

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term:SS 2011

Department:Rural Sociology

Degree:PhD

Title:Gendered Waters: The Participation of Women on the Program One Million Cisterns in the Brazilian Semi-arid Region

Women, especially in developing countries, are often responsible for managing water at the household level, which is considered part of their reproductive work. However, they are rarely represented in bodies that decide on water management, and hardly play a role in the implementation of projects to increase water access. While the need for enhanced gender equality in water management is recognized in international development, the complexities of gender equality and the need for change are poorly understood or translated into progressive practice on the ground.

This dissertation presents a qualitative case study of women participation in the Program "One Million Cisterns" in the Brazilian Semi-Arid region, in three locations: Afogados da Ingazeira, Mossoro and Fortaleza, using participant observations, document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key participants. It illustrates the promises and the challenges of bringing about "deep" gender equality and women's empowerment in water development. The case study shows that women not only derived significant material benefits from the program (access to water, more time, better health); they also acquired economic and political opportunities, as cistern builders and as members of municipal water commissions "roles that had traditionally been reserved for men. The study also found significant synergies between civil society, government and international agencies in creating new avenues for participation and social inclusion, despite considerable resistance and numerous misunderstandings around gender equality. A confluence of favorable conditions at the macro, meso and micro levels enabled women to extent and amplify their participation in water management and in their own development. Key for this transformational process was the role played by local feminist NGOs as well as by social movements and networks supporting women's organizations.