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# Feminist Solidarity? Women's Engagement in Politics and the Implications for Water Management in the Darjeeling Himalaya

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This article explores the motivations of a diverse group of women in the Himalayan region of Darjeeling district in India to engage (or not) in politics, and discusses how women, like men, are vulnerable to power and politics. In Darjeeling,

class, ethnicity, and other divides are accentuated by unresolved, decades-long identity-based political conflicts that also obscure practical everyday needs and challenges. This defines which women engage in the political domain and, in the dominantly patriarchal political space, how these women relate to the region's enduring water challenges. In such a setting, it would be ideal to wish for solidarity among women that would overcome class and ethnic divisions and individual political aspirations, making space for gendering political

causes and practical challenges. Such solidarity would be especially pertinent in the Eastern Himalaya, given the region's projected climate vulnerability and fragile democracy. However, reality is far removed from development discourse and policy which suggests an assumed camaraderie among mountain women: an imagined empathy and solidarity in relation both to environmental causes and concerns and the practice of equitable power and politics. In looking at how a diverse group of women in varying positions of power and powerlessness in Darjeeling District are unable, reluctant, or simply uninterested in addressing critical water injustices experienced by some, this paper calls for retrospection on both gender-environment myths and gender-politics fictions.

**Keywords:** Gender; women; identity; environment; water; politics; feminism; solidarity; Darjeeling.

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## Introduction

This article explores 2 popular stereotypes about gender: that women are almost always egalitarian and likely to support politics and policies that promote equality, peace, and sustainable development (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007), and that women have an inherent link to, and therefore concern for, nature. There is a complex history behind such stereotyping. Some argue that this was inevitable in integrating women in the mainstream development agenda—playing by the rules of the mainstream, adapting to popular language, turning myths into fables and emotions into imagery (Cornwall et al 2008). The authors explain how “myths are narratives composed of a series of familiar images, produc[ing] an order-of-things that is compelling. [It is this] mythical quality of narratives ... evoked in gender in development policies, that gives them the power to spur people into action” (ibid: 6). Integrating “women in development” (WID) is thus considered a hard-won achievement and several authors argue that these gains should not be easily dismissed (Cornwall et al 2008; Moore 2008). But the consequences of such imagery, “of the development icon ... of the [poor, Southern] woman carrying firewood on

her head across a barren landscape ...” is taxing both to women and to feminist development agendas (Leach 2007: 67). Associated with these assumed virtues, women have become stuck in development thinking as carers and nurturers in an otherwise complex and evolving weave of social relations, perpetually perceived as able and willing “fixers” of development and the environment (Jackson 1993).

The need to integrate WID, the challenges to achieving this, and the outcomes of such integration have prompted much feminist critique. Critical questions are asked on the value of the spaces created in development for women, and how (if at all) they transform entrenched inequalities between women and men and among women themselves, as well as reverse the profoundly political and patriarchal context of development, which was what feminist ideology attempted primarily to transform. This article asks similar questions in comparing the 2 stereotypes described above to the complex realities surrounding women, political conflicts, and water injustices in the Darjeeling district of the Eastern Himalaya.

Darjeeling district located in the state of West Bengal in India, has been embroiled in political conflict for over 4

decades. The demand for a separate state, Gorkhaland for the minority Nepali Gorkha community of Darjeeling in majority Bengali-dominated West Bengal is positioned as a resistance against the tyrannical control of local resources (land, water and forests) by an outsider, ethnically alien State (Ganguly 2005). However, the region's complex ethnic, intraethnic, class, religion, and gender divisions deny a common collective Gorkha identity (eg Kraemer 1999; Chatterjee 2001; Chettri 2013). Wenner (2013: 202) refers to the Gorkhaland struggle based around ethnicity and identity as "imaginative geographies that are laden with references to ethno-symbolic resources." It seems pertinent to ask what such constructions mean for the ethnically diverse communities in Darjeeling.

The movement and its leaders consider "Darjeeling as belonging to the Gorkhas simply because they are a majority there" (Wenner 2013: 208). Yet, the Nepalis in Darjeeling are divided by ethnicity, class, caste and other factors; and Darjeeling is also home to the Lepchas, to the Bhutias, to the refugee migrants from Tibet, as well as to Bengali and Marwari families who have lived here for several decades. Nevertheless, the essentialism of a collective identity struggle is the popular rhetoric of former and current local politicians agitating for a separate State of Gorkhaland since 1986.

Both the earlier, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) as well as the current Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (Gorkha People's Liberation Front) are often criticized for their violent, totalitarian, corrupt practices (Wenner 2012). Indeed, in 2010 "the president of an opposition party, All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was hacked to death by alleged Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) activists [in public view] in Darjeeling on 21 May, 2010" (Kalimpong News 2014). That such a conflict engages—or rather is noted to be buoyed by—women is quite remarkable. Indeed, an Internet search of the Gorkhaland agitation shows powerful images of the Nari Morcha, the women's wing of the GJMM party, on the streets, fully engaged in the turbulent political conflict. Casual discussions with women who chose to engage in the conflictual politics bring up articulate arguments about "years of political oppression, autocracy, and economic depravity under an alien, tyrannical state of West Bengal" (Joshi 2011), and about how "there was no choice but to engage in the struggle" (Joshi 2011). However, a deeper insight brings up stories that are different from popular essentialisms of women in Darjeeling divided by ethnicity, class, religion, age, and other factors, viewing and experiencing the social and political crises quite differently.

In 2012, the GJMM agreed to give up the struggle for Gorkhaland in exchange for a newly proposed administrative body, the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), with partial governing powers in Darjeeling District. The GTA lies very much within the state of West Bengal, and, contrary to expectations, the region has been reiterated as an unalienable part of the state of West Bengal by the current chief minister. Seven

Nari Morcha leaders were elected to the GTA and given department portfolios; 3 among them, including the GJMM Supremo's wife, became part of the 14-member executive body of the GTA. In addition, Nari Morcha (from here on, Morcha) members were nominated as GJMM candidates to contest almost half of the councilor positions during the elections in the 3 municipalities of Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Kurseong. Morcha leaders stated that this was only to be expected given women's vital contribution to the movement (Gurung 2012).

The research leading to this article explored the aspirations and motivations of a diverse group of women who chose to engage (or not) in the violent street politics of the GJMM party, leading to the formation of the GTA, and subsequent to that, their experiences and aspiration as women in positions of power that would have allowed them to address the water supply crisis in the region. The findings are in contrast to the popular notion that women do politics differently, engendering the political domain by raising concerns that particularly affect women, in this case the water supply issue. Instead, it found women to be as affected as men by political coercion and power. In other words, most of the women in positions of power were unable or simply unwilling to address the complexity of water injustices.

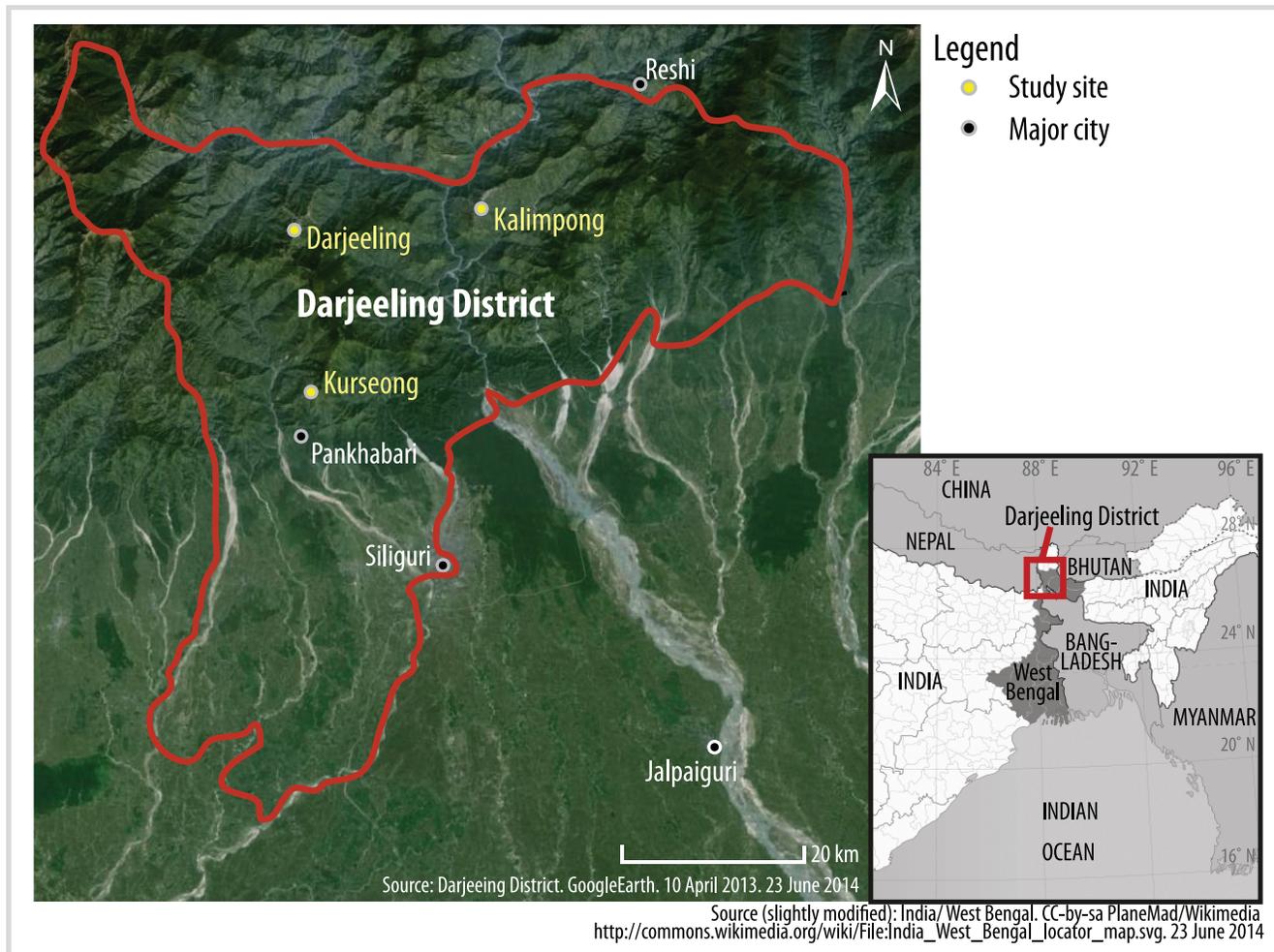
A critical mass of women engaged in an acrimonious political conflict in Darjeeling District and a deafening silence on local struggles around a water supply crisis make for a strange contrast to popular gender and development claims. The quiescence among women in positions of power in Darjeeling District to refrain from raising and politicizing pressing water challenges, as discussed below, is an outcome of complex ground realities. Building on these observations, the paper cautions against popular plans to hitch an assumed mass of environmentally inclined "mountain women" to climate–environment agendas. It urges attention instead to understanding complex spatial realities that shape gender–poverty–environment disparities uniquely in different local contexts.

## Methodology

This article is based on a secondary data review and ethnographic research in Darjeeling District conducted between 2011 and 2013. Working as the principal researcher, I was assisted by 5 local researchers (4 women and 1 man) who researched specific issues at different times during the research. I remain entirely accountable for the information and the views and opinions presented in this article.

The ethnographic research methods applied here included first and foremost establishing trust between the researchers and the researched, a task that was not easily done but particularly relevant given the context of the research. Secondly, the objective was to try and not impose research agendas and instead allow for

FIGURE 1 Map of Darjeeling District. (Map by Sarah-Kay Schotte)



unstructured conversations and communication complemented by observations of “social interactions, perceptions and behaviors” of the researched community (Reeves et al 2008: 512). These methods allowed “getting inside” the research context to understand how the respondents we engaged with perceived and experienced their “lived world” (Hammersley 1992).

At different points in time, the researchers met with Morcha members in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Kurseong towns in Darjeeling District (Figure 1). In order to ensure that differing perceptions and experiences of these women across the administrative structure of the group were captured, the researchers met with leaders and members in different locations. In Darjeeling, the researchers also met with women chair holders within the newly constituted GTA, as well as women elected to the Darjeeling Municipality. Additionally, several other women of different classes and ethnicities in these 3 towns were interviewed to assess whether and how they felt represented by the emerging women politicians. The research also targeted the small minority of gender and

environmental experts (both women and men) in Darjeeling and Kalimpong towns.

This exercise was a useful personal lesson on the ethics of research as well as the rhetoric of essentialism around “mountain women.” I was born in Kalimpong and raised in neighboring Darjeeling and have access to a wide network of friends and family, including Morcha members. My professional interests in gender and water, in addition to my personal interest in the politics and the environment of the region, made me perceive myself as a “returning local,” interested and committed to these issues. Falsely buoyed by this self-belief, I was expecting that doors would open, connections be reestablished, and trust be strengthened to enable critical discussions. I was proved wrong. The women I met did not see me in the way I had identified myself. My identity as an outsider and professional researcher was all too prominent to them. What I expected to hear was not readily told, especially as I was asking difficult questions, touching on issues not normally discussed. As discussed above, the leader of a rival political party had been assassinated in broad public

view in Darjeeling town and the assailants are yet to be brought to justice (Chettri 2013: 293). In my research, I was often ignoring such real, lived turmoil.

Individual researchers, regardless of the situation, often bring their personal narratives and experiences of social, economic, and political interactions into the realm of their research (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007). Such experiences are further impacted by epistemological and disciplinary divides that have their links to the institutional mandates and spaces that we researchers belong to, or claim. That we see, experience, and advocate gender differently is thus hardly a surprise. It makes sense to recognize and be aware of these differences and understand how they impact what is seen as pertaining to gender. Sardenberg (2007: 50), quoting de Lauretis (1994: 217–218), articulately summarizes that, “as ‘real’ beings, we, as women [researchers], are both inside and outside of ‘gender,’ both within and outside of ‘women’ as representation. It is precisely in such gaps, between the constructions and our actual lives, that feminism is rooted.” Or in other words, it is such complex realities as well as “our past roles” that can make us “complicit ... in promoting various gender myths and feminist fables” (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007: 21).

Finally, the fact that some among the women we met were able to speak or say what they did made evident the rhetoric around the bureaucratic theorization of mountain women “as an already constituted and coherent group stripped of all class, caste, ethnic and religious differences” (Tamang 2002: 317). I have changed the names of my respondents and removed identifying details from their stories as much as possible.

## Gender contradictions in theory and practice

Before turning to the case study of women’s experiences of power and politics in Darjeeling District, I discuss here in detail the development generalizations of “women as abject victims, the passive subjects of development’s rescue, and as splendid heroines, whose unsung virtues and contributions to development need to be heeded” (Cornwall et al 2007: 4). These prominently apolitical gender perceptions, conveniently “folded into a package of donor-driven prescriptions,” are not only often based on no evidence at all; many are also grossly counterproductive for transforming unequal relationships by gender in many geopolitical contexts (Kandiyoti 2007: 192). And yet, this relationship, although “poorly conceptualized and inherently fragile ... [continues to] only be sustained because of the strategic [development] interests it serve[s]” (Leach 2007: 68).

### The myth of women driven by a desire for egalitarianism

A recent analysis of the development intersect of good governance, democratization, and women’s rights in Afghanistan and Iraq explains the need for “an

appropriate politics of solidarity” (Kandiyoti 2007: 192) to counter the tendency of “political fiction meet[ing] gender myths” (Kandiyoti 2007: 191). This analysis adds to many others that illustrate women’s multiple identities beyond the simplistic development construction of women as different from men. Generalizing about women without context is problematic, at least in the sense that what development wants for women may not always be what all women seek in a given time and space (Mohanty 1988).

Using case study examples from India, Batliwala and Dhanraj (2007) point out that ethnicity, race, religion, caste, and nationalism are some of the ways in which women also organize. “On the political front, far from women transforming politics, evidence of the reverse is mounting. We clearly underestimated the power of existing modes of power and politics to corrupt, co-opt, or marginalize women” (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007: 32). The authors describe how a women’s cooperative group in the western state of Gujarat in India, on its face mobilizing and uniting women across religious and other divides, failed to respond to the organized carnage against the Muslim minority, particularly Muslim women, in 2002.

*In the very neighborhoods in which the women [belonging to the cooperative] lived, the aggressively fundamentalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad had been actively mobilizing other women into women’s [Hindu] militias. It seems incredible that none of this came to the attention of these self-employed groups or to the NGOs who organize them. (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007: 26)*

A critical question is: Are women unable to transform politics because of an entrenched patriarchy, or does the prevailing culture of power and politics also co-opt and corrupt women? There are no simple answers to this question. In the region from the Maoist struggles in Nepal to separatist movements in northeastern India, there is talk of mountain women’s critical roles in political activism. Yet the nature and context of women’s engagement, and the changes that these processes result in for women, remain disputed. Tamang (2009) notes that the women’s movement in Nepal cannot be easily categorized, as women have influenced policies and politics in diverse ways for a long time from both within and outside the political sphere. In Nepal’s deeply diverse society, such engagements as she (Tamang 2009: 63) notes have been and continue to be “dominated and led by high-caste Hindu women.” In that context, she writes of “the radical, social, economic and political transformation” intended in the Maoist upheaval in Nepal, also known popularly as the “People’s War,” and its “social transformation claims for women ... based on notions of an essentialist image of universally disempowered Nepali woman” (Tamang 2009: 74, 75). Such claims are evident, for example, in MacLeod-Bluver’s (2011) account of the immensely positive

outcomes of the “People’s War” for (Nepali) women: of how the mass political mobilization created new platforms for women to express their agency and solidarity across party and ethnic lines, and how these “gains made by and for women are held on to” by women (MacLeod-Bluver 2011: 1).

Manchanda (2004), reporting on the same Maoist struggle in Nepal, presents a different picture. She writes of a paradoxical engagement of women in the political upheaval: of women as victims, as “propagandists, mobilizers, party cadres and guerrillas in the front ranks of the fighting” (ibid: 237). She notes, however, that regardless of these engagements, the outcomes of the struggle have been ambiguous for women themselves: “a near critical mass of women and a male leadership that is ambivalent about redefining gender relations” (Manchanda 2004: 238). In the sections below, I present the intriguing situation of a critical mass of women political activists and the silence on water injustices in the Darjeeling region of the Eastern Himalaya, and how this ground reality contradicts popular gender myths.

#### **The myth of women’s special relationship with the environment**

Myth-like assumptions about women are especially prevalent in development discourse linking women with nature, for example myths “of women [as] victims of environmental degradation, but also environmental carers, and key fixers of environmental problems” (Leach 2007: 68). Such notions of women being reliant on and therefore deeply aware of the environment, and inherently knowing and respecting nature, have their origins in ecofeminism. Ecofeminists, diverse as they may be, generally agree that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally alike, brought about by patriarchal ideologies and designs of development (Warren 1990). This was the motivation for the argument to link women, environment, and development (WED) as an alternative approach to a destructive, unsustainable culture of development. Such arguments, as well as those highlighting women’s potential in (agricultural) production (see Boserup 1970), became powerful drivers for integrating WID.

Feminist ecologists critique the notion of women’s special relationship with nature on the grounds that these are portrayed as experienced, “purely as ‘women,’ uncomplicated by men, kin, differences or [other] relationships” (Leach 2007: 67). A feminist political ecology perspective views “gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change” (Rocheleau et al 1996: 4). In other words, resource-related relationships relate to “women’s particular circumstances” and differ in different social, political, and economic settings (Molyneux 2007: 231). Feminist ecologists (eg Leach 1991, 2007; Agarwal 1992;

Jackson 1993, 1995; Cleaver and Elson 1995; Rocheleau et al 1996) have critiqued the portrayal of women as inherent environmental carers, as well as the subsequent legitimizing and propelling of WED and WID perspectives, which are argued to be situated in neoliberal development agendas (Molyneux and Steinberg 1995). The argument made here is of “a feminization of responsibility and obligation” (Chant 2006: 206). Such “materialist discourse about women’s environmental roles ... suited donor and NGO preoccupations” at a time when a neoliberal development agenda called for the cutback of state services and the public sector (Leach 2007: 68). In this context, women became attractive, voluntary, hitherto unexplored “fixers” of environmental problems in development projects (Jackson 1993). Such integration of women into development rarely translated to equal power relations in complex sociopolitical contexts (Dixon 1985; Rathgeber 1989). Ecofeminists also contest coercive development policy agendas, particularly the practice of neoliberalism and globalization, yet they appear critically silent on the co-option of their own theories in the development agenda. This silence of a prominent group of feminists on “reversed” (Kabeer 1994) feminist perspectives in development policy makes for a polarized women–environment discourse. This unresolved ideological conflict between prominent feminist theorists and practitioners has significant implications on the policy and practice of gender (Gururani 2010).

In 2007, Leach (68) argued that “women and environment assumptions were debunked” because the discourse was essentially flawed, doomed to a temporary prominence. However, the discourse persists and is manifest, most recently in relation to climate change. Especially in the context of the Himalayas, there are countless stories of mountain women who, through their experience, responsibilities, and strength, are reported to play a much stronger role than men in the management of ecosystem services and food security, and therefore in climate change adaptation (Nellemann et al 2011). Mountain women’s knowledge, capability, and commitment to the environment and their families are used to highlight their ability to adapt in extreme situations such as conflict, natural disasters, and displacement (Leduc 2010). In the Himalayas, the phenomenon of economically driven male outmigration, accounts of women’s greater roles in agrarian production and marketing, stories of polyandrous mountain communities, of egalitarian cultures, of a greater mobility among mountain women, all add to the image that women—although vulnerable—are not passive victims of change (Mitchell et al 2007). Such arguments make for convincing claims that especially in mountains, women are critical actors in mitigating climate change (ICIMOD 2010).

Women do experience a structural and symbolic relation with environmental resources derived from a “universal patriarchy” (Molyneux 2001). But this

**FIGURE 2** Water supply pipes in Kalimpong town.  
(Photo by Radha Mohini Prasad)



relationship is crosscut by ethnicity, class, caste, color, race, and religion, and evolves spatially and temporally, resulting in varying experiences for different women, or, for that matter, for different men as well. This article speaks of similar ambiguities: on the one hand of subdued gendered priorities in a patriarchal, coercive political domain, and on the other, of serious challenges to a politics of solidarity among a diverse group of women with differing needs, challenges, and individual priorities, in a context of serious environmental problems.

### **Women's perceptions and experiences of the political and water crisis in Darjeeling**

The following sections present an analysis of the data from the fieldwork.

#### **Dimensions of the water crisis in Darjeeling District**

An Internet search of the words "water problems in Darjeeling" yields impressions of a serious and enduring water crisis in the region. These impressions are not anecdotal: they are matched by statistics and official data. A review of development in Darjeeling District by the Government of India's Planning Commission in 2010

noted hardly any interventions in irrigation in the region (Government of India 2010). Similarly, another report sanctioned by the Prime Minister's office in 2011 states that only 44 of 600 officially approved rural water supply schemes have been implemented (Government of India 2011).

Primary ethnographic research conducted in 2011 and 2012 in Kalimpong shows that only around 30–40% of the town's residents are formally connected to the official water supply. The situation is no better in the towns of Darjeeling and Kurseong. These connections mostly deliver erratic and inadequate amounts of water (Figure 2). Making access reliable requires illegally connecting to supply pipes closer to the collection and storage tanks, which are located in the more elevated parts of the town. Such connections, as pointed out to us by the municipality plumbers who perform these tasks, cost around INR 75,000 (~US\$ 1500). This money is to be paid under the table to the plumbers, who claim that this is then passed on to other Public Health Engineering Department officials (Dixit 2011). It is unclear how many local people indulge in such extravagance; however, most households connected to the official supply system in Kalimpong are required to pay around INR 5000 per month (~US\$ 100) as fees to appease the municipality technicians. Not paying anything means unreliable water, even if one has an official connection (Dixit 2011). Such fees do not spare the household members from having to wake up early each morning to see whether water will be available, as the supply is intermittent, sometimes only once in 8 days, or to find innovative ways needed to ensure suction and pressure to get the water flowing in their pipes.

In Kalimpong, local water authorities have historically pleaded fiscal inability to develop and manage water. The deteriorating waterworks dating back to the British colonial era are only irregularly repaired, when funds are made available by the state-government-managed Public Health Engineering Department. This nonfunctional public water supply demands alternative arrangements. A formal water market registered as the Kalimpong Water Supply Drivers' Welfare Association is the lifeline of most residents and businesses in the town. The association is operated, often in monopolistic ways, by water vendors and taxi drivers who work under the patronage of local political leaders. In March 2012, municipality authorities, who generally ignore and overlook the private water vending practice, informed the town's residents that the water supplied by the association drivers was coliform contaminated. The vendors were warned to expect random quality checks. The association was unrepentant and furious.

*We have been supplying water from these sources for ages. To date, there have been no complaints that anybody has fallen ill after drinking water supplied by us. The municipality suddenly decides*

FIGURE 3 The Baghdara spring in the morning. (Photo by Radha Mohini Prasad)



*that the water is contaminated. We will not supply water till the matter is sorted out to our satisfaction. (Ravidas 2012)*

This conflict occurred at the start of the dry season in March, when many boarding schools start up and the first tourists of the year arrive—both critical income sources for the town. The result was an unconditional withdrawal of the planned water quality checks and an apology by the municipal government to the association.

Those underserved or unserved by the official network and/or unable to have water delivered at home by private vendors include those at the bottom of the town's sociopolitical hierarchy. They fetch water from public springs, of which the Baghdara (Tiger's Spring), located in the middle of Kalimpong, is the largest. Early-morning activities in Baghdara illustrate that even in this small town, the water crisis is experienced differently by different people. Constraints and challenges to accessing water are highly differentiated and not only financial. The women and men we met at Baghdara were

differently disadvantaged by unique intersects of class, caste, ethnicity, and personal fortune in terms of marriage, life partners, and children. Several trips need to be made to the spring throughout the day. In peak scarcity periods, when the water flow is significantly reduced, one needs to be up at around 3 AM for undisputed access to water, or else one may spend hours waiting in the line to fetch water. These are also periods of intense conflicts focusing on water. None of the women and men we met there found pleasure in washing clothes, bathing in the open, or having daily fights over water in public view. These were unavoidable realities for an unfortunate few (Figure 3).

Muskan Rai, a male college student and resident of Darjeeling town, describes his daily schedule as dictated by the water scarcity.

*I had to wake up early morning, go to the dhara (spring), and wait for my turn to come and fill the jerry cans that I had taken along. It would basically be around 80–100 liters or sometimes even more.*

*Every time there were hundreds of empty jerry cans waiting to be filled. If there were more jerry cans in the queue, my turn would come late and I would reach school late. Sometimes, I would go around 6 PM after school in the evening to fill the water and get back home around midnight. (Sunam 2013)*

This is the daily life of some people in Darjeeling town, where water is, as in Kalimpong, scarce and differentially distributed.

The water scarcity in the region is indicative of a hydrological paradox: “Although the Himalayan region is a source of countless perennial rivers, paradoxically the mountain people depend largely on spring [ground] water for their sustenance” (Tambe et al 2012: 62). The river water is hardly accessible for scattered mountain communities living upstream of these sources. Similarly, the hard-rock mountain aquifer makes management and development of groundwater exceptionally difficult.

The hydrogeological, financial, and sociopolitical constraints that affect Darjeeling District’s water problems are simplistically lumped together as an outcome of the region’s nondevelopment due to skewed state–local government relations. The political conflict is blamed for the nondevelopment of the region, evidenced in the shortage of water and electricity, poor roads and infrastructure, and lack of higher education institutions (Ganguly 2005). This is believed to have provoked a “statehood agitation [that] quickly turned violent” (Ganguly 2005: 468). In such linking of nondevelopment and state–local conflicts, entrenched disparities by ethnicity, class, and gender are rarely noted. Much of what is not working in Darjeeling District is popularly blamed on the West Bengal government, seen as outsiders and tyrannical. The proposed separate state of Gorkhaland is seen as the panacea for all problems, ranging from the restoration of a rightful Nepali Indian Gorkha identity for the local community, to economic development befitting the region’s rich biodiversity, and economic and infrastructural development in pace with the rest of the nation. Such stories seem to make for an enticing political agenda and the demand for a separate state is presented by local politicians (as well as others) as a unanimous demand, even though in practice, ethnic identity positions are deeply exclusionary.

Local–state government relations are indeed skewed, parochial, and problematic, but the public imagery of the “Gorkha” and of shared vulnerabilities is far removed from reality (Chettri 2013). Wenner (2012, 2013) writes that movement mobilizations such as the Gorkhaland take place in contested sociopolitical spaces, and these often violent identity-based conflicts obscure power relations that have differing implications for different groups of people who belong to or are excluded from ethnically aligned spaces.

These divides are poignantly visible in the differing hopes and aspirations for Gorkhaland as well as in the

hope of resolution of everyday challenges such as improved water security. An elderly Nepali resident in Kalimpong whom we spoke to blames the West Bengal government for its deliberate failure to resolve the water problems of the region (Prasad 2012). He holds some hope that the situation will improve, maybe through the creation of Gorkhaland. Such perceptions are different to what an impoverished Bihari (non-Nepali) tea-shop owner says: “For people like me [meaning, non-Nepali] there is little hope for justice, nor for water, nor for anything else; not now nor if there is Gorkhaland” (Prasad 2012). Our interactions with some non-Nepali women revealed their mixed experiences regarding the Gorkhaland movement and the Morcha. Tibetan immigrants, who are culturally and socially more adapted to the local context, spoke about feeling included, although they also noted their obligation to the government of India for their refugee status. On the other hand, women from Bengali and Marwari communities seemed less convinced of being included in local politics and respected in everyday life. An elderly Bengali woman who had spent all her life in Darjeeling remarked, “There is no representation of Bengalis [who have lived here for decades] in the GJMM administration” (Rai and Rai 2012). This particular respondent expressed her anguish at having found little support from anyone, including Morcha leaders, in over 3 years during which she struggled in a court case. She believed that there was a strong element of ethnic exclusion within the movement. There are many such stories of being and feeling the “other” among non-Nepali groups. Indeed, Chettri (2013: 298) points out that a “fossilized” Gorkha identity is only completely internalized by a small population of Nepali tea-estate laborers—those who have never made the social and physical crossover outside the estates. In this contested political space, women’s everyday political engagement and roles have been complex, as discussed in the following section.

### **Political and environmental values—a conflict of interest for women?**

This section discusses how the Gorkhaland struggle has enabled some women to engage in the violent street politics and discouraged others; it also discusses whether and how women in positions of power are able to or interested in taking their own (or others’) experiences of the water crisis to their newly acquired political spaces.

*Just take a look at the present or past leaders. They are mostly uneducated. For them leadership is all about coming to power and making some profit for themselves. The educated do not join politics because it is a dirty job. It is not an easy task to listen to people’s taunts and allegations. Only the poorest or maybe the very rich can tolerate it. For us middle-class women it is impossible to get into politics. (Rai and Rai 2012)*

This comment by a group of women who had come to fetch water at a public spring on the periphery of Darjeeling town sums up popular perceptions of how the Morcha is viewed by women who have chosen to not engage in politics. It also points to the class divides in the political struggle for Gorkhaland. This is hardly surprising. Chettri (2013: 298) explains that historically, landless peasants from the region's tea and *cinchona* plantations have formed the backbone of the separatist political movement, which thrives on a culture of "poverty, dependency and subservience."

The educated elite speak of the undisciplined politics of the illiterate and the enormous personal and professional risks for trivial gains in politics. They also argue that a majority of women and men are simply coerced into the movement. "When called to attend political rallies there is no option to say no. This could lead to being socially ostracized or worse consequences" (Rai and Rai 2012). A well-known female social activist pointed out the miniscule gains for women engaged in a conflict that is predominantly shaped on masculine, patriarchal terms.

*During the agitation, on most mornings, a whistle would blow at 3 or 4 AM, alerting women leaders to start preparing the family meal for the day because the GJMM rallies and meetings would continue throughout the day. The Nari Morcha is invited for every event of GJMM, but they are there just to parrot slogans. And the one who shouts loudest is considered a leader. The perseverance of these women has not really been rewarded by any meaningful decision making power to these women. In that context and on many other issues, the current leadership is not really different from the earlier Gorkha National Liberation Front regime. (Rai and Rai 2012)*

In Darjeeling, decades of conflict have disallowed collective action on environmental and gender issues. This is not to say that the small Himalayan district lacks environmental advocates. Despite the upheaval, there are women and men who, individually or as members of organizations, advocate environmental issues and concerns. What is interesting is that this small minority of largely social elites tend to disassociate themselves from those who engage in Darjeeling's conflict-ridden street politics. A female NGO professional pointed out why women like herself did not engage in street politics: "Which educated woman in her senses would be willing to take the risk [of joining politics in Darjeeling]?" (Rai and Rai 2012). As observed in Darjeeling, Manchanda (2004) also noted little solidarity between the Maoist women and the numerous women's development organizations during the time of social upheaval in Nepal.

And yet, those who chose to engage in politics articulately present a political agenda and motivation that seems to be beyond individual or practical gains: "This is

not a struggle for roads, for water, for such trivia—it is a struggle for a rightful Indian Gorkha identity" (Joshi 2011). However, these articulate political positions seemed significantly reversed when we met the same women leaders and members in 2012 during the time the GJMM leadership was negotiating the West Bengal state government's offer to establish the GTA. The date for GTA and municipality elections had been agreed on and candidates were being nominated for the elections. These were times of frantic networking and lobbying among the Morcha members. A grassroots worker in Kalimpong, a young mother of 2, explained why:

*Of course we did this for Gorkhaland, but some have contributed far more than others. It is only fair, that we are rightly rewarded [with party posts and other political favors]. In these years of struggle, we left our homes and families day in and out. For the meetings and travels in the long periods of the agitation, I used my own resources. Having exhausted my small savings, I recently pawned some gold. Daju ["elder brother," a term commonly used for the GJMM leader] knows of our struggles and our commitment. He gives us money during festivals or if someone from the party cadre or their family is sick, he arranges for our treatment and travels. But it is another thing to have a political position in the administration. (Joshi 2012)*

This was therefore also a period of animosities and conflicts, especially among senior Morcha members. In April 2013, a founding member of the Kalimpong Nari Morcha announced her resignation from the GJMM. Although she pointed to health reasons for her withdrawal, her letter, made public in leading daily papers, was evident of the conflict.

*I joined the agitation a week after the GJMM was formed. I now hold experiences that have become bitter memories. The movement is over. I have been made a member of the GTA Core Committee but have been given no portfolio. And to date, I have no idea what this core committee is about. (Joshi 2013)*

For many women, however, minor gains were the reward, presenting a way out of poverty and backwardness. In July 2013, well after the formation of the GTA, I met a group of young women from the tea estates in Darjeeling who had actively engaged in the struggle. They now functioned as mediators between the Morcha head (wife of the GJMM head; see above) and the general public. Working 6 days a week for a monthly remuneration of around INR 2500 (US\$ 40), they viewed their current situation as a turnaround in their lives.

*We were nobody—poor, illiterate and from the tea-gardens. We had no future, and nothing to look forward to. Today, we sit here and no one can go in and talk to Bhauju [sister-in-law wife of GJMM supremo, who is referred to as Daju or elder brother] without our*

*permission. She may scold us, but she has our unstinting and unquestioned support. (Joshi 2013)*

Similarly, a young widowed position holder in the Darjeeling municipality remarked, “I am here because of the party, and everything else comes after the party” (Rai and Rai 2012). These conversations explain how individual needs and priorities take precedence in the lives of the women in political positions.

Some of the stories we heard on how new leadership positions and other forms of political largesse were distributed to favorites spoke of political manipulation. If stories such as the one told by an elected member of the Darjeeling Municipality are indeed true, then except for a powerful few, women leaders seem to have little say in anything:

*We were all seated and Daju [“elder brother,” the GJMM head] called out names of those nominated for the municipality elections. Those whose names were not announced were promised that there would be other opportunities. All of us were quiet, still, no one questioned, no one asked. (Joshi 2012)*

There were a few women leaders who spoke (in confidence) of disillusionment. “It is beginning to feel no different from the earlier Gorkha National Liberation Front regime” (Joshi 2013). The respondent pointed out the desperate need to raise such concerns publicly in order to not forego public commitment for Gorkhaland. But according to her, the risks of doing so were high and could likely result in violent rebuttals.

Those outside the political circle say, “Women do know about the water scarcity issue in Darjeeling, but they are unable or simply unwilling to pursue this issue at a political level. This related in part to them being complicit in the prevailing practices of corruption” (Rai and Rai 2012). This was said in reference to links drawn between the water vendors and politicians, as well as to buildings constructed or businesses initiated by female party members with money acquired after entering into active politics.

Regardless of who they are and what they experience, the women in the Morcha seem far from illiterate, irrational, or risk indulging. Instead, they appear to make conscious political choices, including the taking of small and big risks. They toe the party leadership position even when it is totalitarian and coercive. This appears to be in the best interests of their own personal, individual goals.

As discussed above, in Darjeeling environmental activists do not choose to engage in politics and politicians are usually not advocates for environmental initiatives. However, an interesting crossover between environmentalism and political activism was made by 2 women: an academic environmentalist who is now a Morcha leader, and a politician who joined the movement from the start, participating actively on the “streets,” and

who now manages the water portfolio in the Darjeeling Municipality. Both women are enthusiastic about their new careers. Both have chosen not to engage in the politics of gender or environmental solidarity. The former is said to have acted against local communities displaced by dam development in the region. Women in these communities speak bitterly of a woman leader who did not hear their voices. The latter is credited with regularizing illegal water tapping and presents a water management strategy based on a flat rate based for all official users as well as penalties for those users absconding payments and making illegal connections. Such management options are technically sound but do not correspond to the complex reality of those connected to, and being provided [or not] water from, the official water supply. Her take on the recent hydropower development in the region, which is critiqued by environmentalists, is also cautiously apolitical: “Is technology a blessing or curse? Only time will tell” (Joshi 2013).

## Conclusion

By looking into the complex ties between women, water, and politics, this study provides an overview of the varying motivations of women to adopt political agendas that resonate in different ways with their individual aspirations. These examples clearly show that the assumed camaraderie among women, and between women and the environment, is blurred by contextual realities. It seems prudent then to step back and “interrogate past assumptions and strategies, or risk being completely ... instrumentalized by the forces of a resurgent patriarchy, ... fundamentalism[s] and unregulated neoliberalisms” (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007: 21).

In the Himalayan region, a depoliticized discourse of an assumedly homogeneous group of mountain women championing climate projects is problematic. Such feminization of responsibility and obligation masks inequalities among women, and, without context, obscures complex environmental and gender challenges (Chant 2008). It seems far more important to pay attention to “women’s particular circumstances” and show a “greater awareness of the political and ethical dimensions of the interface between global instruments and local settings” (Molyneux 2007: 231, 236).

Praising women’s virtues places—at least in principle—disproportionate responsibility and expectations on mountain women, ranging from care for natural resources at the household and community levels to commitment to the environment and sustainable development in hierarchies of political decision-making. But reality contradicts popular notions about the vulnerabilities of mountain people, the shared environmental challenges of mountain women, and the imagined camaraderie to address these. These contradictions between gender stereotypes and everyday

experiences have profound implications for gendered injustices.

Such contradictions between stereotypes and experiences disable rather than enable women “to define change for themselves, negotiate change, understand and challenge [the complexity of] injustices and inequity” (Chakravarti 2008: 14). Simplifying complex realities depoliticizes social hierarchies and inequalities. For example, it masks the dominantly male political environments or the fact that political opportunities only occasionally translate into emancipation for a select few women (Manchanda 2004). Women’s engagement in political positions is essential, but a greater representation of some women in formal political life does not guarantee representative, inclusive politics. Women have interests and identities that often override gender or environmental interests. This explains why women in positions of power might not want to inherently and enduringly address environmental and/or gender challenges. The circumstances under which women in power commit to leveling gender and/or environmental inequalities are by no means predictable,

shaped as they are by complex combinations of individual, sociopolitical, institutional, and other contextual realities. Rather than imagining a “politics of solidarity” (Kandiyoti 2007) among women, it seems to make more sense to consider seeing women as complex “gendered beings,” united in some inequalities by gender and yet divided by other aspects of their identities (Molyneux 2007: 229).

Finally, lest it should be misunderstood, gender—alongside class and ethnicity—constitutes one of the major axes of signification in social life, structuring the world from global economies to local institutions and personal lives (Mohanty 2004). One of the main difficulties, according to Liebrand (2014), is that gender issues are equated with women’s issues and women’s empowerment is assumed to be implementable as top-down essentialism. Such a limited perspective hampers understanding of how and why different women and men engage (or not) in development. This paper flags the urgent need to move away from this narrow, apolitical, and technocratic way of defining and “doing” gender.

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