

Contemporary water governance in the global south

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17 Who is a water user?

The politics of gender in Egypt's water user associations

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It is a crisp winter's day, early in 2008, and a group of five men are sitting in the guest room of a farmer's house in a village in northern Egypt. The room is recently decorated, with a green mat on the floor, ornate armchairs and plaques on the wall with verses from the Koran. The men are gathered for one of the first meetings of a newly elected water user association (WUA).

I enter the room with Mohamed and Saida, two community organizers from Egypt's Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, and Noha, a member of the association whom we collected on our way. Mohamed goes to join the men at one end of the room, and I sit with the two women at the other end. The men start to discuss the problems occurring along their irrigation canal. They talk about a section of the canal that has become blocked with sediment and weeds. The blockage is impeding the flow, with the result that some farmers are not receiving enough water. They need the ministry to bring an excavator to scour out the blockage. One man, acting as secretary, takes notes.

A few times during the discussion Noha interjects with a comment, but the men pay little attention to her. She grows increasingly frustrated. After about half an hour, Noha starts talking quietly to Saida. She says that she is angry because she would like to be secretary of the water user association but the other members have said that she cannot be. She feels that whenever she makes a suggestion, the men ignore her. One of the men notices that Noha is talking to Saida and asks what she is saying. Noha starts speaking in a strong tone, anger simmering beneath her words: 'You don't agree that a woman should be with you. You don't give a woman an opportunity to talk. You don't want any women in the management committee!'¹

In this ethnographic moment, we see the dynamics of participation in action. We see how participation – a theme that has become hegemonic within international water management circles (see Goldin, Chapter 16) – translates into practice on the ground. The group gathered together in the farmer's guest room comprises the management committee of a water user association that was formed through an internationally financed project. This project was one of a number of donor-funded initiatives that have sought to promote participatory water management in Egypt since the 1980s, through the establishment of WUAs, of which there are now over a thousand in Egypt.² The WUAs are designed to

help improve management of the water distribution network, which channels water from the Nile (the source of 96 percent of Egypt's water) through over 48,000 km of canals, mostly to feed agricultural lands (where 90 percent of the water is consumed). While Egypt receives more than 55 billion cubic meters of water a year from the Nile, many farmers do not receive sufficient water to grow the number or type of crops that they would like to. As is often the case (see Mahayni, Chapter 4), this scarcity is a function, primarily, of the distribution system's failure to match supply and demand rather than fundamental water insufficiency. The rationale behind the water user associations – as articulated in the many documents produced by these donor projects – is that they will help the ministry pinpoint problems within the infrastructural system, such as places where canals are blocked, banks eroded or weirs broken. In addition, they will help resolve conflicts, like when farmers take other people's water allocations. The WUAs will, therefore, improve the efficiency with which water flows through the canal network, with the result that more farmers will receive the quantity and quality of water they need.³ It is for this reason that members of the management committee have gathered to discuss the problems along their canal. The secretary writes up the list of problems, which the WUA will then pass on to the district engineer, in the hope that the ministry will address these issues during its next annual maintenance period.

The scene in the farmer's guest room captures the patchiness of participation. The fact that many do not participate in what are meant to be participatory institutions – a phenomenon that Bina Agarwal (2001) describes as 'participatory exclusions' – has been extensively documented in the literature on WUAs (see Kadirbeyoglu and Kurtic, Chapter 18; Morinville and Harris, Chapter 19; and also Hunt, 1989; Mosse, 2003; Pellissery and Bergh, 2007). In this case, as in many others, the limits to participation are drawn in part along gender lines (Harris, 2005; Meinzen-Dick and Zwartveen, 1998). There is only one woman to five men in the management committee meeting, and as that woman states, she does not feel like her voice is being heard. The men in the WUA do not give her a space to express her feelings, nor is she allowed to stand for the post of secretary and record the WUA's priorities in an official report. She becomes angry at her exclusion, the strength of her emotion clearly indicating the lack of participatory parity in this setting. Hence not only is the number of women in the WUAs limited, but the dynamics that play out during WUA meetings preclude the participation of those women who do attend.

Many factors can limit female participation in a WUA. In the Egyptian case, meetings are often held at locations or times that are not conducive to women's attendance. Indeed the reason why we transported Noha to the meeting was because of the inconvenience of its location in relation to her house. Had we not collected her, she may well have not gone to the meeting. On other occasions, women are not told that meetings are taking place. In fact, later in this meeting the men sought to undermine Noha's commitment to the WUA by pointing out that she had failed to attend previous meetings, to which she replied that she was not aware that there had been any meetings.

However rather than focusing on the factors that shape participation after a WUA is formed, this chapter looks at factors that come into play during the preliminary stages of establishing a WUA. A number of authors have identified the fact that ‘rules of membership’ of participatory institutions are often biased against women (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998; Agarwal, 2001). Since most analyses of WUAs have looked at associations that have already been established, though, they have tended to take these rules as a given. My interest here is in how these rules come into being. Who writes them? How are they communicated to the target population? What are some of the ways in which they may be contested? Tracing the origins of these rules helps explain how the people gathered in the farmer’s guest room came to represent the water users in this area, why there was only one woman present at the meeting, and why the men were not interested in her opinion.

By focusing on how these rules were set, enforced and challenged during the process of establishing WUAs in Egypt, I draw attention to the role of a group that has been largely missing from studies of WUAs – those who coordinate the establishment process. In contrast to forms of communal interaction that evolve organically through the shared use of a water source, such as a pump (Hopkins, 1999) or canal (Trawick, 2001), WUAs are communities that are often coordinated ‘from above’. Hence those who do this work of coordination play an important role. In cases where the WUAs are being established by a government, the coordinators may be mid-level government bureaucrats. In cases where the impetus for WUA establishment is coming from international donor agencies, the coordinators are likely to be the international consultants or local staff who run the donor projects.

The chapter draws on a year of ethnographic observation that I conducted in Egypt with a participatory water management project in 2007–8. This project worked in association with the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation (hereafter ‘the ministry’) to establish almost a hundred water user associations throughout one of Egypt’s provinces between 2007 and 2010.⁴ Project activities were implemented by a team of male and female ‘community organizers’ under the leadership of a project manager (an expatriate consultant) and project director (a ministry engineer). Some of the community organizers were agricultural engineers seconded from the ministry; others, most of whom held degrees in social work from the local university, were recruited by the project manager. The male community organizers came from the city where the project was based and from villages around the province; the female community organizers were all from the city. I argue that these people who coordinated the establishment of the WUAs, as well as the particular way in which they understood participation, were key to determining what participation came to mean for the associations and their members. They were the ones to translate the concept of participation – a buzzword of the international water management community – into an on-the-ground reality.

This chapter therefore speaks to the question raised by Sneddon (Chapter 2) about how concepts such as participation travel and how they are molded and

modified in specific circumstances and locales. The chapter shows, first, how different parties debate and challenge the rules of participation according to their contrasting understandings of what it means to be a water user. Second, the chapter demonstrates how those who coordinate the establishment of the WUAs shape what the WUAs come to be through their communication to the community members of what it means to participate. I argue that these interactions and negotiations, which take place during the foundational stages of participatory water management, have profound consequences for how participatory processes subsequently unfold.

How do women use water?

Panning across a bucolic scene of fields and irrigation canals, the camera focuses on a woman dressed in a *galabiya* (the long tunic commonly worn in rural Egypt), who explains that she is a widow. 'I do all the work,' she says. 'A man just turns on the pump then leaves. When a plot takes its fill, I stop it. And so on till I'm done.' The camera cuts to a close-up of a man, also wearing a *galabiya*. He speaks adamantly. 'A woman here can only do certain tasks,' he declares. 'She can't irrigate. She might have to gird up her dress and our customs and traditions wouldn't permit that.' (Most Egyptian farms are flood irrigated, which means that the farmers have to direct the water across their fields by building up and breaking down small dams of earth until the surface is entirely covered.) The camera shifts back to the woman. With her back to the camera, she takes off her brightly patterned *galabiya*, leaving a plain brown one below. She picks up an axe and starts raking away a dam of earth. The water begins to flow from the irrigation ditch onto her field.

I press stop and the image freezes on the screen. It is March 2008 and I am giving a lecture to the project team on gender.⁵ The lecture began with me asking the group of community organizers and ministry engineers gathered in the large meeting room to write down what they understood by the term gender. Responses ranged from a one-word definition – 'women' (*harim*) – reflecting the popular association of gender as meaning women's issues, to the Arabic term for gender – *al-no' al-igtimaci* – which translates literally and not particularly revealingly, as 'social type'. Most people, though, wrote something about men and women having different roles and responsibilities, so I am intrigued to see how they respond to this video clip.⁶ To my surprise, they show no surprise. We know that women irrigate, they say. There is a pause, before the caveat comes. But, they add, not here in this province. In this province, they explain, it is very rare for women to irrigate.⁷

The question of whether or not women irrigate cuts to the heart of who should participate in a WUA and on what basis. The WUAs established by this project included two types of water users, which it termed agricultural water users and residential water users. The project defined the former as farmers, who draw water from the canals to irrigate their fields, and the latter as residents of the villages that the canals pass through, who use water from the canals for domestic purposes.

While these categories are not by definition gendered, they came to be understood by the project team in this way. In this simplified understanding, agricultural water users are men and residential water users are women. Farmers (*fellahin*), in other words, are a distinct category from women (*sitat*). Indeed I never heard anyone use the word farmer with a female case ending (*fellaha-fellahat*). The project guidelines fixed the number of residential representatives in each WUA as between 10 and 20 percent the number of agricultural representatives. This weighting reflected the fact that the WUAs' primary focus is irrigation. The rules of membership therefore not only set the terms on which women would participate in the WUAs – as residential representatives in an institution designed to improve irrigation management – but implicitly limited the ratio of women to men in the WUAs.

I turn now to trace the origin of these rules. The first WUAs established in Egypt during the 1980s did not include any women at all. This gradually came to be seen by the donors and consultants funding and managing development projects in Egypt as a limitation. Complete exclusion of one sex from a so-called participatory institution does, after all, undermine its participatory nature. Evaluation reports of these early projects also noted that people use canal water not only to irrigate but also to wash clothes and dishes and even, sometimes, to drink. People know that this water is poor quality, but in the absence of a reliable water supply within the homes, as is the case in many rural households, they have little alternative. In light of these domestic uses of canal water and their impact on water quality, evaluations of the early projects advised that the WUAs should take non-agricultural uses of water into consideration as well. In the second round of WUA projects, project managers therefore saw the inclusion of women as residential representatives as a way to address both these deficiencies. The WUAs would contain women and those women would represent domestic water concerns. Thus the WUAs' attention to domestic use was not to be an end in itself but a way of securing a sufficient quantity and quality of water for irrigation.

During the planning stages of this project, the manager was told by the funding agency that the project should adopt this same method of defining WUA membership by user type so as to be consistent. This need for coordination between donor projects is a topic of increasing emphasis within the international and bilateral agencies working on water issues in Egypt. Developing a unified model for WUA establishment throughout Egypt, they argue, will signify that participatory water governance is not just a project-based initiative, but rather a national program to which the water ministry is truly committed.

However both the consultant managing the project and the project director seconded from the ministry remained sceptical that adopting a gendered classification of water user was the best mechanism for ensuring full participation. The fact that both of these individuals were women may well have influenced this perspective. One day, shortly after the project began, I accompanied the manager to a meeting at the office of the agency funding the project. 'A key question', she commented to the program officer with whom we met, 'is how to get more women's representation in the WUAs.' She went on to explain what she saw as

being the root of this limited participation. 'It is a problem that women are only involved as representatives of residential areas. This is how it is done in the other projects, but I would like to rethink it ... It would cause an upheaval, but if you never challenge the method, you will never improve!'⁸

The consultant's desire to change the rules of membership for the WUA was hampered, though, by a lack of proof. Having worked on resource management projects around the world and attended many workshops on gender awareness, she had a sense that women probably irrigated as well as men, but she had no data. So she asked me, as a student affiliated with the project, to conduct a study of gender and water management in the province. I set out with the female community organizers from the project team on a quest to find women farmers. Where were the *fellahat* – this category that nobody referred to? Would we find any women who irrigated?

We selected a purposive sample of female farmers from five villages. Some of these women farmed land that was in their husband's name, as their husbands were working overseas or had passed away. Other women had never married and farmed land that they themselves rented or owned. In addition, we surveyed women who helped their husbands in the fields, as we considered these women, also, to be farmers. By means of comparison, we selected a similar sample of male farmers.

Many of the women we talked to described the role they played in agriculture and irrigation. One woman whose husband is working in the Gulf and whose son is working in Cairo talked in detail about how she irrigates their land. 'Our water is on Wednesdays. Our neighbors dam the irrigation ditch and I go and open it up. Then when the land has drunk I dam it again ... We irrigate the top first, then the lower parts of the land, so that all the land will drink equally.' Indeed of the 25 women we surveyed, nearly half said that they irrigated the land themselves. While this was lower than the proportion of men, it is most likely an underestimate. Women often undervalue their own contributions to agricultural water management, seeing themselves as just 'helpers' rather than as the primary irrigators (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998; Radwan, 2005). One woman who we talked to explained that she works with her husband to farm five acres, but that her husband is responsible for irrigation. It was only on further questioning that she acknowledged, 'I can irrigate during the day if my husband is not present.' Similarly, although she told us that her husband maintains the irrigation ditch, when we asked what she would do if she saw a blockage in the ditch she responded, 'If the man is not here, I can do it.' To her it was just common sense that she would step in and irrigate if her husband was not available. 'Isn't this our livelihood?' she said to us.

When, however, I conveyed the survey results to the project team in a formal presentation, they were met with scepticism. One engineer raised his hand. 'These cases where women irrigate are very rare,' he stated. Another joined him. 'It is only in marginal areas, in the areas of Arab populations' – people in this province use the word 'Arab' to refer to communities of Bedouin origin, which they often consider to be 'backward' – 'or in fruit growing regions that you find women irrigating,' he asserted.⁹ Just as they did during the lecture, the engineers dismissed

the significance of women's role in irrigation and continued to question the notion that women might also participate in the WUAs as agricultural representatives. In doing so, they played into prevailing stereotypical ideas about the gendered division of labor and what kinds of male and female behavior are appropriate (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998; Radwan, 2007). Interestingly, even among the female project staff who had helped carry out the survey and spoken to female farmers with me, the notion that women play a minor role in agricultural water use persisted. 'There really aren't very many women who farm,' I heard one of the female community organizers tell a visiting consultant. Even if what she meant by this was that there are few women who farm on their own, it was a puzzling comment given that she had spent a whole day with me interviewing women who participate in farming activities in a variety of ways.¹⁰

One could interpret the continuation of these skewed perspectives as ignorance – a detachment of government officials and project workers from rural realities. But to do so would be to disregard the fact that many of the male project staff actually came from rural backgrounds, as do many of the ministry engineers. Such a characterization would also be a misrepresentation. Even people living in rural areas, who are obviously aware of the fact that women go to the fields, would sometimes reply to my questions by saying that women do not farm. 'The land is for the men, it's not our business,' one woman told me.¹¹ During many conversations with rural residents, they would explain that women do farm, but only in other areas. There is, certainly, spatial variability in the degree of female participation in farming. Women tend to be more of a presence in the fields of northern Egypt than they are in the traditionally more conservative south (Hopkins and Saad, 2004: 11). But the insistence that women in this province do not farm, when clearly some do, deserves closer examination.

Rather than reflecting ignorance, I argue that the repeated assertions that women do not farm and irrigate reflect instead the fact that farming is not a particularly celebrated work for women in Egyptian society.¹² Most of the women who take primary responsibility for the work in the fields do so because they have no alternative. Their husbands have died or are working overseas and they do not have the money to employ laborers to do the work of tending the crops and irrigating the land. Gender therefore intersects with other lines of inequality. Female farmers are often poor, elderly and uneducated. They are the kind of women that it is easy for ministry officials, project staff and villagers to overlook. As one female community organizer said explicitly, 'If there are women who farm, they tend to only have very small pieces of land and are uneducated, so they aren't very important.'¹³ Such women, in her view, have little role to play in participatory water management. They are low-status, not 'model' farmers who can represent the interests of other agricultural water users in the WUA.

Despite the project manager's repeated efforts, she was unable to challenge these stereotypes and open up the agricultural water user category for women. This failure was not only due to the difficulty of convincing the project staff that women do farm and so can represent agricultural areas. It was also because female farmers were not particularly interested in representing agricultural interests in

the WUAs. At the start of my fieldwork, I assumed that everyone would want a chance to participate. As someone who has studied development and water management at graduate school in the United States, I have been trained in just the kinds of hegemonic concepts that this book analyzes. I had a notion that giving people an opportunity to participate in making decisions that affect them and their livelihoods is a good idea. I could relate to propositions like that of Agarwal (2001: 1624) that participation is ‘important both in itself, as a measure of citizenship and a means of empowerment, and for its potential effects on equity, efficiency, and sustainability’. The more I talked to rural women, though, I realized that they did not necessarily share this perspective. As other authors have shown, participation, or rather a particular notion of participation – in this case, involvement in a WUA – can be a burden. Attending meetings takes time away from other activities of household maintenance and income generation (see e.g. Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998). Further, it potentially underscores an aspect of these women’s identity and everyday realities that they may not want to celebrate – their marginal position within society and the fact that they have little choice but to undertake low-status irrigation and agricultural labor (cf. Harris, 2006).

In our survey of female farmers, we asked them if they would like to participate in the WUA. Most of them said no. One woman elaborated, ‘No, am I a man? I’m not free. I’m a widow. You need a woman who is educated. Would men listen to me?’¹⁴ In this comment, she drew attention not only to her gender but also to her social status as an uneducated woman, which she saw as placing her in a position where she did not think that she would be an effective participant. She had no problem with others representing her interests.

When I came to present this part of the survey results to the project team, one of the senior ministry engineers became animated. He wanted to know the exact percentage of female farmers who did not want to participate. He shouted across to the project director on the other side of the room, ‘See! It’s not our fault [that there aren’t many women in the WUAs], they don’t want to participate.’¹⁵ This does not mean that these women are voiceless. They have their own mechanisms of making their voice heard (see also Zwarteveen *et al.*, 2010). If they see ministry engineers in the field, they approach them and make their claims. Or they approach other influential members of the community to make claims on their behalf. But they are not interested in the WUA as a forum for participation. They are well aware of how they are likely to be judged or dismissed in such a setting.

Thus, the rule that women should be incorporated in the WUAs as representatives of the residential areas persisted, despite the project managers’ efforts to challenge it. In the next section, I examine how the community organizers communicated this rule to rural people, ultimately shaping the nature of women’s participation in the WUAs.

Don’t you care about sewage?

I leave the project office with Fatima, one of the female community organizers. We drive into the countryside and through fields of sorghum, maize, cotton and

rice, soon arriving at the village of Latifa where Fatima has scheduled a meeting for women to elect a representative to the local WUA. We enter the guest room of one of the village houses, which lies just a short distance from the canal. We sit down on the two armchairs that are placed along one wall. Women from the village begin to file in. They are wearing dark colored *galabiyas*, with loose headscarves around their heads; a few have their faces covered with a full veil. Fatima, dressed in a long form-fitting turquoise skirt and jacket, with a matching headscarf and handbag, stands apart from them, marked by her dress as urban, educated, different. Unlike Fatima, the village women all slip off their sandals as they enter and sit down on the plastic mat covering the floor.

Fatima starts her speech. 'My name is Madame Fatima, and I come from the project in the "The Irrigation" (*al-rai*) [this is how people commonly refer to the ministry]. We're coming to do something called a water user association (*rabita mustakhdami al-mai*). An association (*rabita*) is like a cooperative (*gama'iya*), but not for agriculture or social affairs but for irrigation.' She describes the establishment process. She explains, first, 'We go to the people who irrigate from the canal. Those are the men.' The order of her words is not incidental; the irrigators are always first. She comes, then, to the women's piece of the WUA. 'Just as a canal irrigates agricultural land,' she says, 'so it also goes through villages.'

To demonstrate the importance of women in the residential domain of water use, she asks the group a series of questions. 'Have you ever seen a man throw rubbish in the canal? Are men responsible if a child falls in the canal? Have you ever seen a man wash dishes in the canal?' To each, there is a chorus of 'No!' The domestic domain is thereby bounded as a female one. Fatima continues. 'If you put sugar in a glass of water, what happens to the water?' The women reply that the water becomes sugary. 'And if you add dirt?' On cue, the women complete that the water becomes dirty. She makes her point, therefore, that the disposal of solid waste and sewage into the canal degrades the quality of water that then flows onto the fields.

Fatima moves straight from this discussion of water quality to introducing the meetings that embody what the WUA is and what it does. 'So,' she explains, 'we do meetings in villages and choose a woman who can talk about the problems of the canal in the village.' By framing her comments in this way, Fatima underscores the linkage between women's participation and water quality issues. Before doing the election, though, she says that she would like to hear the women's problems. The women respond that their main problem is the lack of irrigation water. This is not what Fatima expects to hear. It confounds her preconceptions of women as domestic water users who are mostly concerned about the water they can access for household use. She does not ask any follow-up questions, but instead, redirects the conversation. 'Do you have problems with rubbish?' she asks. 'Does anyone wash dishes in the canal? Does anyone put wastewater in the canal?' While these practices are not uncommon in the province, the women reply that no, everyone in Latifa has good drinking water in their homes and septic tanks to dispose of their wastewater. In essence, this group of women does not fall into the project's

category of residential water user. They do, of course, use water for residential purposes, but their main interest in the canals is not as a source of domestic water but as a source of irrigation water.

Fatima persists regardless, following the procedures that the project has set in place. She explains that they need to select a female residential representative for the WUA management committee. The women choose someone and Fatima hands out a packet of laundry detergent to everyone who has attended the meeting – a gift designed to thank the women for their time and to encourage attendance, which also, subtly, reinforces their role as housewives who are interested in canal water for household tasks such as laundry. As we leave, however, an old woman grabs my hand. ‘Oh on the prophet, bring us water, the land is so dry!’ she implores, clearly hoping that I might have more influence than I do. I am struck by the contrast between the meeting and this parting impression. While on Fatima’s insistence, the meeting has revolved around issues of water use in the home, the old woman’s take-home message is about water scarcity in the fields.¹⁶

This ethnographic scene reveals how the actors driving the participation agenda communicate the notion to rural women as they introduce the idea of the WUA. For the women gathered in the room, this was their first encounter with participatory water management. It was through meetings like this one, which the female community organizers arranged with rural women around the province, that they led women to talk about residential concerns. They achieved this through the language that they used and the way in which they structured their meetings. Sometimes they would ask leading questions. Other times they would speak on the women’s behalf. On one occasion, for example, I heard a community organizer ask a group of women, ‘What are your problems?’ only to answer straight away herself, ‘sewage and rubbish?’ The inflection in her voice indicated a question mark, but the answer was already clearly self-evident to her.¹⁷

The significance of this preliminary step in the establishment of WUAs is that it creates certain expectations. The issues that the community organizers emphasized to the women as being their chief concerns do not fall under the remit of the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, which is the ministry formally responsible for establishing and interacting with the WUAs. The Ministry of Irrigation does not build drinking water treatment stations, install sewage pipes or arrange waste collection systems. These tasks are the responsibility of the drinking water and sanitation company and the local municipalities, which have no relationship with the WUAs. Thus the community organizers told the female representatives to expect things that the WUAs, designed to improve participation in irrigation management, will never be able to deliver. In addition, while these domestic concerns relating to the canals can be very problematic, they are often not the priority for farming communities, as the old woman’s comment to me at the end of the meeting illustrated. Hence women who participate in the WUAs as representatives of residential water use are bound to be disappointed.

When their interests are not met, female participants lose faith in the WUAs. One community organizer reported, for example, how two women on a WUA management committee had suggested building a wall alongside their canal as

a safety measure. But the male majority of the committee voted this out as a priority issue for work during the maintenance period, judging that their own irrigation concerns were more pressing. As a result, the women felt that their voices were not being heard and subsequently stopped attending meetings. By enacting the roles expected of them by the project, these women found themselves in a marginal position relative to the dominant function of the WUAs.¹⁸

Over the course of the project, the female community organizers, who were responsible for getting women to participate in the WUAs, also became frustrated. In one case, for instance, an organizer worked with a WUA representative from one village to try and increase the village's drinking water supply, after many women from the village complained that the supply was insufficient. This was the kind of 'domestic concern' that the female community organizers championed and the organizer was keen to demonstrate that the WUA could have a positive impact on the women's everyday lives. In this instance, the domestic usage was not one directly related to the use of canal water, as intended in the project's conceptualization of why it was important to include residential water users in the WUAs, but rather related to the water flowing (or rather, not flowing) into the villagers' homes through drinking water pipes. This was precisely the kind of slippage that occurred, though, through the project's framing of the female domain of water use as a residential one. The organizer took on the case as a personal mission, helping the WUA representative from the village write a petition, and accompanying her to present it in a meeting with the director of the drinking water company. After hearing the dire situation in this village, the director promised that a tanker would visit the village twice a week to supplement the supply. The women left, satisfied, but the tanker never arrived. Faced with a heavy demand on limited tankers, the director evidently prioritized other areas. Ultimately, the claims of the WUA, even when backed by the water ministry itself, held little weight with the semi-private company that provides drinking water. The disappointment in the village was acute and the organizer was embarrassed. She said that she doubted that she would be able to work further with these women after failing to deliver what she had promised.

This marginalization of the water-related issues deemed to be 'female' impacted the dynamics of the project team, as the female community organizers began to feel that their work was being sidelined. I attended one meeting, for example, in which the members of a WUA gathered together to elect representatives for the management committee. The meeting comprised eighteen men and one woman. The woman sat at the back of the room with the female community organizer and did not participate in any of the discussion. When the election took place for the management committee, on which this lady became the female representative by virtue of being the only woman present, she was not party to any of the decisions. Only at the end of the meeting, after the men had chosen the committee and selected a president, secretary and treasurer, did one of the male community organizers turn to the woman and ask, 'Do you agree?' His tone and manner was such that it would have been difficult for her to say that she did not. As we drove away from the meeting, the female community organizer was sullen. She said

she was fed up with the ‘gender work’. ‘There were only words for the men, few words for the women,’ she complained. There had not been any discussion of drinking water provision, sewage connections or rubbish collection – the issues that she saw as the priority concerns of the women in the WUA. ‘I’ve lost all hope in my work,’ she said.¹⁹

The way in which participation is structured and communicated at the outset is hence critical for determining the participants’ expectations. These expectations play a key role in how the participants approach the participatory process, and ultimately shape the success of the participatory institutions. Participatory governance thus moves far beyond the theorizations of its advocates as it is enacted in practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on one specific locale where international donors, working in partnership with a national water ministry, are seeking to implement the notion of participatory water governance. From the conference halls of international water forums and publications of international agencies and academic journals, where repeated iteration of the same phrases establishes water user participation in governance as one of *the* solutions to water problems, it is in scenes such as those I describe in this chapter that participation takes on, or fails to take on, meaning for participants. One of the most frequently cited critiques of participation is the fact that it is incomplete. In focusing on one dimension of this incompleteness – the marginalization of women from the WUAs – I show the significance of the establishment process for setting the terms of participation. In this case, as in many others, the rules of entry into the WUA are biased against women. But rather than the analysis stopping there and taking those rules as a given, the chapter has explored how those rules came into being, through an active process of negotiation between the different parties involved in the WUA establishment. This analysis thus brings to light the multiplicities reflected within a hegemonic concept like participation – the different understandings of who the participants are and what it means to participate. It draws attention to the people who carry the concept from place to place, communicating to those who are meant to participate what participation means, and in doing so, shaping the terrain for participation. It shows, also, how ideas about participation are always articulated through and circumscribed by other hegemonic understandings, such as societal interpretations of gender norms.

In their introduction to this volume, Goldin, Harris and Sneddon (Chapter 1) note the way in which hegemonic concepts manifest themselves in particular places in different ways. This chapter argues that efforts to promote participation could benefit from closer attention to how the concept travels and, in the process, evolves. It is in these spaces of implementation that participation gains its meaning. It is in these spaces that it impacts people’s lives.

Notes

- 1 Fieldnotes, 17 Feb. 2008.
- 2 While international donors working in Egypt have also sought to promote other concepts that have become hegemonic in water management circles, like marketization, these efforts have been less successful. The Egyptian Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation has, for example, resisted pressure from the donors to introduce charges for water, despite the argument that this form of marketization can help increase the efficiency of water use (see Harris, Chapter 10).
- 3 As of yet, none of the donor projects have encouraged the ministry to transfer responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the canals to the WUAs. The notion of participatory water management in this case thus remains limited to one of involvement in decision-making, rather than actually running the system. For more on the contrasting ways in which donors, consultants, engineers and farmers understand the concept of participation and the role of the WUAs as participatory institutions, see Barnes (forthcoming, Ch.3).
- 4 I keep the project anonymous in order to protect the identity of my informants.
- 5 The project manager asked me to give a series of lectures to the project team as part of my affiliation with the project.
- 6 The clip was from the short documentary film, *She Cultivates, She Irrigates*, produced by the Dutch-Egyptian Advisory Panel Project on Water Management in the late 1990s.
- 7 Fieldnotes, 2 March 2008.
- 8 Fieldnotes, 17 Jan. 2008.
- 9 This is a strikingly similar rhetoric to that presented by Harris (2006), in which she describes Arab farmers in southeastern Turkey as stating proudly that Arab women do not irrigate but Kurdish women might do, highlighting intersections between ethnicity and gender.
- 10 Fieldnotes, 23 April 2008.
- 11 Fieldnotes, 14 June 2007.
- 12 Harris (2006) also documents the lower prestige accorded to women who work in the fields in her analysis of irrigation in southeastern Turkey.
- 13 Fieldnotes 23 April 2008.
- 14 Fieldnotes, 11 March 2008.
- 15 Fieldnotes, 1 July 2008.
- 16 Fieldnotes, 16 June 2008.
- 17 Fieldnotes, 9 March 2008.
- 18 Fieldnotes, 26 March 2008.
- 19 Fieldnotes, 20 Feb. 2008.

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