

Between Scarcity and Survival: Hydropolitics, Gendered Vulnerabilities, and Water Governance under Climate Extremes in Displacement Contexts in Turkana, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Ecological systems in Eastern Africa are increasingly embedded in hydro-political contestations, where scarcity, access, and uneven distribution transform water into a strategic resource through which states, communities, and non-state actors negotiate power, identity, and survival mechanisms. These dynamics intensify existing environmental, socio-economic and political inequalities, especially in rural and refugee settlements, characterised by fragile infrastructure and limited governance capacity. In Kenya, women are primarily responsible for water management, yet they face structural constraints in managing this crucial resource. They are disproportionately affected by climate change and water insecurity due to their gendered roles in sustaining livelihoods through water collection, agriculture and household responsibilities. While considerable research has highlighted water scarcity and vulnerable livelihoods in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), particularly in Turkana County, limited attention has been given to how refugee women and host communities collectively navigate and negotiate access to water resources in order to create adaptive resilience strategies in their everyday subjectivities in protracted displacement settings such as Kakuma Refugee Camp. This paper examines the gendered dimensions of shared water governance among refugee women in Kakuma Refugee Camp and host communities in Turkana County in Kenya through the theoretical lens of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). By foregrounding the intersections of gender, hydropolitics and resource governance, the study investigates how water scarcity can be shaped by both environmental stressors and socio-political structures. It further analyses how socio-cultural norms, humanitarian water governance, policy frameworks, and environmental degradation can collectively shape refugee women's resilience and adaptive strategies in response to water scarcity. The study contributes to the discourses of FPE of displacement and gendered water governance between refugees and host communities, highlighting how they collectively negotiate access to shared water resources and co-produce resilience through their agency under climate extremes.

Keywords: Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), Climate Change, Hydropolitics, Water Governance, Refugee women, Kakuma Refugee Camp