



**Journal of**  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
**SOCIETY & EDUCATION**  
**(JCSE)**

ISSN: 2709-832X (Print)  
2709-8338

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.69778/2709-8338/2026/5.2/EN>

### **Editorial Note:**

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education.

If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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## **TABLE OF CONTENT**

1. Exploring the Influence of Language on Family Conflicts Among Vhavenda Families  
**Mudau S.D., Raphalalani M.R., Tshikota S.L., & Mathabi Mashudu**  
**6-22**
2. Academic Literacy Reframed: Sociocultural Theory and Rural Teacher Development  
**Robert Maungedzo**  
**23-39**
3. Analysis Of Omission Errors In The Academic Writing Of Level One Students At A South African University  
**Ndishunwani Vincent Demana, Ernest Kwesi Klu, Mzamani Johannes Maluleke**  
**40-57**
4. The Perceptions of Students on Sexual Harassment at the Rural University  
**Mudau Thizwilondi Josephine**  
**58-88**
5. Understanding how belonging and originality are negotiated in three South African Anthropology Departments  
**Asemahle Sibango**  
**89-101**
6. Employee Retention and Talent Management In The Hospitality Sector. Does Employer Branding Matter?  
**Costa Hofisi&Munyaradzi Chikove1, Lilliosah Dowo**  
**102-129**
7. African Union (AU) and Climate Change Governance in Africa, 2002-2022  
**Olawale Yemisi, Kelechi Johnmary Ani**  
**130-149**
8. A Gendered Analysis of the Nexus of Marital Status and Poverty  
**Hannah Mayamiko Dunga**  
**150-167**
9. The Influence of Authenticity, Credibility and Cultural Relatability on Consumer Trust and Purchasing Behaviour  
**Aphelele Hlengwa and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj**  
**168-188**
10. Performance Management: A Mirror of Inertia and a Lens on Public Administration's Evolution and Progress in South Africa  
**Shereen Sikwela, Melvin Diedericks**  
**189-211**
11. **The Underrepresentation Of Women's Leadership In Water Governance: A Case Study Of Zululand District Municipality, South Africa**  
**Nomfundo Nomcebo Zulu, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza**  
**212-234**

12. Intersectionality and Academic Marginalisation: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black Women Scholars at the University of South Africa  
**Dr Khabonina Grace Nkumane**  
**235-251**
13. A Philosophical Appraisal Of René Girard'S Archetypal Scapegoat Hypothesis In The Light Of Nigerian Migrants In Germany  
**Stanley Ekwugha & Kingsley Ekene Amaechi**  
**252-268**
14. The Effect Of Flood Risk Management Control On Property Protection In Lagos State, Nigeria  
**Margaret N. Jinadu & Akinseye Olowu**  
**268-285**
15. Antinomies of Afro-radical and liberal democratic decolonization in Zimbabwe and South Africa in Sue Nyathi's *The Gold-Diggers* (2018)  
**Peter Moopi**  
**286-304**
16. A Collaborative or Disputed Space? Teacher Unions and The Professionalization of School Leadership  
**Thembinkosi Zwane, David Matsepe, Mugwena Maluleke**  
**305-325**
17. Dialectics On Humanitarian Action: A Necessary Action To The Less Privilege And Nations In Crisis Anselm Oyon  
**Anselm Oyon, Kelechi Johnmary Ani**  
**326-338**
18. Music As A Pedagogical Tool And Epistemology Within A Multiliteracies Approach To University Education  
**Maricel Botha**  
**339-353**
19. Ecologies Of Distress: How Off-Campus Housing Affects Student Mental Health In Rural South Africa  
**Mammusa RosinahLekoa & Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza**  
**354-370**
20. Post-COVID-19 Challenges Faced by Enterprises in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal  
**Selena Moodley, Beharry-Ramraj, A**  
**371-388**
21. Linguistic Justice And Higher Education Futures: Leveraging The Disciplinary Literacies Framework To Re-Imagine Instructional Communication In South African Higher Education  
**Musara Lubombo, Thato Zethi**  
**389-408**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.69778/2709-8338/2026/5.2/a11>

## **THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN WATER GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY OF ZULULAND DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY, SOUTH AFRICA**

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### ***Abstract***

*The integration of gender considerations into water resource management and governance was first addressed at the 1977 United Nations Water Conference in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Subsequent policy frameworks were developed to enable women to assume a transformative role in global water governance. The 1992 International Conference on Water and Environment resulted in the Dublin Declaration, which highlighted the importance of empowering women for effective water resource management. This principle was further endorsed at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, known as the Earth Summit. During this conference, Agenda 21 was adopted, and Chapter 18 of the declaration emphasised the necessity of financially and socially viable projects that incorporate a participatory approach involving women in water resource management and governance. Women and girls are the most affected by water challenges, walking long distances to fetch water, facing health risks from poor sanitation, and yet remaining underrepresented in decision-making and finance. This paper investigated the underrepresentation of women's leadership in water governance in the Zululand District Municipality. This paper adopted an exploratory research design, underpinned by a qualitative methodological approach, to generate nuanced insights into the complex dynamics shaping women's relationship with water governance. Content analysis was further utilised as the primary method for examining qualitative data. The results stressed the challenges encountered by women in water governance and indicated that prioritising equity is essential to enable women to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.*

***Keywords:*** *Feminism, water governance, gender, Dublin Principles, traditional governance,*

### **1. Introduction**

Women occupy a distinctive position in water governance because of their

extensive interaction with water resources. Frequently serving as the primary managers of water at both household and community levels,

women are responsible for water collection, food production, and household hygiene (UN-Women, 2018). This experience provides them with significant knowledge of local water systems, underscoring the importance of their participation in decision-making processes to develop effective and sustainable policies. Water governance encompasses the political, social, economic, and administrative systems that influence the use and management of water (International Rivers, 2025).

Effective governance, according to UN-Women (2024), is crucial for ensuring equitable access to water resources and protecting ecosystems. However, traditional structures often exclude the perspectives of women, especially those from indigenous and marginalised communities. The global community is at a pivotal point in advancing sustainability and climate resilience. Water governance represents one of the most urgent and complex challenges, necessitating inclusive and intersectional strategies. In addressing the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and diminishing civic engagement, the leadership and perspectives of women, especially from indigenous and riverine communities, are both essential and transformative (Khayat, 2021).

Inclusion and exclusion of women in water governance structures, as well as other community participation mechanisms, are shaped by four intertwined sets of factors: institutional governance factors; personal factors and attributes; the contextual dynamics of social relations, including gender relations; and the complex and “uneven” interactions between physical

characteristics of the resource (“nature”) and society (Collard et al., 2018). More women would be empowered if they were included in greater numbers and through more equitable forms of governance.

In the Zululand District Municipality (ZDM), leadership positions in water governance, both within municipal institutions and traditional leadership structures, are predominantly occupied by men, thereby creating significant barriers to women’s meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This gender imbalance limits the extent to which women can influence governance outcomes, particularly in critical areas such as water governance and resource management. Given that women are often the primary users and managers of water at the household and community levels, their exclusion from formal governance structures not only perpetuates gender inequality but also undermines the effectiveness and inclusivity of water governance.

## **2. Problem Statement and Study Justification**

In the ZDM, traditional leadership remains largely male-dominated, thereby constraining the participation of women in governance structures. This exclusion is particularly evident in water governance, where decisions are often made without adequately considering women’s perspectives, despite their critical role as primary users and custodians of water at the household and community levels. The marginalisation of women in decision-making processes perpetuates gender inequality and weakens the inclusiveness, responsiveness, and sustainability of water governance systems (Imburgia et

al., 2021). Consequently, the absence of women's voices in water-related governance not only undermines equitable representation but also risks overlooking the community needs and local knowledge that are essential for effective water management. Therefore, there is a need to address the persistent gendered power dynamics that shape water governance in ZDM. Strengthening women's participation in decision-making is crucial for promoting inclusive governance and ensuring that water management strategies address the diverse needs and realities of all community members.

### **3. Theoretical Framing and Empirical Literature**

Existing scholarship increasingly demonstrates the value of employing both water governance frameworks and feminist theory to interrogate the complex intersections of gender, power, and resource management. Water governance, broadly concerned with the rules, institutions, and decision-making processes that shape access to and control over water resources, provides a lens for understanding how institutional arrangements produce differentiated outcomes across social groups (Clever and Whaley, 2018; Pahl-Wostl, 2019). However, water governance analysis alone often risk obscuring the deeply gendered dimensions of power that influence whose voices are heard and whose interests are prioritised.

Feminist theory, in contrast, foregrounds questions of inequality, representation, and justice by examining how patriarchal structures, masculinities of power, and entrenched social norms systematically marginalise women from leadership and decision-making

(Cornwall et al., 2007; Zwartveen, 2017). Integrating these two perspectives allows for a more holistic analysis of women's struggles in water access and leadership. Such an approach captures both the structural barriers, including male-dominated institutions and exclusionary governance systems, and the everyday lived realities of women, such as the disproportionate burden of water collection, psychosocial stress, and restricted opportunities for political participation. This dual framing thus situates women's struggles not as isolated challenges but as outcomes of overlapping governance failures and gendered power relations. It also highlights the transformative potential of feminist-informed water governance in promoting equity, inclusivity, and sustainability.

#### **3.1 Importance of Women in the Water Sector**

A key principle identified at the 1992 Dublin International Conference on Water and Environment was the vital contribution of women to water management. According to Principle 3 of the Dublin Statement, "women play a crucial role in the provision, management, and protection of water." Thus, it is essential to adopt supportive policies that not only cater to the unique needs of women regarding water but also enable them to engage at all levels in water resource initiatives, including both decision-making and implementation (UN, 2018). Women and girls are essential to water accessibility; nevertheless, disparities continue to hinder their full participation in rural areas. Additionally, women and girls are disproportionately involved in domestic tasks such as cleaning, washing, and

cooking, which means that water shortages impact them more significantly than their male counterparts (Fonjong and Ngekwi, 2014).

Women constitute a crucial segment of the stakeholders engaged in daily water usage and management; however, as of 2014, they accounted for less than 17% of the water workforce in developing nations. Their lack of representation in technical positions and leadership roles within the water sector can be attributed to cultural obstacles as well as their lower likelihood of land ownership (Khayat, 2021). Additionally, Vogelstein (2017) contends that women are disproportionately affected by water crises, as the burdens of water scarcity and inadequate infrastructure heavily impact women and girls. Thus, there is a need for new institutional frameworks that concentrate the responsibility for water regulation while decentralising water management duties and enhancing user ownership and engagement (UN, 2022).

Moreover, educating women for involvement in asset management improves asset sustainability by enhancing operation and maintenance practices. Additionally, efforts to boost women's leadership roles in community-based organisations have led to significant advancements in community water infrastructure, supply, and sanitation. Furthermore, numerous studies indicate that reducing the burden of water collection on girls and women can lead to an increase in school attendance by 20% over four years and diminish women's time poverty by 50% to 90% (Asian Development Bank, 2014).

### **3.2 Climate change amplifies existing gender inequalities**

For over five decades, Joshi and Nicol (2024) assert that international declarations and policy frameworks have emphasised the crucial connection between water access and women's well-being, particularly in marginalised and resource-constrained communities. Despite this global recognition, progress has been uneven and, in many respects, inadequate. Current estimates indicate that approximately 800,000 women continue to lose their lives annually due to water-related challenges, underscoring the persistence of structural inequalities in water governance and access (UN-Women, 2023).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the gendered burden of water collection remains especially stark: women collectively spend an estimated 40 billion hours each year fetching water, equivalent to roughly five billion working days lost. This immense expenditure of time not only perpetuates cycles of poverty but also constrains women's opportunities for education, economic participation, and leadership in governance processes (Sarkissian, 2021). The gendered implications of water insecurity are further amplified by climate change. Global early warning systems highlight that droughts, floods, and other climate-induced water risks disproportionately affect women and girls, who often bear the brunt of adaptation and survival strategies within households (Cunneen, 2022).

The consequences, according to Aslam et al. (2024), reverberate across multiple

dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, empirical studies demonstrate that a single hour increase in water collection time for young, marginalised girls can reduce their probability of completing primary education by as much as 17 percent (Dennis and Bell, 2020). This not only obstructs their individual development but also undermines broader social and economic progress. Tools such as the Individual Water Insecurity Experiences (IWISE) Scales provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics by documenting the multifaceted effects of water insecurity on women's lives. These include not only labour, time, nutrition, and economic growth, but also psychosocial dimensions such as stress, anxiety, and social exclusion (Joshi and Nicol, 2024). Thus, these insights underscore the crucial importance of gender-sensitive approaches to water governance. Addressing water insecurity is not merely a technical or infrastructural challenge but a profound issue of social justice, equity, and sustainable development.

### **3.3 Women: Traditional Co-Custodians of Natural Resources in Rural Areas**

In many developing nations, water management is predominantly seen as a responsibility of women. Women and girls are tasked with fetching, transporting, storing, and overseeing household water. They possess detailed knowledge about water sources, its quality, and the daily water needs of their households (Sehring et al., 2022). Consequently, women play a crucial role in water-related matters and should be included in any decisions regarding

water issues. Data from surveys in 45 developing countries indicate that in most households (76%), the primary duty of collecting water falls on women and children (International Water Management Institute [IWMI], 2025).

The African feminism theory, norms, and customs should recognise women's capacity based on merit rather than gender. This perspective emphasises leadership and decision-making in water governance, advocating for equal opportunities for women within existing norms and cultures (Ghorfati and Medini, 2015). As mentioned earlier in the paper, the Commission on Gender Equality is constitutionally required to oversee and assess all laws and policies to guarantee equal treatment for men and women regarding access to resources and services (Abrahams et al., 2011). The findings suggest that enhancing women's empowerment is essential for boosting economic opportunities, given water's significant impact on both individual and national development. Consequently, failing to provide women with such opportunities is likely to exacerbate challenges in alleviating poverty and improving access to water.

### **3.4 Gendered Dimensions of Leadership in Water Governance**

Despite possessing extensive natural water resources, including the Congo, Nile, and Niger rivers, Africa continues to encounter substantial obstacles in delivering safe and reliable water services (Oluwasanya et al., 2022). Persistent water scarcity affects millions due to uneven resource distribution, insufficient infrastructure, and institutional limitations. The continent remains behind in meeting SDG 6,

which targets universal access to clean water and sanitation by 2030. In 2022, over half of the 703 million individuals without basic drinking water resided in sub-Saharan Africa. The Global Water Security Outlook 2023 classified all countries in this region as water insecure. Water is essential for sustaining both life and ecosystems (MacAlister et al., 2023). However, water governance faces complex challenges that span natural, social, and political domains. A critical concern is the persistent underrepresentation of women in decision-making and governance bodies responsible for shaping water policies and management practices (UNU-INWEH, 2025).

Women's representation in leadership positions within Africa's water sector, as elsewhere, presents a complex intersection of gender dynamics, resource management, and sustainable development. Although they are primary stakeholders in water management at the household and community levels, their representation in formal decision-making roles remains disproportionately low across the continent (Haeffner et al., 2021). This disparity not only reflects broader gender inequalities but also impacts the effectiveness of water governance systems throughout Africa. This underscores the urgent need to address gender disparities in water governance to improve overall water management and access.

The water sector comprises national ministries, public and private utilities, regulatory bodies, educational institutions responsible for water education, and policy-making organizations. This sector has historically been dominated by men,

reflecting trends in other technical and infrastructure-related fields. Studies indicate that women represent only 37% of the global water workforce and hold just 23% of managerial positions, a proportion lower than in other technical sectors such as energy (World Bank, 2019). A recent assessment of 173 water sector organisations in the Global South found that women occupy only 26% of leadership roles (Oluwasanya et al., 2024).

Contributing factors to this disparity include traditional gender roles, restricted access to technical education, and persistent societal barriers. These obstacles, often described as a "leadership ceiling," persist even when women possess the necessary qualifications (Truelove et al., 2024). Women encounter challenges in advancing to senior positions, including gender bias, limited networking opportunities, and a lack of robust mentorship systems. Furthermore, inflexible and non-inclusive employment practices, as well as unwelcoming recruitment and promotion processes, continue to impede women's career progression (Davis et al., 2024).

### **3.5 Framing Water Governance through Feminist Theory**

Applying a feminist lens facilitates the examination of interpersonal dynamics within systems and supports the development of strategies to confront and eliminate oppressive structures (Guy-Evans, 2024). A key finding from the special issue is that, despite ongoing global advocacy for systemic and transformative change, the water sector mostly favours short-term, technical,

and efficiency-focused solutions. Although these approaches may address immediate operational challenges, including those related to gender and water, they rarely examine or challenge the fundamental masculinities of power that shape institutional practices and sustain inequitable water outcomes (Armstrong, 2020). Through avoiding the comprehensive structural reforms needed to redefine decision-making processes and beneficiaries, the sector unintentionally preserves existing power structures. As a result, practitioners, policymakers, and scholars may unknowingly help maintain institutional arrangements that support exclusion and inequality.

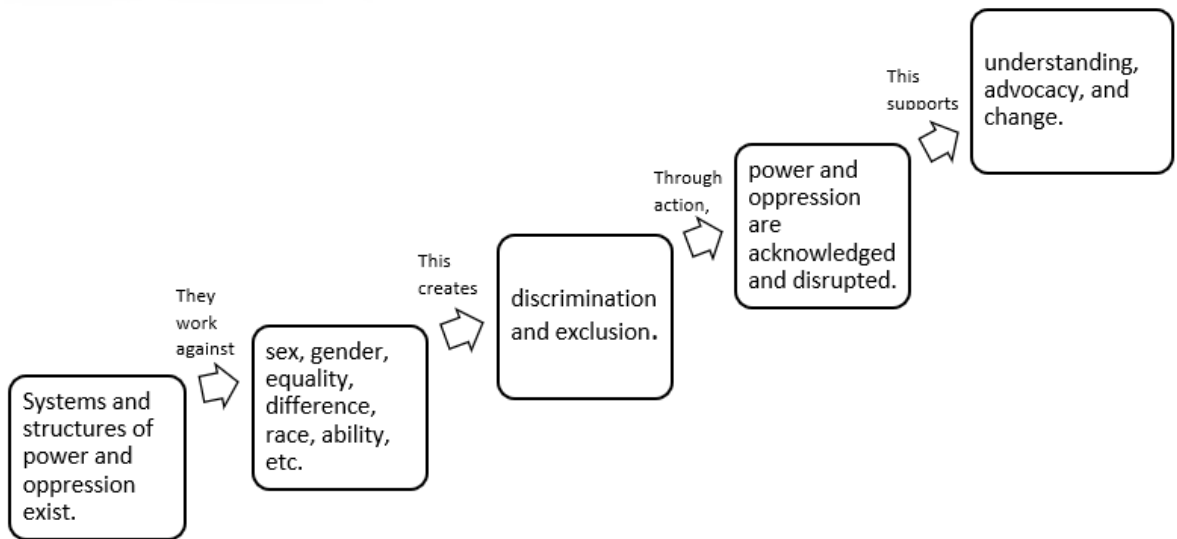
A feminist perspective asserts that advancing a transformative water agenda demands an urgent and intentional shift away from entrenched institutional biases, normative assumptions, and hierarchical power structures. This process requires critical reflection, learning, and unlearning, especially regarding interventions that are ineffective or exacerbate harm during climate crises (Egbert and Roe, 2020). Reflexivity alone is insufficient; it must be paired with tangible actions to alter power relations within water governance institutions. Without meaningful changes in power

distribution, commitments such as “water for all,” “putting the last first,” or “leaving no one behind” are likely to remain aspirational and lack substantive impact (Haradhan, 2022).

Failing to address these systemic dynamics will hinder progress towards equitable water governance and may further entrench gender inequalities, thereby increasing their resistance to change. A feminist water agenda, therefore, emphasises that genuine transformation hinges on prioritizing equity and justice, redistributing decision-making authority, and addressing the structural mechanisms that perpetuate gendered marginalization in the water sector (Kark and Buengeler, 2024).

Figure 3.1 illustrates a model of feminist theory that posits the existence of systems that oppress and marginalise individuals. The model demonstrates that oppression arises from intersecting identities, which contribute to discrimination and exclusion. It further suggests that, through the application of knowledge and collective action, these oppressive systems can be challenged to promote social change and greater understanding (Egbert and Roe, 2020).

**Figure 3.1: Model of Feminist Theory**



**Source: Egbert and Roe (2020).**

#### **4 Contribution to Knowledge**

This paper explores the underrepresentation of women's involvement in water governance within the Zululand District Municipality, focusing on the actual experiences, perspectives, and participation of women in local decision-making processes. Drawing on empirical data collected from municipal and community structures, the study highlights the extent to which women engage in governance, the barriers they face, and how their lack of involvement shapes water management outcomes. Rather than claiming to generate broad theoretical generalisations, the paper provides context-specific insights into how women's leadership functions within the local institutional and socio-cultural environment. In particular, the study illustrates how women's participation can influence

accountability, transparency, and equity in the management of water resources, while also identifying the structural constraints that limit their engagement. These findings offer a grounded understanding of gendered dynamics in water governance and provide evidence-based considerations for enhancing gender-responsive practices at the local level.

#### **5 Research Methodology**

This paper adopted an exploratory research design, underpinned by a qualitative methodological approach, to generate nuanced insights into the complex dynamics shaping women's relationship with water governance. Such a design is particularly appropriate for examining the interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors that influence women's access to, participation in, and influence over

water-related decision-making processes (Ototo et al., 2024). Through prioritising lived experiences and context-specific narratives, the study seeks to illuminate the structural barriers and opportunities that define women's engagement in water governance. Ultimately, the findings are intended to contribute to the formulation of more inclusive and gender-responsive water policies, as well as the design of community-based initiatives that not only address practical water needs but also advance women's leadership and empowerment within governance structures (Singaraju, 2025).

Within the broader framework of non-probability sampling, this paper utilised purposive sampling as the primary strategy for participant selection. Purposive sampling, as Robinson (2014) explains, involves the deliberate and systematic identification of informants who are best positioned to provide in-depth insights into a particular theme, concept, or phenomenon. This approach was deemed appropriate given the focus on understanding gendered dynamics in water governance, which requires access to participants with direct knowledge, experience, and involvement in the field. Consequently, participants were selected from key groups: Department of Water and Sanitation officials, Traditional leaders, and ZDM water officials. The participants were seen as the officials who could provide institutional and policy-level perspectives, and community leaders, who could contribute lived experiences and localised understandings of water access and decision-making. This dual perspective enriched the study by ensuring a more holistic account of the intersections between policy

frameworks and everyday practices in water governance.

Data was collected from three municipalities under ZDM: AbaQulusi Local Municipality (ALM), Nongoma Local Municipality (NLM), and Ulundi Local Municipality (ULM). In-depth interviews were utilised as the principal method of data collection, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. This qualitative approach facilitated the generation of rich data by encouraging participants to elaborate on their responses in an open-ended and reflective manner. Moreover, the semi-structured nature of the interviews provided the researchers with the flexibility to pose follow-up questions and probe deeper into emerging themes or unexpected insights, thereby enhancing the depth and authenticity of the data gathered. This method is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena, such as women's leadership in water governance.

The paper further employed content analysis as the primary method for examining qualitative data. Qualitative content analysis is widely recognised as a systematic and rigorous technique for describing, interpreting, and, where applicable, quantifying social phenomena. According to Gunawan (2023), this method encompasses three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, and summative content analysis, each of which facilitates the interpretation of meaning embedded within textual data while remaining consistent with the naturalistic paradigm. For this study, a directed content analysis was adopted, as it

allowed for the elaboration and extension of pre-existing concepts and theoretical constructs relevant to the research focus.

### **5.1 Interview Protocol**

The interview questions were reviewed and validated by an independent researcher with expertise in similar studies to enhance credibility and ensure the relevance and clarity of the questions. The semi-structured interview guide encompassed key thematic areas, including participants' demographic characteristics, as well as their experiences, perceptions, and understanding of water governance in rural contexts. Data collection was conducted across the three municipalities, with each interview lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

### **5.2 Researcher Positionality**

The first author is an African female who originates from the same district where the study was conducted, whereas the second author is an African male who originates from peri urban and affluent rural areas of KZN, the province where the study was carried out. This shared geographical and socio-cultural background provided contextual familiarity and an informed understanding of the local dynamics surrounding water governance in rural communities. Such proximity facilitated

rapport-building with participants and enhanced sensitivity to contextual nuances during data collection and interpretation. However, the authors' positionality did not influence participant selection, responses, or the overall integrity of the study. All stages of the research process were conducted in strict adherence to established ethical protocols. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without facing any consequences.

### **5.3 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zululand, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, which granted formal approval to conduct the study and collect data from the respondents. The Zulu Kingdom's Royal House, Traditional Leaders, Zululand District Municipality, and Department of Water and Sanitation granted both consent and permission to conduct the study. The respondents from the AbaQulusi, Nongoma, and Ulundi Local Municipalities who took part in the study, did so with the blessing of these municipalities.

## 6 Findings and Discussions

### 6.1 Demographic Profile of the Interviewed Participants

Table 6.1 presents the demographic profile of the interviewed participants.

**Table 6.1: Demographic Profile**

Name of participants	Gender	Age	Nationality
TL1 (Traditional leader)	Male	53	South African
TL2 (Traditional leader)	Male	48	South African
TL3 (Traditional leader)	Female	57	South African
TL4 (Traditional leader)	Female	44	South African
ZDMWO1 (Zululand District Municipality water official)	Female	32	South African
ZDMWO2 Zululand District Municipality water official	Male	43	South African
ZDMWO3 Zululand District Municipality water official	Male	34	South African
DWSO (Department of Water and Sanitation official)	Male	47	South African

**Source: Author’s compilation (2024)**

The data presented in the table indicate a notable gender imbalance among participants, particularly within traditional leadership structures and among water governance officials. The relatively higher representation of male participants compared to their female counterparts reflects the broader structural and institutional realities in which leadership and decision-making positions are predominantly occupied by men. This imbalance constitutes a limitation of the study, as it constrains the extent to which women’s

perspectives, especially those in formal leadership and administrative roles, are represented. The insufficient representation of women in traditional leadership and water governance roles signifies deeply rooted gender inequalities within local governance frameworks. This limitation is thus both methodological and structural, mirroring the existing gender dynamics within the study’s context, rather than being attributed solely to sampling bias.

## **6.2 Women's Leadership in Water Governance**

As previously mentioned, women and girls have vital roles in accessing water; nevertheless, there are ongoing inequalities that hinder their involvement in rural areas. A report by UN-Water (2023) highlights that adopting a feminist perspective on the water crisis acknowledges the significant roles women fulfil in their communities as primary collectors, protectors, and managers of water. This perspective advocates for equal representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles, alongside engaging with women and communities to integrate their viewpoints, such as the rights of nature, into ecologically sound water governance. At its core, this approach links social justice, ecological rights, and women's rights, asserting that to expedite progress on SDG 6, countries must also prioritize SDG 5 regarding gender equality, and vice versa (UN, 2022).

Additionally, an individual requires at least 20 litres of water daily to fulfil basic needs, yet globally, women and girls from the poorest communities often have access to significantly less (UN-Women, 2024). This inadequacy endangers millions of lives, with over 800,000 women dying each year due to limited access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene. Adequate facilities for menstrual hygiene management are critical for women's health; however, they remain insufficient for an estimated 500 million women and girls (UNESCO and UN-Water, 2023). Furthermore, women's agency, solutions, and unique experiences in water governance are

often overlooked. This lack of recognition undermines the effectiveness of water management strategies and policies. Moreover, restricted safe spaces for civil society organizations and new operational challenges exacerbate efforts to establish inclusive water governance (UN-Women, 2024). The upcoming section reviews participants' perceptions regarding male domination in water resources management and water governance in the study area.

### **6.2.1 Male Dominance in Water Resources Management within the Three Local Municipalities**

The issue of water insecurity faced by women represents a significant international health and socio-economic challenge, disproportionately impacting women with low incomes and children (WWC, 2023; UN-Women, 2023). The gendered dimension of water scarcity is illustrated by the unequal burden of water collection, with women and girls reportedly dedicating hours daily to this endeavour worldwide (WWC, 2023). In addition to the physical demands, water scarcity intersects with various elements of social welfare, threatening food security, public health, cultural integrity, and even local stability (UN-Women, 2023). Feminist theory offers an essential perspective for comprehending these dynamics by emphasising how systemic gender inequalities influence access to natural resources and decision-making authority (Agarwal, 2010; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Viewed through this lens, water insecurity transcends being merely an environmental or infrastructural concern; it also serves as an indication of

deep-rooted socio-cultural and political hierarchies that marginalise women.

Despite the crucial role of women in managing household and community water resources, male dominance in formal water governance remains widespread, especially in rural areas where traditional and cultural norms frequently dictate gender roles (WWC, 2023). Participants in this research highlighted these structural impediments. TL3 observed that "water management is frequently regarded as a male responsibility in rural regions due to traditions and cultural beliefs that exclude women from making decisions and holding technical positions, despite their significant involvement in collecting and managing water". Similarly, a Department of Water and Sanitation officer noted that, while women are prioritised in participation initiatives, cultural attitudes still restrict their representation in leadership positions: "Women undoubtedly play a critical role for evident reasons; a majority of households are led by females, and women primarily engage in domestic labour, however, due to cultural perspectives, there is a very minimal presence of women in leadership roles since men predominantly occupy these positions" (DWSO). These observations are consistent with feminist analyses that connect institutional and cultural norms to gender-based inequalities in access, control, and governance of vital resources (Naz, 2020).

The study further highlights the importance of integrating gender-sensitive methodologies into water governance frameworks. Insights from participants indicate that men and

women encounter unique difficulties concerning water access, management, and decision-making processes. TL1 articulated, "It is vital to consider gender in the management and governance of water resources because men and women face differing challenges. Recognising these gender roles ensures equitable treatment in water accessibility". Likewise, another participant acknowledged persistent shortcomings in inclusivity: "There remain issues that need to be addressed to guarantee the participation of both men and women in water governance" (ZDMWO3). These observations correspond with the feminist water studies literature, which suggests that effective involvement of women in governance not only fosters equity but also leads to more sustainable, resilient, and context-specific water management outcomes (Cornwall, 2016).

Therefore, the findings emphasise the interplay of gender, socio-cultural norms, and institutional frameworks in influencing access to water resources. Feminist theory postulates that tackling water insecurity necessitates both the redistribution of decision-making authority and acknowledgment of women's practical expertise and contributions to water management (Agarwal, 2010). Therefore, policy initiatives should aim to eradicate cultural and structural impediments, advocate for female leadership in water governance, and ensure that water management strategies are responsive to gender needs. Such strategies can promote equitable access, enhance community resilience, and align with broader sustainable development objectives in accordance with human rights and feminist viewpoints on

resource governance (UN-Women, 2023).

### **6.2.2 Women: Traditional Co-Custodians of Natural Resources in Rural Areas**

Women are entitled to equal participation in decision-making processes; however, their presence in governance, particularly in rural contexts, is notably restricted. Women's perspectives tend to be sidelined in formal governance settings, despite their vital contributions. Angwaomadoko (2024) stresses the necessity of acknowledging women's agency and appreciating their roles in social, economic, and environmental advancements. Additionally, women's proactive involvement in community initiatives often lays the groundwork for wider movements towards gender equality, fostering social cohesion and yielding sustainable development results (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2013).

In rural areas, women typically function as traditional co-custodians of natural resources, overseeing land, water, and biodiversity through activities such as crop cultivation, preservation of indigenous seeds, and soil stewardship, which enhance the ecological resilience and food security of their communities (FAO, 2020). Nonetheless, structural inequalities (such as limited land tenure, insufficient access to financial and natural resources, and exclusion from decision-making arenas) significantly hinder women's ability to influence resource governance effectively, underscoring the need for supportive policy measures, education, and community involvement (International Labour Organisation, 2019).

Participants identified these structural and socio-cultural obstacles. One participant remarked, "Rural women often face distinct challenges that intersect with both gender and geographic disadvantages. They are disproportionately impacted by poverty, which restricts their ability to achieve stable livelihoods and contributes to cycles of economic instability. Limited access to quality education further hinders their prospects, as numerous rural regions lack sufficient schools, infrastructure, and resources, making it arduous for women and girls to acquire the skills necessary to compete in wider labour markets" (TL4). This observation aligns with findings in feminist and rural development literature, which highlight that inadequate access to education and economic resources perpetuates gender inequalities in agency and participation (Elmhirst, 2015).

Another participant noted, "Job opportunities in rural areas are frequently limited, informal, or inadequately compensated, and cultural and structural barriers further obstruct women's involvement in decision-making environments. These intersecting challenges not only reinforce gender disparities but also restrict rural women's capacity to assert their agency, enhance their livelihoods, and contribute significantly to community and societal progress" (ZDMWO1). Remzova (2024) contends that these structural and cultural obstacles reflect systemic power imbalances that marginalise women's voices in water governance.

The essential contribution of rural women to biodiversity conservation has

been underscored. One participant remarked, "Rural women play a vital role in conserving and cultivating biodiversity. They act as guardians of natural resources and possess traditional knowledge. Furthermore, women's involvement in biodiversity conservation is vital for food security, climate adaptability, and the enhancement of resilient rural economies. Nonetheless, despite their pivotal contribution, women's ecological knowledge and practices are frequently undervalued or omitted from formal policy frameworks, perpetuating gender-based inequalities in the governance of natural resources and decision-making" (DWSO). This perspective is corroborated by Agarwal (2010), who highlights that the ecological knowledge held by women is essential for fostering community resilience, yet is often excluded from formal policy and governance frameworks.

Another participant noted that "rural women face unique challenges due to their limited access to resources and restricted decision-making capabilities. Discrimination against women, stemming from longstanding social and cultural beliefs, constrains their opportunities and autonomy. Typically, rural women are expected to fulfil domestic roles, which complicates their ability to engage in work or participate in decision-making regarding natural resources" (TL3). Fraser (2016) articulates that feminist theory perceives these challenges as reflections of patriarchal norms and socio-cultural structures that curtail women's independence, agency, and resource access.

Despite these obstacles, rural women remain integral to water governance and community sustainability. Participants indicated that women's roles encompass not only domestic duties but also food production, water collection, childcare, and participation in community-driven initiatives that uphold social and economic vitality. They observed, "women in rural areas often act as stewards of indigenous knowledge, particularly regarding nutrition, traditional medicine, and sustainable management of natural resources, directly enhancing community resilience and health outcomes. Additionally, their engagement in local health initiatives, self-help groups, and grassroots organisations underscores their capability to mobilise collective action in contexts lacking formal services" (ZDMWO2). The FAO (2020) advocates that women's contributions in these domains substantially strengthen community resilience. Acknowledging and amplifying women's agency is vital for equitable water governance and sustainable resource management, given that women are crucial players in advancing social, ecological, and economic sustainability.

### **6.2.3 Gendered Burdens in Water Collection: The Long Distances Walked by Girls**

In numerous areas, especially throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and certain regions of South Asia, the duty of water collection disproportionately rests on girls and women, thereby reinforcing established gender-based labour divisions. Feminist theory suggests that such practices mirror patriarchal societal structures, wherein domestic and caregiving responsibilities are socially

designated as a female obligation, consequently restricting women's and girls' access to public, educational, and economic opportunities (Nkolola and Phiri, 2024). The Council on Foreign Relations (2017) observes that "women and girls spend a significant portion of their days traversing extensive distances to obtain safe water, collecting or drawing it, and transporting heavy containers back to their households," with journeys often lasting over an hour each way.

One participant highlighted the transformative impact of access to water, asserting that "No matter where you are in the world, having access to clean drinking water changes people's lives for the better. When water is safe and easy to reach, families are healthier, children can devote more time to schooling, and communities can flourish. The needs are evident, as are the objectives: everyone deserves clean water. Clean water should not be a burden or a privilege; it is a fundamental human right that should be accessible to everyone without such difficulty" (ZDMWO1). This viewpoint underscores that in the absence of readily accessible water near homes, the act of collection "is a demanding task that predominantly falls on women and girls," hindering their chances for education, income generation, and leisure (World Bank, 2024).

The physical and social challenges of water collection are exacerbated by structural and environmental factors, including the depletion or pollution of local water sources, alterations in rainfall patterns due to climate change, and increasing demand at the limited operational water points (Fonjong and

Zama, 2023). These circumstances intensify prevailing gender inequalities and perpetuate cycles of intergenerational marginalisation, as girls' school absenteeism diminishes their educational achievements and future economic prospects (HSRC Review, 2024).

Moreover, a participant validated this experience, remarking that "when water is not accessible at home and needs to be fetched from elsewhere, it is typically women and girls who bear this burden. They are the ones walking long distances, queuing, and transporting heavy containers back to their households. Thus, the lack of local water services not only impacts households' basic needs but also prevents women and girls from realising their full potential" (TL4). Feminist viewpoints assert that these burdens are socially constructed, reflecting patriarchal norms that allocate domestic responsibilities to females while excluding them from decision-making and governance arenas (Garcia, 2019).

Feminist theory emphasises that the task of water collection is predominantly perceived as women's work, which limits men's participation and reinforces gender-based divisions of labour. One participant noted, "men would only fetch water if there were no women available in their families, if the women were ill, or if the women were not at home. Generally, it is regarded as socially unacceptable for men to engage in fetching water" (TL3). These societal norms restrict women's autonomy and perpetuate systemic inequality, which is a significant focus of feminist research. The routine responsibility of gathering water, frequently involving heavy

containers weighing as much as 20 kilograms (Hallett, 2016), limits girls' chances for education, recreation, and economic engagement. This phenomenon exemplifies what feminist theorists describe as the "double burden" of caregiving, where unpaid domestic tasks hinder women's advancement and social mobility (Garcia, 2019).

Furthermore, one participant highlighted "this relationship between gender and access to water, stating that clean water ought to be viewed neither as a burden nor a privilege, but as a fundamental human right crucial for the health of families, the education of children, and the advancement of community development" (ZDMWO1). Taken together, the evidence reveals that water scarcity transcends being a mere logistical issue; it represents a vital equity and rights concern that significantly influences the daily realities and opportunities available to women and girls, thereby directly linking water management to issues of gender justice and social development (World Bank, 2024).

## **7 Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has demonstrated that the underrepresentation of women in water governance remains a persistent challenge across multiple levels of leadership, including national, municipal, and local structures, as well as within water utilities, supply systems, irrigation schemes, and community governance bodies. The findings reveal a clear gender gap in decision-making processes, with men occupying most formal leadership positions, while women's participation remains limited and often marginalised. This imbalance

is not merely institutional but has tangible socio-economic implications. The study further highlights that, despite their limited presence in formal governance structures, women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of water insecurity at the household level. Consequently, the exclusion of women from strategic areas such as water resource management reinforces both gender inequality and inefficiencies in governance systems. The absence of women's voices in key decision-making arenas ultimately undermines equitable and sustainable water management.

However, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The gender imbalance among participants, particularly the higher number of male traditional leaders and water officials, reflects existing structural inequalities but also limits the breadth of insights from women in formal leadership roles. Additionally, as the study was confined to a specific district context, the findings may not be fully generalisable to other regions with different socio-political dynamics. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides context-specific evidence of gendered governance patterns and their implications. Therefore, promoting gender equity in water governance is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for improving accountability, inclusivity, and sustainability in water resource management. Ensuring meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making is essential for advancing water security and fostering more equitable governance outcomes.

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