

8 Gendered River Basin Institutions

The Chu–Talas Commission in Central Asia

Jennifer Sehring

Introduction

This chapter sheds light on how gender perceptions and identities are shaping transboundary water governance in the Chu–Talas basin in Central Asia. I look at the bilateral Chu–Talas Commission (CTC), a joint basin organisation established in 2006 by Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. When conceptualising water institutions as “gendered”, I build on Feminist Institutionalism which has shown that political institutions are not gender neutral. This also counts for water institutions (understood as the formal and informal rules and practices to govern water), including those at transboundary level. This lens shows how “constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions”, hence that gender relations are “embedded in particular political institutions and constraining and shaping social interaction” (Mackay et al. 2010, p. 580).

Data for this chapter has been collected as part of a comparative analysis of gender and transboundary water governance in three different river basins, which also includes the studies by ter Horst and Mattur on the Rhine basin (Chapter 9 of this volume) and of Said on the Nile basin (Chapter 10 of this volume).¹ They are based on a literature review, own participation in meetings of the CTC, as well as 17 semi-structured interviews with members of the CTC and water professionals in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.²

I first introduce the CTC and describe to what extent it is both representative and extraordinary for Central Asia. I then discuss how Feminist Institutionalism can help to unravel the gendered nature of transboundary water governance. I continue with a brief overview of gender relations in Central Asia to sketch the political context, and subsequently discuss the genderedness of institutions, focusing on three gendered norms and practices: duty travels, leadership norms, and negotiation styles. I finally reflect on how gender intersects with other relevant power relations, namely generational and urban–rural divides.

The Chu–Talas Commission and Transboundary Water Relations in Central Asia

The vast landmass of Central Asia spans – depending on definition – the countries between the Caspian Sea in the West and China in the East, between Russia in the North and Afghanistan and Iran in the South. In this chapter, I use the term to refer to the following five countries: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. They share a long, common history, being interconnected through the Silk Road, conquered by Russia, later integrated in the Soviet Union, and finally becoming independent nation states in 1991. The major basin that these five countries share is the Aral Sea basin, tragically famous for the environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea desiccation. The efforts, successes, and failures of interstate collaboration in this basin, and the related political tensions, has attracted significant scholarly attention (e.g., Xenarios et al. 2020; Menga 2018; Weinthal 2002). However, there are also a few smaller, often bilaterally shared, basins in the region; between Kazakhstan and China, between Kazakhstan and Russia, and between Iran and Turkmenistan. Among these smaller bilateral basins are the Chu and Talas basins.

The Chu–Talas basins cover together an area of approximately 115,000 km² shared by Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. The Chu and Talas rivers are the major rivers of the basins, which also encompasses numerous smaller rivers. The Chu river is 1,186 km long and the Talas river 661 km. A major part of the basins is located in desert or semi-desert zones in Kazakhstan, while the rivers originate in the Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan, where most of the run-off is formed (UNECE 2011).

Most of the rivers' infrastructure was built during the Soviet period: two reservoirs on Kyrgyz territory to store water for irrigation (Kirov and Orto-Tokoi) and extensive canal systems for irrigation in Kazakhstan (By-Pass Chu Canals, Western Bolshoi Chu Canal, Eastern Bolshoi Chu Canal, Chumysh Hydrosystem). A 1983 USSR regulation determined that the Kazakh Soviet Republic would receive 42 per cent of the water resources from the Chu river basin and 50 per cent of the resources from Talas basin, and that the Kyrgyz SSR would receive the remaining percentage of the water resources from the Chu and Talas basins, respectively. In 2000, the governments of both countries signed the *Agreement on Utilization of the Water Facilities of Interstate Use on the Chu and Talas rivers*. The agreement confirmed the water allocation as established in the Soviet Union, and obliged Kazakhstan to contribute to the costs of operation, maintenance, and rehabilitation of dams and reservoirs located in Kyrgyzstan and serving irrigation needs in Kazakhstan. In addition, it stipulated the establishment of a permanent commission and the implementation of joint activities (Libert 2015; Ni 2018).

In 2006, the *Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic on the Use of Water Management Facilities of Intergovernmental Status on the Rivers Chu and Talas* – the official name of the aforementioned CTC – was established.

The CTC's mandate includes the approval of the allocation of water resources between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, measures to maintain and rehabilitate water facilities of interstate use, and approval of financial plans. The establishment and further functioning of CTC was supported by several international donors, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Asian Development Bank and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (Ni 2018; Wegerich 2008; Libert 2015).

The CTC's structure is defined and illustrated below (Figure 8.1). It is headed by two co-chairpersons, representing the main ministries in charge of water – currently Kazakhstan's Ministry of Agriculture and the Kyrgyz Republic's State Agency for Water Resources. A small joint Secretariat was established, co-headed by a Kazakh and a Kyrgyz director. The Secretariat is the CTC's permanent executive body that coordinates the work of the commission, prepares meetings, and follows the implementation of decisions taken at the meetings.

There are six thematic Working Groups (WGs) with experts from both countries to deal with issues such as infrastructure safety, legal and institutional matters, water resources allocation, monitoring and data exchange, as well as environmental protection (see Figure 8.1). Both WGs and CTC usually meet twice a year, with the respective delegations being nominated by the government. CTC members come from the respective line ministries, the foreign ministries, environmental and hydro-meteorological agencies, as well as provincial/district authorities. International and donor organisations participate

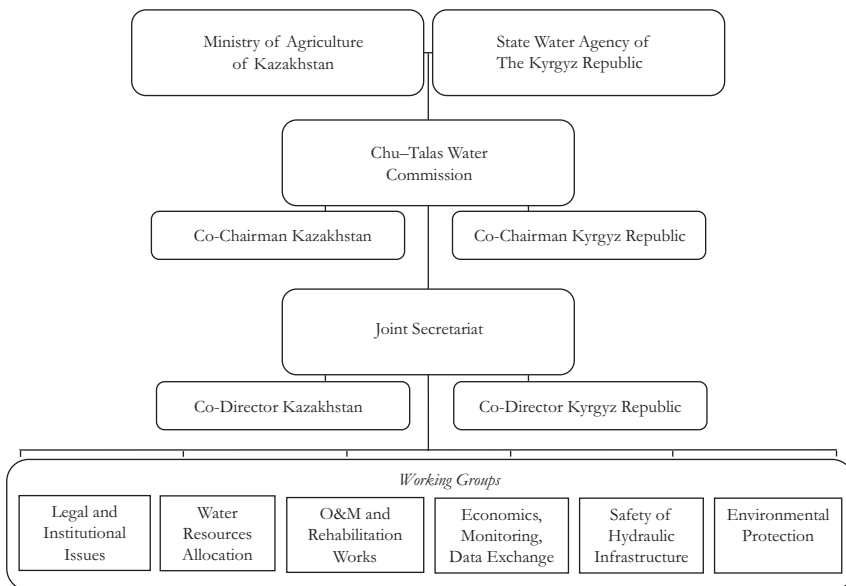


Figure 8.1 Structure of the Chu–Talas Commission (author's compilation)

as observers in the meetings. The protocol of each session with the agreed decisions is drafted, negotiated, finalised, and signed by the Co-Chairs after the meeting. Meeting locations alternate between Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic.

CTC is thus still a relatively young organisation. It was established in a region that is characterised by often occurring water tensions, lack or insufficient agreements for other basins, and usually tough and polarised water negotiations. In this context, CTC is often praised as an exceptional example for water cooperation in Central Asia (Libert 2015; Ni 2018). It has a clear mandate and procedures, can take binding decisions, and manages to maintain good working relations even in times of political disagreements or instability. Many members of CTC and its WGs have been involved for many years and have good personal relations. Interview partners explained this with a similar understanding of the issues at stake as well as with the close cultural ties, joint past, and shared mentality of the two countries. The Soviet period has many legacies, including Russian as a *lingua franca*, but more importantly a strong network and community of water experts jointly educated in the USSR. This provides them with longstanding personal ties and shared norms on water management, resulting in similar opinions on preferred solutions (Sehring & Ibatullin 2021).

However, there are also challenges. Neither the CTC nor the Secretariat have a legal status with implications for bank accounts, permanent positions, salary for the Secretariat staff, as well as receipt and transfer of funding, among other things. Much of CTC's work is dependent on projects funded by international donors. These projects do not only enable additional studies but keep up the normal functioning by paying the salary of key positions in the Secretariat and the costs of the bi-annual meetings, for example. As a result, the CTC's work remains unstable, lacks financial sustainability, and has been criticised for being donor-driven and lacking ownership (Ni 2018; Wegerich 2008).

Without doubt, factors like donor-dependency, type and robustness of an agreement, economic mechanisms, political interests, and relations between the two countries can explain a big part of the challenges, developments, and results of transboundary water cooperation in the Chu–Talas basin. But they overlook an important aspect, namely how the consistency, change, and outcomes of transboundary water institutions are impacted by gendered practices, routines, and norms of behaviour that enable or constrain constructive cooperation.

A Feminist Institutional View

New Institutionalism has put focus on how actors are being shaped and are shaping institutions, defined here as “a set of rules stipulating expected behaviour and ruling out behaviour deemed undesirable” (Streeck & Thelen 2005, pp. 12–13) in both formal and informal ways. Different schools (most importantly Rational Choice, Historical and Sociological Institutionalism)

put different weight on power, ideas, rational behaviour, or historical path dependencies for explaining the persistence or change of institutions. Feminist Institutionalism, which evolved in recent years as a dedicated school of New Institutionalism in Political Science, seeks to understand how gender impacts the way political institutions work, their outcomes, how they distribute power, how agency works within them, and how they do or do not change (Mackay et al. 2010; Chappell & Waylen 2013). Seeing institutions as gendered means to understand gender roles as not existing primarily at individual level and to emphasise that “constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions” (Mackay et al. 2010, p. 580).

While looking at one specific organisation, namely CTC, the institutional perspective is not confined to formal aspects of the organisation but looks in particular at the often hidden aspects – informal rules and practices – and the impact they have on institutional design and outcomes as well as the interaction between the formal and informal (Chappell & Waylen 2013; Aggestam & Towns 2018). It thus requires looking at institutions in the broader sense, including daily practices within the organisation as well as the political and socio-cultural settings in which CTC is embedded.

Behaviours, roles, and identities of male and female water professionals engaged in transboundary negotiations are determined through processes of socialisation, norms, and practices in bureaucracies, resulting in certain expectations and patterns of acceptable behaviour for men and women (Mackay et al. 2010; Aggestam & Towns 2018). For example, certain masculine norms of leadership can be performed by both men and women, but are socially accepted only for men. At the same time, a male leader can show soft or feminine character traits, but runs the risk of being ridiculed. Chappell’s (2006) concept of a “gendered logic of appropriateness” (p.223) can help to explain this. It builds on the work of Sociological Institutionalism scholars who argue that rules are followed and norms are powerful not only because of domination mechanisms, but because actors perceive them as natural and rightful, as appropriate in a given situation (March & Olsen 2013). In a gendered understanding, this logic “prescribes (as well as proscribes) ‘acceptable’ masculine and feminine forms of behaviour, rules, and values for men and women within institutions” (Chappell & Waylen 2013, p. 601).

Based on Chappell and Waylen (2013) as well as Lowndes and Roberts (2013), I look at gender in the CTC along two dimensions:

- 1) the nominal dimension, which refers to the participation of men and women, and can show the historical and ongoing dominance of men in positions of power in CTC and other relevant water agencies in the basin; and
- 2) the substantive dimension, which refers to the hidden gender bias in supposedly gender neutral formal and informal rules, norms, and practices, like dress codes, negotiation styles, meeting agendas and timing, wording used, etc.

The Chu–Talas Commission as a Gendered Institution

Before looking at CTC as such, the next section gives a brief overview of the gender relations in the political and socio-cultural context of Central Asia in which the CTC is embedded.

Gender, Water, and the State in Central Asia

The liberation of women was one of the prominent objectives of the Soviet restructuring of society. Soviet policies promoted the empowerment of women in the public sphere, and women have worked in all economic sectors, overcoming earlier gender divisions. This was achieved through giving women access to education and training as well as family and child welfare policies. In Central Asia, the dependence on kinship ties, religion and gender-restrictive traditions was pushed back – at least on the surface (Kandiyoti 2007; Constantine 2007; Ishkanian 2005). Women were encouraged to take up technical professions and work in fields traditionally occupied by men – with the result of female engineers, hydrologists, and similar professions being much more common than in other world regions.

Many of the women in senior water management positions today were educated and started their professional life in the Soviet Union, and in their perception, gender did not matter: “*We weren’t divided back in Soviet times – in female, male. Somehow, we were all of the same sex, somehow taking responsibility for ourselves, maybe even more than we should*” (Interview 11, 19 December 2019). Still today, many of them would insist that they are first and foremost professional experts, and that this counts more than their gender.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought independence to the Central Asian Republics. It led not only to major rivers becoming transboundary and the subject of negotiation between the states, but also to altered gender relations. In Soviet times, women were expected to contribute to society through work (as a farmer or an academic, for example), whereas the modern Uzbek woman often fills the role of young wife with familial and household responsibilities (Constantine 2007). This interpretation applies to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as much as it does to Uzbekistan and resembles the revival of patriarchal, traditional, and religious norms seen since independence (Kandiyoti 2007; Ishkanian 2005). Several interviewees shared the perception that the relative gender equality of Soviet times has declined in current society. These changing socio-cultural norms impact the professional perspectives of young women, and they are exacerbated by the gendered effects of the economic crisis during the transformation period and the decline of the education system (Sahvaeva n.d.). The following quote from a male Kazakh CTC member illustrates this:

Previously, qualified women used to work in the water sector. They were not inferior to men. Today, there are fewer such women as knowledge is insufficient because of the education system, which is in decline today. Women have given up a little in

terms of knowledge, because there was a downturn in the economy and women were feeding their families by working at the bazaar. And men, where can they go? They can't do anything else. So men mostly stayed [in the water administration], women fed [their children] and were the keeper of the hearth.

(Interview 2, 19 September 2019)

The empowerment of women in the Soviet economic sphere was not reflected in the political sphere. While there was a quota system, which guaranteed women 33 per cent of seats in political bodies, leadership in the Soviet Union was male and continued to be so in the newly independent states. After independence, “symbolic ‘masculinization’ of national representation” (Kudaibergenova 2016, p. 4; see also Franke-Schwenk 2013) became an important element of official state- and nation-building discourses – resembled for example in the national heroes (e.g., Manas in Kyrgyzstan, Golden Man in Kazakhstan) that replaced the statues of the male Soviet leaders. In the post-Soviet time, female politicians are a minority; after the elections in 2005, there was not a single woman in the Kyrgyz Parliament. This is perhaps due to the fact that politics is often perceived as something rude and therefore not appropriate for women (Ishkanian 2005). Nevertheless, there are a few notable exceptions, like Roza Otunbaeva, Kyrgyzstan’s president in the transition period after the 2010 uprising, and female relatives of male politicians (like the daughters of Kazakhstan’s first president). These few female leadership figures in contemporary times as well as historical figures were referred to by female interviewees as role models to affirm the scope of agency women had and have in society and show how tradition can be evoked in different ways (see also Beyer & Kojobekova 2019).

Representation of Men and Women in the Chu–Talas Commission

A first step to analyse the impacts of gender on the working of CTC is to look at the participation and roles of men and women across levels and thematic areas.

At the highest decision-making level, the two Chairpersons have always been men. At the same time, the two directors of the Secretariat have been two (and the same) women since its establishment. In WGs, women constitute about one-third of all members. Among WGs, gender composition differs per group. Interestingly, the share of women is particularly high in the WG on Environmental Protection.

In CTC meetings, it is mostly men who speak. This is due to protocol and hierarchy as the Chairs and Head of Delegations, who mainly speak, are men. Women speak in the meetings if given the floor as WG members. However, many women have supporting roles in WGs and the Secretariat that should not be underestimated, and prepare the documents presented and statements made in the meeting. These roles are less visible, but not necessarily less important.

Compared with other transboundary water bodies in the region, CTC has a relatively gender-equal composition. In all the main bodies of the Aral Sea basin (namely the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), and the Basin Water Organizations (BVOs)) the Chairpersons as well as national representatives, Heads of scientific centres and Secretariats have been almost exclusively men, as well as the majority of the staff. Notably, the Secretariats of the ICWC (until recently) and of the Chu–Talas Commission (until today) have been headed by women – but these are administrative more than political bodies.

Members of CTC come from national and provincial water and environmental agencies. The majority of the senior and high-level professional and technical positions of the state water administrations, including ministries, agencies, and basin management, are held by men. The same holds true for foreign affairs. A few women in Deputy Minister or Director positions are exceptions. Nevertheless, compared to the water agencies in the provinces and in operational management, there are relatively more women in the ministries and agencies at the national level (Akylbekova 2017; Musabayeva 2014).

Caution is required in counting increased numbers of women as a sign of women empowerment or more gender equality. Rather, it is important to look at the changed role and status of the water sector. The water sector used to be a highly prestigious sector in the Soviet Union with an enormous and powerful bureaucracy, research institutes, huge infrastructural projects, and well-paid jobs. After independence, funding, power, and prestige declined. The preferred profession was no longer engineer, but businessman. One male interviewee explained the high number of women in the WG on Environmental Protection by the fact that its members are coming from national hydro–meteorological services and environmental departments with low salary and status:

Now we have a 50–50 workforce. When I started working, there were probably 10–20% men, mostly women worked here. It is more balanced now [...] Salaries are low, so it was not prestigious for a man, as a breadwinner, to work for such a salary. [...] Now of course salaries have gone up a little bit, but at that time they were lower.

(Interview 14, 19 December 2019)

In this respect it is to be noted that the two Co-Directors of the Secretariat, due to the previously mentioned unresolved legal status of CTC, did not receive a permanent salary from the governments until recently but were dependent on temporary contracts under the international projects. This forced them to work without payment between projects. A Central Asian water expert not involved in CTC therefore noted:

Probably it [CTC] would be headed by men if the Secretariat had a sound structure and good money. But it is in a very unstable position, no budget, just a name. Probably therefore women are heading the Secretariat, no one else wants it.

(Interview 17, 08 July 2020)

Looking at it from this perspective, a relatively high number of female members might not be a sign of gender equality, but of reduced significance and economic attractiveness. In those transboundary commissions in the region where water governance is still an issue of high politics, namely IFAS and ICWC, women do play a much less visible role than in CTC. On the other hand, one male Kazakh water expert noted that the gender balance is different in different bilateral settings: In negotiations with Russia, China, and the Kyrgyz Republic, both sides have relatively many women in their delegations. In negotiations with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the other side would be mostly represented by men, and so also Kazakhstan would have more men in their delegation (Interview 2, 19 September 2019). The gender balance might thus be both the result of hard vs soft politics as of diplomatic intuition in anticipation of gendered expectations of the other party.

Gendered Practices and Norms within the Chu–Talas Commission

Regarding how the daily routines within CTC are gendered, I look at three seemingly neutral practices and norms, that are at closer sight highly gendered: duty travels, leadership norms, and negotiation styles.

Duty Travels

One example of a supposedly gender-neutral practice that has gender-specific implications is the need for regular duty travels. Being a CTC member implies regular travel to the meetings that alternately take place in the two member states. Similarly, the work in the respective national ministries and agencies involves field visits. Many of the female interviewees stressed that for them duty travels are no problem, for example:

I like travelling a lot. I have no problem travelling – I deal with water issues. We are dealing with wastewater treatment plants, water supply, drainage issues. I can go to the South [of Kyrgyzstan] without any problems, this is not a problem for me.
(Interview 13, 19 December 2019)

But at the same time, the very same woman said:

This work, you see, it covers economic entities far in the mountains, different regions, constantly on the move, so therefore it is male, it's a man's work.
(ibid.)

In a similar vein, a Kazakh female water specialist said:

At middle level [positions], there are mostly women, at higher levels there are fewer women, I won't lie. But this also depends on women themselves. Many women have families and so on. For example, in the Basin Inspectorate there were always

business trips. Women with small children attending kindergartens and schools – they cannot travel. They are not eager to. But I became the boss because [...] I don't have anyone. I could easily spend 10 days or 20 days wading through riverbeds. So this is why it is like a man's work, all the time on a business trip, many business trips. And you can't do our work in the office if you haven't been on the ground, seen what's going on there.

(Interview 5, 19 September 2019)

For both women, though themselves travelling a lot, it is the duty of travel that prompts them to equate their work to men's work. It comes with two important implications: first, not being able to travel will prevent a professional from reaching higher level positions, and second, it is not related to the nature of the work itself, but that duty travel conflicts with care work that is mostly expected to be done by women.

The latter aspect requires having a close look at the gender division of labour in the two basin countries. While the Soviet Union promoted women's role in economic and public life, this change did not take place equally in the private sphere – an issue discussed as a double burden in the late Soviet Union where care duties continued to be the primary responsibility of women (Ishkanian 2005). Also, in independent Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, women spend between one and a half to two and a half times more than men on unpaid labour related to care for children and the elderly, housekeeping, etc. (Khitariashvili 2016). Unsurprisingly, both male and female interview partners mentioned care work as a hindering factor for women to get into decision-making positions, and one where women depend on the role and support of their partners, as these two experiences show:

She [a woman] knows the job. She can manage. But not when the kids are little or they go to primary school, then you have to look after the kids too. I don't know about your men, our men don't [help in the household]. He comes home, he lies down. He's like a piece of furniture.

(Interview 5, 19 September 2019)

If you are a water professional, your job involves frequent trips, business trips. For example, if everything is normal in the family, if the other half [the husband] allows you to travel, then, please, why not work? I also have frequent business trips, but my husband also understands me, he also worked in the same field, so he does not mind.

(Interview 12, 19 December 2019)

This shows the interwoven nature of private and professional life, of social norms about care and participation of women in political decision making, and thus the gendered impact of a key practice in transboundary water governance.

Leadership Norms

Ideas about what makes a good leader are strongly gendered and impact the perceptions of women's suitability for leadership positions. Often, favoured

leadership styles are at odds with norms of appropriate behaviour for women (Due Billing & Alvesson 2000; Lowndes 2014).

An obvious pattern in the interviews was that (male) water diplomats are expected to be strong leaders and that being a strong leader is seen as something masculine. Among female interviewees, leadership was commonly associated with male behaviour and male character, like here: “*The male logic is to govern, to command*” (Kyrgyz female water expert, 19 December 2019). The characteristics that are considered as needed for being a good leader, like making clear decisions and giving commands, are associated with men. And even when talking about female leaders, as here about a senior official in the water ministry, their masculine characteristics were brought up in relation to their leadership styles:

She was a good deputy director. Well, she was like a man. Honestly, we were all afraid of her. A very strict woman. [...] If a woman, for example, has a male character, then she makes a good leader. But if a woman is, so to speak, soft, she will not be suitable for a leading role.

(Interview 12, 19 December 2019)

If leadership, strong will, commanding personalities, and making decisions are seen as male characteristics, what are considered female characteristics? A common assumption in the interviews (both of men and women) was that men are better leaders, and women more accurate workers: “*A woman is more assiduous and does more analytics. And men mainly command*” (Interview 2, 19 September 2019). This was also given as an explanation for why there are many women at mid-level but not at high-level positions:

The middle level is the heads of departments. In this range, the executives, the heads of departments are mostly women, because paperwork can only be scrupulously done by a woman. [...]. Where you need to count a lot, [work] with papers, with numbers.

(Interview 5, 19 September 2019)

These perceptions reinforce the dominance of men in leadership positions:

In my opinion, for solving the tasks of water diplomacy at a higher level, men who can take responsibility for making decisions are more suitable. Women are better suited for tasks requiring diligence and daily performance, for example, to fill out daily reports, to keep various materials in order, etc.

(Interview 12, 19 December 2019)

However, there is another narrative, and this relates to how women (are expected to) behave when they are in leadership positions. It is assumed that they would not pursue their own power interests but take this role out of responsibility and care:

A woman, of course, knows better all the details, and more – she feels everything. [...] and regarding leadership roles of women, they will always try to do good not only for themselves but for you and for someone, because children are in the first place for her. She does not say this is my child, this is your child. For her, this is a child as a whole. Yes, a woman thinks about everyone, right?

(Interview 4, 19 September 2019)

In the idea of masculine leadership, it is essential to keep the image of being strong and powerful. For women in leadership positions, however, it is considered inappropriate to show this. As illustrated in the following quote:

I am a doctor of science, and my husband is a candidate of science. I will never tell him, you are a candidate, I am a doctor. Never, he will be offended. I do not say that I have a higher salary than he. He turns away, he feels bad and is offended. This topic is painful for him, so I try to somehow not touch these things.³

(Interview 4, 19 September 2019)

Thus, if women are in leadership positions, they are assumed to be less self-interested, more caring, and modest – characteristics contrasting the masculine leadership ideal of strong men. While there are obvious examples of female leaders who are as tough as (or even tougher than) their male colleagues, these cannot (yet) challenge the internalised gender stereotypes. One male interviewee, when asked about a previous female water diplomat in a leadership position who was known for her uncompromising attitude, simply said: “*she is no good example*” (Interview 15, 23 September 2019).

This shows that leading, commanding, and excelling is not considered appropriate for women. Such ideas about norms of appropriate behaviour were by the interviewees often linked to what they referred to as “mentality”, meaning traditional attitudes of society. One Kyrgyz interviewee stated: “*many women want [leadership positions], but stereotypes prevent it*” (Interview 10, 19 December 2019). While some interviewees accepted this mentality as part of their living conditions, others stated that it would be relevant only in private contexts or in rural areas – and would not affect them as urban, educated professionals (see section intersectional aspects on page 141). Additionally, others referred to their national traditions and mentality in a positive way: in comparison to the other countries of Central Asia, Kazakh and Kyrgyz female interviewees perceived women of their countries as more active and independent, often referring to the nomadic culture and a few important female leadership figures in the past and present. This shows that, while cultural norms were often mentioned as obstacles, they are dynamic enough to be used by women to support their active roles.

Negotiation Styles

In an earlier paper (Sehring 2021), I have differentiated between confrontational practices (involving talking aggressively, swearing, being uncompromising, or

walking out of negotiations) and collaborative practices (like avoiding open confrontation, seeking compromise, using informal and technical levels to find common understandings, and respecting different perspectives) in water negotiations in Central Asia. The first, confrontational negotiation style aligns with the aforementioned description of the strong, masculine leadership norm and can be often observed in Central Asia. For CTC, however, many interviewees stressed the constructive atmosphere in which the meetings usually take place. Nevertheless, one female interviewee also noted: “*And then there might even be some problems, men immediately start swearing, but women will be uncomfortable*” (Interview 12, 19 December 2019). The interviews showed that some women consider arguments as inappropriate. For example: “*It is not very diplomatic, not very correct to discuss raw data and even more to argue right there at a meeting of the commission*” (Interview 9, 19 December 2019).

In contrast to this, the interviewed women saw themselves as working more collaboratively. One interviewee mentioned her women-dominated Working Group, which would not present two separate national reports at the meeting but coordinate and agree beforehand and present a joint report, as an example of this. One of the female members of the same Working Group remarked: “*we always try to find some kind of compromise*” (Interview 13, 19 December 2019).

But it is not only that men and women are perceived to have different negotiation styles. Several interviewees noted that the negotiations between men become less confrontational when women are attending the meeting. There is a strong social norm for men not to swear in the presence of a woman. For example:

The [effect of] participation of women in such commissions is, first, probably, tact: Men also try to behave, probably be diplomatic among themselves. Because, I also saw such situations when there were very controversial moments. Men do not hold back, but when there are more women participating, they all nevertheless, probably, think and try to somehow behave more diplomatically.

(Interview 13, 19 December 2019)

This shows that the appropriate behaviour for men and women can change depending on the setting, and that more female participants in decision making can change the practices of negotiation.

Intersectional Aspects within the Chu–Talas Commission

Many scholars have pointed out how gender intersects and combines with other structural power relations, such as race, sexuality, or class and that it is important to acknowledge that these other factors might have an equally or even more important effect. It reminds us that women and men are not uniform categories. In the last section, I want to focus on two factors intersecting with gender that appear to be relevant, and these are generational and urban–rural (North–South) divides.

Generational Divides

Perceptions of gender inequalities differed between older women (those who started their career in the Soviet Union) and the younger generation. It also became clear that the latter face different challenges. This was evident for example in the assessment of the family situation, which was perceived as challenging by younger women but not by some of the older generation of women who started their career in Soviet times, when care duties were partly taken over by the state. Due to the declining quality of education, several interviewees, in particular Soviet generation female technical experts, complained about the low level of education for young specialists, including lack of field work and exposure to technical sites. Besides this lack of access to knowledge, some older women also perceived the younger generation as less responsible and diligent, but more demanding in professional settings. This shows that gender is not a unifying factor per se, but that women from different generations have different experiences and attitudes which can lead to friction amongst them.

Urban–Rural Divides

Many women interviewed identified themselves as urban, educated women; as professionals who are respected and treated based on their expertise and not their gender. In their view, gender stereotypes and patriarchal mentality would not concern them, but were phenomena of rural areas, thus affecting female heads of farms or Water User Associations, for example. In Kyrgyzstan, this difference is not only felt between rural and urban areas, but also between the North and South of the country; with the South seen as more traditional and religious. Indeed, this is visible in women's participation in local political bodies, and in staffing numbers of the central and basin water administrations in Kyrgyzstan. While in the central administration and the Northern provinces women make up around one-third of the staff members, in the basin level organisations in the South of the country, it is only around or even less than one-tenth (Musabayeva 2014). The aforementioned strengthening of certain patriarchal cultural norms in both countries affects all women, but not all equally. Consequently, the life of an educated, working, maybe unmarried, woman in the city is very different from a young daughter-in-law in a village, also affecting their potential involvement in managing water differently.

Conclusion

The bilateral CTC in Central Asia has existed for 15 years and during this time evolved into not only one of the few well-functioning transboundary water bodies in the region, but also one with higher women's participation than others. This makes it an interesting case to study how gender affects transboundary water governance; keeping in mind that gender is just one factor

among others. But as it is one often neglected, it is worth highlighting how daily practices and social interactions within a transboundary water governance arrangement are gendered, and what effect they have. Hence, what can the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism tell us about transboundary water governance that other approaches cannot?

First, it helps us to situate a joint water governance body in its context, and here – as other political analyses of transboundary waters do – not only the context of political relations between the riparian states, economic and strategic interests, or power asymmetries, but also the socio-cultural setting where the professionals practising water diplomacy are socialised in and have learnt expectations of appropriate behaviour that impact how they approach water-related challenges.

Second, it can unravel the gendered norms and practices and show how they affect men and women differently in terms of access to and performing work on transboundary waters. In this chapter I have illustrated that duty travels led to water governance perceived as a man's work, leadership norms were strongly associated with masculinity, and prevalent negotiation styles appeared as uncomfortable for women. All this is closely related with the gendered division of labour and cultural norms. At the same time, simply increasing the number of women might not necessarily be a sign of more gender equality, but might rather reflect the societal status of certain sectors and positions. However, we can also see how women make selected use of cultural, historic, and political incidents of female agency to strategise their own room for manoeuvre in this masculinised field.

These insights add one piece to the puzzle explaining the challenges and dynamics of transboundary conflict and cooperation, gaining a deeper understanding of the politics of water.

Notes

- 1 This research was executed in cooperation between IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, the Netherlands, and the Stockholm International Water Institute, Sweden, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 2 Most of the interviews were conducted in Russian. The quotes in the text have been translated by the author and anonymised.
- 3 In the former Soviet countries, candidate of science is the first doctoral degree (equivalent to a PhD), and doctor of science is a higher degree (equivalent to a "habilitation" in some European countries).

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