone equally, which is not true because the benefits are largely for the men while the labour is for the women. Gender differences are paramount in the priorities chosen by men and women for water use and water management (Rutgerd & Zwartveen, 2002).

When only women carry the burden of household water and only men have the opportunity to contribute to water management project planning, valuable opportunities to build the most effective community water schemes can be lost. Sandys (2005) argued that promoting equitable water resource management involves the abolition of gender stereotypes as a key instrument for developing the efficiency and reach of water sector investments. Improving water issues for women would necessitate modifications at many different levels and in many different areas. It involves altering divisions of labour that presently assign water responsibilities (without rights) to women by changing the current routines of public decision-making that would encourage and necessitate women's participation and alter perceptions about their involvement in water management (O'Reilly, 2008). Ribot (2002) further argued that decentralisation of roles and responsibilities with associated devolution of real powers and the retiring or re-negotiating of perceptions that disallow effective women's

participation, could provide genuine opportunities and a framework for women's participation in water management (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001) and governance at the rural community level.

4.3. Challenges and Perceptions of Women's Participation in RWM

Water and its management are supposed to be a public affair as much as water is accepted to be a public good, which should be available, accessible and affordable to everyone in a community. However, villages in this research are typical of a hierarchical system driven by class and gender discrimination (see O'Reilly, 2008). In the focus group discussions, the women did not openly discuss their participation in local water management activities, and none spoke of their challenges publicly. Dissatisfaction was evident in their faces, mixed with a little fear. No one wanted to be reported to her husband or be accused of talking about her husband in a group. One female participant, for fear of backlash from men, said she would prefer to stay at home and not have anything to do with RWM. A female key informant said the presence of women in indigenous/rural water management at the community level would solve many water challenges.

Most of the women know that all they are after is political gains, but the men would want us to stay away from such meetings with excuses that we cannot contribute meaningfully since we did not go to school (interview with female member in Ose, January 2020).

The responsibility of providing potable water for the household is enormous. Some women were concerned that participation in water management would be adding to their work.

The tasks at home are much and we struggle to finish them every day; why are you trying to add other community activities to our responsibilities? (interview with female member in Ese-Odo, December 2019)

So many participation cases have placed extra demands on women's time or re-emphasised gender stereotypes without status gains or appropriate economic or social benefit in terms of income (Boelens & Zwarteveen, 2002). But because women are generally affected most, their participation in water management schemes would be invaluable and could

ultimately reduce their workloads. According to Barreteau, Bots and Daniell (2010), benefits of full and equal participation range from increased legitimacy of decisions to the development of participatory democracy, in addition to representative democracy, all of which are actions in the direction of sustainable development.

Female participants felt that the men should be fair and kind and hear the women out, because we are well experienced and we know a lot of things with respect to managing water” (a female participant, Ese-Odo, November 2019). However, male cultural perceptions about the role of women make this difficult. Since gender relations are based on attitudes, perceptions and behavioural patterns between men and women, involving women more in water management would affect the socially constructed practices that manifest themselves in the division of labour, roles, responsibilities and access to resources such as water (see Rao & Kelleher, 2005).

The majority of the residents of the rural villages under study were aware of the responsibilities and potential impact of the women in the provision of potable water. However, allowing women to participate in community committees and meetings is a big issue. This issue has been complicated by culture and religion. Women are perceived to be solely responsible for the provision of potable water to the household but participation beyond this sphere is connected with the perception of premeditated democracy, which automatically excludes women (Bernard & Kumalo, 2004). Most men and some of the women believe strongly that women’s roles are not negotiable and are pre-ordained by God. An attempt to change this order would bring the men down and cause friction in their homes. Women, apart from not having time to participate in ‘active decision-making roles within the community, are prohibited by their cultural and religious beliefs from taking active roles in water management (Garcia, 2001, p. 85–98).

Cooke and Kothari (2001) posited that the processes of unfair and unlawful use of power are generally hidden amongst the community and participation has become hegemonic in development discourses. Hence, patriarchy and hegemonic force among rural communities have consistently sustained the perceptions that limit the active participation of women in the RWM especially when it is beyond the sir homes. Agarwal (1997) also noted that participatory organisations are frequently socio-economically unfair and allow for continuous unequal relations of power. This was also observed in the local perceptions about the participation of women in village life which are often worked out through support systems and kinship structures. It is inside this unequal arrangement that water management

projects, supposed to be part of a gendered participatory system, are however perpetuating the cycle of inequality in RWM. Across these rural communities, men do not see the reasons why the women should be part of water management or any communal institutions.

Women are our backbone, women should watch from the back to learn from men (Laugh! Laugh!! Laugh!!!) (interview with male member in Ose, February 2020).

My son, never give a woman more power or more opportunity than she has at home, if you do, there might be chaos (interview with male key informant in Ile-Oluji, November 2019).

The men are likely to be aware that if the women can manage water provision at the household level effectively, they are probably capable of doing this at the community level, but they are probably threatened by this and therefore do not give women this opportunity. All this remains an obstacle to women's involvement in rural water management. Hirsch et al. (2010, p. 23) have showed how "participatory models can be steered in the political and cultural context of Uzbekistan", where usually little opportunity for stakeholder participation is provided. The men *in theory* agree that allowing the participation of the women could affect the local water scheme positively; however, there is a general fear by most of the men that the women would abuse the power and opportunity. One of the participants called me 'son', as if about to reveal deep mysteries, before saying: "If you give a woman power like the one you are talking about, that power would destroy her that is why God made the man first" (interview with male key informant in Ile-Oluji, November 2019). Thus, at the village level, an important cross-cutting theme in the examination of water management and provision is gender, because it is an 'analytical variable' in rural areas; the household provision of domestic water is a gendered issue as is its management at the community level (Mandara, Butijn & Niehof, 2013).

Conclusion

This article has explored unequal power relations and gender stereotypes in water management. It has also considered the potential impact of women in rural water management and their perceptions about their roles. It has examined women's perceived role, which revolves primarily

and culturally around water collection, protection, maintenance and storage at the household level in rural communities in developing countries, including in the research sites in Ondo. A substantial amount of a woman's time is spent on these activities; the women also plan the usage of water for their household carefully, as this can have a direct positive or negative impact upon their families' health.

During the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981–1990), the fundamental role of women was documented and has since been widely deliberated in the drinking water sector. In the context of potable water and its indigenous management for the provision of potable water projects, both the women and the men across the research sites agreed to the positive benefits of involvement of women beyond their homes. However, this was observed to be a theoretical consideration based on the women's contribution to water management at home; beyond the sphere of the home, they were not allowed to participate due to strongly held cultural and religious beliefs and perceptions.

Furthermore, the perceptions about women's roles in rural water management re-emphasise unequal power relations and gender stereotypes, thereby increasing the burden of water management. Gender awareness and sensitivity among the men and women could potentially re-order the perceived cultural role of women (that limits them to reproduction and household managers of water) by involving them actively in community development, especially as it relates to rural water management. The different narratives from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions showed that the under-involvement of women in rural water management practices at the community level had affected the management and adequate provision of water for the villagers. Men who see women's roles as limited to the household functions find it problematic to admit their involvement in the public domain on the assumption that women lack intellectual skills to make decisions.

Finally, I would like to argue that a change in the perceptions about roles and responsibilities with associated devolution of real powers and the re-negotiating of cultural views that disallow effective women's participation could provide genuine opportunities and a framework for women's participation in water management and governance at the rural community level. As much as decentralisation or devolution of power is a process which must be negotiated, the tough reality for the poor and side-lined women is that negotiation could be difficult since it is always dominated by political discourse and women in the rural areas are mostly not privy to this.

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