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Social Relations of Water Access Among the Poor in Urban Malawi

Andy Kusi-Appiah

Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada;
andykusiappiah@cmail.carleton.ca

Paul Mkandawire

Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Human Rights and Social Justice Program, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada; paul.mkandawire@carleton.ca

ABSTRACT: This paper examines some intimate ways that water constitutes and is constitutive of social relations in urban Malawi in a context where the government-sponsored water supply system has left a large section of the population off the municipal supply grid. Specifically, the paper focuses on the ambiguous role of *ganyu*, an informal and ad hoc form of labour with deep roots in Malawi's colonial history. Based on qualitative research (n = 30) and grounded in perspectives rooted in urban political ecology, our findings indicate that *ganyu* helps poor households cope with acute water shortages. On the other hand, it also binds them to problematic and often exploitative social relationships. Specifically, the findings show that *ganyu* relations give rise to usufruct rights through which the urban poor can obtain potable water on a day-to-day basis from the homes of the individuals for whom they work. However, material control over potable water by those who own it fosters indentured relations, as it allows these individuals to wield enormous control over the productive labour of the people who work for them. And as these providers of *ganyu* hold all the cards, they also sometimes weave sexual demands into these ad hoc contracts, locking poor women into a cycle of both labour exploitation and sexual servitude. Underscoring the relational nature of water, overall, these findings contradict simplistic notions of water as a market commodity and show that in urban Malawi water is a mechanism for the generation and exercise of social power, a marker of social differentiation, a force for material reproduction for the well-off, and an instrument for further subordination of women.

KEYWORDS: *ganyu*, potable water, social relations, gender, political ecology, Malawi

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the intimate ways in which water constitutes and is constitutive of sociopolitical relations in urban Malawi. Specifically, it examines the role that informal labour, locally known as *ganyu*, plays in facilitating access to potable water among Malawi's urban poor. At the same time, the paper examines the uneven access to and control over water in urban Malawi, its changing relationship to the exploitation of the labour power of the extremely poor, and its connection to the social and political status and lived experiences of women. Because water connects people and places, entailing relationships that run deep, this paper may provide insights into the changing sociopolitical role of water in enabling and structuring urban social relations in the rapidly urbanising cities of sub-Saharan Africa. More broadly, it can contribute to the growing literature that sees water and society as coevolving and emergent through continued engagement over space and time (Wantzen et al., 2016; Anderson 2019). The paper also has the potential to contribute to a growing body of literature on feminist ethics of care, which focusses on connections and relations between people, not just material outcomes, to better understand livelihood strategies (Robinson, 2011; Hanrahan, 2015).

Much of the existing research on water access and use rightly cites the escalating cost of water in the wake of deepening neoliberal economic reforms as the primary driving force behind inadequate access to potable water among the urban poor, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Bond and Dugard, 2008; McInnes, 2012; Twum and Abubakari, 2020). In addition, the existing research also identifies policy failure, the lack of appropriate technical know-how, and fiscal bottlenecks as critical barriers to broad access to safe and reliable water in urban areas (Peloso and Morinville, 2014; Walters and Javernick-Hill, 2015; White, 2016; Cassivi, 2019; Anim and Ofori-Asenso, 2020). This paper seeks to add to this expansive literature by pointing out that the commodification and corporatisation of water, along with the chronic policy failures plaguing public water systems in the developing world, certainly undermine access to water among the poor. At the same time, the paper argues that explanatory frameworks that privilege market and institutional factors do not provide a complete picture of the problem in urban areas, especially in settings marked by widespread poverty and social inequality. In addition, such frameworks conceal the sociopolitical dynamics that arise when large sections of the population, formally excluded from the public water supply system, must forge alternative informal social networks to gain secondary access to the same public water supply grid from which they are excluded.

In other words, by focusing on market mechanisms such as water tariffs and/or institutional challenges – lack of funding, poor policy, or deficits in technical know-how, for instance – in explanations of water access, the existing literature tends to miss the complex web of caring and relations in and through which people support themselves and others and make a living on a daily basis (see Hanrahan, 2015). In this paper, we go beneath this layer of market dynamics and other institutional and technical aspects of water, seeking to explore the question of water access among the urban poor from sociopolitical and relational perspectives. Unlike constructions that privilege markets and formal institutions, this perspective has as its starting point the proposition that our lives are interconnected with the lives of others, drawing our attention to how social relations provide opportunities but also complicate access to water. This opens scope for understanding the reciprocal, embedded, and mutually constitutive relationships that people have with water in different contexts (Anderson et al., 2019) and for the analysis of how water is implicated in processes of social and spatial differentiation and their consequences for everyday life in urban settings in Malawi (Truelove, 2011).

Many aspects of everyday life in urban settings, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, play out in social environments not strictly governed by formal agreements, private or legal, but that are rather marked by informal ties, face-to-face interactions, and in-kind exchanges. In these contexts, social pressure, kin ties, social norms, or social status – and not necessarily the ability to pay, for instance – shape entitlements and claims of individuals against one another in a range of domains, including in the realm of water (Pinto, 2008; Dey and Amponsah, 2020). Social and political relations and reciprocal ties forged outside of formal market contexts may constitute important avenues through which poor people undertake their livelihoods and meet their daily household needs such as water needs. Thus, a growing number of studies are showing that within these social settings, informal exchange relationships and in-kind transactions act as an important social safety net that protects people from extreme personal hardships and poverty (Dercon and Krishma, 2000; Haagsma and Mouche, 2020).

Moreover, arguments that situate water entirely as a market commodity also fail to acknowledge the relationality of water, and thus they are unable to give us a clear sense of the nature and magnitude of the benefits and burdens accruing to families who depend on these informal ties and networks as a primary strategy for accessing potable water. To partly fill in this gap, this paper examines the role that *ganyu* plays in enabling access to clean water among the poor in urban Malawi, as well as the nature and magnitude of the social and economic collateral damage that poor people sometimes incur because of the social relationships that they must forge and maintain to meet their daily water needs.

It is well-known that exclusion from access to and ownership of essential resources necessary for life – such as food or clean water – constitutes a fundamental breach of human rights. Also, there is an intrinsic relationship between control of essential resources and political power, and this relationship is

especially profound if it pertains to the control over resources required to meet basic needs and which represent a generative source of health and wellbeing, such as water (Strang, 2016). In fact, studies have shown that whoever has material control over water inevitably becomes the ruling class (Worster, 1992; Strang, 2016). Thus, this paper also examines how the uneven access to and control over water in urban Malawi is restructuring social relations between neighbours and residents in a country already marked by extreme poverty and deep social inequities.

The remainder of this paper proceeds with a discussion of the study setting, including a historical account of the evolution of *ganyu* with its continuities and ruptures, followed by an outline of the urban political ecology (UPE) framework that serves as a theoretical lens for understanding water as a highly politicised resource. With its express focus on how power relations, in all incarnations, shape access to resources, ecological processes, and everyday lives of people in urban settings, urban political ecology represents a more critical and politically sensitive framework to understanding the sociality and materiality of water relations in a context where water's presentation as a market commodity continues to dominate the understanding of it. Then we present the study's methodology, especially the rationale behind our choice of qualitative design and of focus groups and interviews, before outlining our key findings. The discussion points to *ganyu* as a phenomenon that is at once a lifesaver, protecting the extreme poor from catastrophic water shortages, and problematic from a social justice perspective.

STUDY SETTING

Mzuzu, the site for this study, is the third-largest city in Malawi, located in a shallow depression at the northern limits of the Viphya highlands. From a humble population of about 6000 people on the eve of independence from Britain in 1964, the city's population is now formally estimated at 220,000 (Government of Malawi, 2019), although unofficial estimates put that number at over half a million. Mzuzu's population has grown at an annual rate of 5.4 percent since 2008 (Government of Malawi, 2019), presenting an ever-increasing challenge to household water security and complicating the problems of water provision and adequate sanitation services. Inequitable distribution of water points and unreliable water supply are among the most pressing problems affecting residents in Mzuzu (Wanda 2012). Estimates suggest that 60 percent of the population of Mzuzu live in informal settlements (Wanda et al., 2012).

In general, Malawi represents an intriguing setting for an examination of household water access and use because the urban water supply system remains exclusively under the control of the state through its regional parastatal water supply organisations. In addition, although the country's landmass is only 118,000 km², nearly 20 percent of this consists of fresh water, primarily contained in Lake Malawi, the fourth largest freshwater lake in the world by volume, the ninth largest lake in the world by area and the third largest and second deepest lake in Africa (Nicholson, 2023). A key advantage of Lake Malawi from a geographic and water distribution perspective is that it runs almost the entire length of the country, placing most Malawians within 100 km of a large body of fresh water. From a cultural perspective, Malawians generally consider water bodies as commons over which no one individual alone can claim exclusive rights; they also tend to view water bodies as sacred sites where spirits of their ancestors live (Price, 2017). However, since statutory corporations acting on behalf of the state effectively control the water supply infrastructure, de facto ownership of water resides with these state entities. Residents of Mzuzu are required to pay for the water supplied to them by the regional grid, run by the Northern Region Water Board (NRWB). The NRWB is a state-run corporation and supplies water services along the lines of a private company. It charges a tariff for the water it supplies, a trend seen as part of the wider effort to commodify water. This makes most people view water as a product owned by the state-owned companies that draw, treat, and supply it, as opposed to a common good for all.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per-capita income of US\$600 (World Bank, 2023). In addition, despite the public health progress made over the past several decades, HIV prevalence

is still very high – around 10 percent of the adult population (Lungu et al., 2019). Extreme poverty and unequal gender relations mainly drive the spread of HIV, with the problem of water amplifying these issues in complex ways. Historically, droughts and floods induced by climate change have led to catastrophic water problems in Malawi, exacerbating the already precarious public health situation, food insecurity, and urban poverty (Mapoma and Xie, 2014; Kambuku et al., 2018). For example, floods in 2015 caused a 30.2 percent reduction in the national output of maize, the country's staple crop, leaving 2.8 million people on the verge of starvation and a growing percentage impoverished. This was immediately followed by an even worse drought in 2016, which this time left over 6.6 million Malawians food-insecure, malnourished, and prone to water-borne diseases, especially cholera and diarrhoea (Record et al., 2016: 25). In addition to affecting the urban poor disproportionately, extreme weather events have worsened the already dire water situation in the cities, where large concentrations of people live in confined areas.

To cope with deprivation, a growing number of people in urban areas resort to *ganyu* (Bryceson and Fonseca, 2006; Mkandawire et al., 2014). A form of casual and ad-hoc, on-and-off farm labour, *ganyu* has deep roots in the estate agriculture economy ushered in during British colonial rule (Kandawire, 1979). The establishment of estate farms by White settlers in the southern region of Malawi during colonial rule resulted in the mass displacement of local people from their lands, effectively driving them into the European plantation economy as cheap labour. The subsequent imposition of a 'hut tax' by the colonial state intensified the integration of locals into capitalist relations, as it fuelled the migration of (mostly) men to settler plantations where they sought employment to earn cash to pay the levy or worked for about a month in lieu of the tax. Furthermore, because colonial officials perceived no real economic opportunities in the north of the country, they designated the northern area the 'dead north', including Mzuzu. This essentially relegated the entire northern region to a hotbed of cheap labour for settler plantations in the south.

Initially, settlers mobilised and governed farm labour mainly through a system known as *thangata*. Under the *thangata* labour system, local people worked for a month as rent payment for living on the farm and a second month in lieu of the hut tax to be paid to the colonial government (Mandala, 1990; Mkandawire et al., 2011). Unfortunately, peak labour periods on settler farms often coincided with the farming season and conflicted with the farm labour and food production needs of the natives themselves (Kandawire, 1979). *Ganyu* thus emerged primarily to plug in this gap in the *thangata* system – to stabilise labour on the plantations by supplying more casual, flexible, and ephemeral farm workers, allowing European planters to mobilise or dispense with farm labour on short notice (Mkandawire et al., 2011). These aspects ensured that women and children were particularly preferred by planters as *ganyu* workers.

Over time, the nature and meaning of *ganyu* began to change as it diffused to outlying and far-flung rural communities. Unlike *thangata*, which was mainly a tribute labour system, *ganyu* was reconstituted in rural economies and began to connote mutually beneficial exchanges of labour for cash or in-kind food payments between households (Vaughan, 1987). Facing farm labour shortages, local households themselves would seek and enlist the labour of friends, relatives, and neighbours in the community to overcome short-term smallholder farm labour deficits. In addition, individuals trying to avoid the perception of living off the charity of relatives and neighbours usually sought 'help' from the same relatives and neighbours under the guise of *ganyu*. Thus, as *ganyu* labour penetrated rural communities, it was mainly practiced among blood relatives, affines, and neighbours as a reciprocal form of labour exchange and thus as a social safety net and an escape from extreme poverty.

In recent decades, primarily due to rapid urbanisation, *ganyu* has become the mainstay of the urban underclass in the wake of persistent underemployment, food insecurity, and general economic decline (Mkandawire et al., 2011). As rural-urban migration has intensified, urban residents have increasingly resorted to *ganyu* in direct response to the need to cope with the effects of rising urban poverty and unemployment. Researchers have also noted that *ganyu* has become a more permanent feature of the urban social landscape in Malawi as the social pain unleashed by the neoliberal economic reforms of the

World Bank and the International Monetary Fund since the early 1980s has become a permanent feature of urban life (Tellegen, 1997; Dimowa et al., 2010; Mkandawire et al., 2011).

Despite its increasing use, *ganyu* is associated with a deep sense of shame for those who do it on a regular basis (Mkandawire et al., 2014). In Malawi's sociocultural context, doing *ganyu* signifies extreme poverty and a manner of existence that raises all kinds of moral questions and judgement, including the perception of being under some kind of spell. In addition, recent studies have shown that *ganyu's* once-intrinsic mutually beneficial attribute has significantly waned, especially in urban areas where it is often practiced outside kin and familiar relations (Englund, 1999; Whiteside, 2000; Dimowa et al., 2010).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES – URBAN POLITICAL ECOLOGY

This study applies perspectives from urban political ecology (UPE) to the understanding of how social relations of water are constituted in urban settings in Malawi. An offshoot of political ecology, the literature on UPE is rapidly expanding, and its roots are spread across a wide range of intellectual traditions but are unified in their desire for fundamental social critique (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Heynen et al., 2005; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that urban political ecologists are interested in the social, political, and economic processes that shape urban environments, social relations, policies, and practices (Keil, 2003; Peet and Watts, 2003). UPE seeks to reveal the unnaturalness of urban environments and remove the perception that their state is innate or not made by mankind (Harvey, 2005). Its central argument is that the complex dynamics and processes that underpin urban order are in fact products of social action and exchanges involving millions of people, not artifacts of natural phenomena. Thus, in contrast to seeing cities as the opposite of nature, UPE looks at urban spaces as creations of complex relations and interactions between nature and society. These nature-urban relations are not static but constantly evolve in relation to forces of globalisation operating at various spatial scales.

More expressly argued by Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003), the forces that go on together to shape the highly unjust and deeply uneven urban environments constantly shift across different historical and geographic scales. This requires attention to how complex interactions between social, economic, and environmental factors have varied impacts on urban formations, depending on local histories and local, place-based, and non-place-based sociopolitical dynamics such as colonial legacies, gender politics, or government policies (Mkandawire et al., 2014). Central to this analysis is the importance of context and scale, particularly the need to consider historical depth. Contemporary urban environments often emerge from the long-term entanglement of ecological and political forces.

According to UPE, governance regimes and the politics of everyday life are important determinants of our relationship with nature. Central to this are the nature of power relations and the issue of who wins or loses because of policy decisions affecting environmental decisions and processes (Rocheleau and Roth, 2007; Crawford and Bell, 2011; Robbins, 2012). From UPE perspectives, material conditions of the environment cannot be truly divorced from their eco-social and political processes (Blaikie, 1985; Paulson and Gezon, 2004; Heynen et al., 2005; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2008; Crawford and Bell, 2011; Robbins, 2012). Set in the context of this paper, the simple fact that a person can share water with others, can withhold it from them, or can define the terms under which they share it, makes this study amenable to UPE analysis. By the same token, municipal policies on water supply have implications for a range of factors, including who has access to it and who does not. In other words, water is amenable to a UPE analysis because, as a fundamental natural resource, it is subject to a myriad of power relationships and contestations about who has access to and control over it, a situation that effectively creates winners and losers. It follows that variations in combinations of social, cultural, and political resources that individuals, households, and groups possess endow them with different abilities to access water.

The political aspect of urban political ecology recognises class-oriented distributional aspects of urban ecology but also engages with other critical social justice issues such as race and gender relations. Gender

relations are also central in the analysis of access to, control over, and knowledge of environmental resources, including water access (Massey, 2013; Sundberg, 2016; Clay and Yurco, 2020). But gender as understood from feminist geographies is not a fixed site or category but a dynamic relationship, experienced not in isolation from but in relation to other dimensions of disadvantage such as disability, class, race, place, culture, and ethnicity, to shape processes of environmental change (Rocheleau et al., 2013). Feminist geographic perspectives usher in an understanding of gender by foregrounding the role of place and space in people's everyday experience of gender relations (Dixon and Jones, 2006). A gendered experience of the environment, according to feminist geographers, means that we need to understand the social relations that link men and women in a range of different spatial contexts (McDowell, 1999). Because UPE recognises the role of gender in structuring urban social relations, it aligns well with the basic postulates of feminist geographies. That said, it is noteworthy that despite their shared history of patriarchal oppression, not all women suffer from oppression in the same way or degree. In addition to place, the experience of gender is also shaped by class and ethnicity (Ajibade et al., 2013; Blidon and Zaragocin, 2019).

In the context of urban Malawi, UPE helps to uncover how water access is shaped by historical legacies, municipal governance, and broader political economies that produce unequal urban landscapes. Feminist geographies deepen this analysis by revealing how these inequalities are further structured by gendered labour dynamics and embodied experiences, especially for poor women navigating exploitative *ganyu* arrangements to access a basic necessity like water.

METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION, AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study received ethical clearance from the authors' academic institution in October 2020. It is set in present-day Malawi and employs a qualitative methodological approach to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of how the urban poor use social relations of *ganyu* to obtain clean water to meet their daily needs. A case study approach generally lends itself well to explicating the context or occurrence of a social phenomenon and is hence deemed appropriate for examining household water access and use (Saldana, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013).

We used in-depth interviews (IDIs) with key informants (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect the data for this study. We applied a snowballing technique to select participants for the IDIs and purposive sampling to identify and recruit participants for FGDs. With respect to the key informants (KIs), at each stage of the interview process, we asked the participant to suggest the name of an individual whom they thought would provide key insights into the area's water problems. We then assessed and followed these leads, subject to a set of criteria including position in the community, employment status, gender, and length of stay in the area (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018). We also considered whether a potential participant might offer perspectives or information different from any of the views already offered by the preceding participants. Although this non-probability sampling technique results in findings that cannot be generalised statistically beyond the study sample itself, it is nonetheless vital in qualitative research, as it allows us identify participants with valued 'expertise' on the issue at hand (Noy, 2008; Saunders et al., 2018). Through this process, we were able to recruit up to sixteen participants based on the principle of saturation, where we continued to recruit participants until a point where no real new information was emerging from the interviews (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

With respect to FGDs, we used purposive sampling technique, another non-probability sampling method that allows for the selection of individuals who report not being connected to the public water supply grid, express difficulties getting water, and have tried different desperate strategies to address the problem of water shortage at any given time over the past two years. Twenty individuals took part in the FGDs (10 individuals per FGD), each FGD with six females and four males to ensure equitable representation of women and in keeping with the fact that gendered norms in Malawi mean that women bear the burden of providing water for domestic needs.

Participants for the IDIs and FGDs came from six areas (Chibavi, Mzilawaingwe, Zolozolo, Katoto, Masasa, and Area1B). This paper's first author had prior knowledge of Mzuzu ahead of the fieldwork, having previously visited the city in the summer of 2019 for three months on a different project. The principal investigator did not travel to Mzuzu for the actual fieldwork due to travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but he was able to participate in the interviewing virtually (via WhatsApp and Zoom). Research assistants trained by the principal investigator interviewed all participants during the interviewing period (1 November 2020-30 October 2021). All the interviews were audio and video-recorded, and research assistants took detailed notes on any non-verbal communication that occurred.

One major definition of data analysis relates to disaggregating data into meaningful parts or simply making sense of the data (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Analysis of the data came down to closely and repeatedly reading through all the interviews, comparing the data, and then interpreting them with the research question(s) in mind. We assigned phrases to relevant information in the data to help address the research question(s).

We took several steps to ensure rigour in our data analysis. First, we conducted line-by-line description-focused coding to produce textual elements that answer each research question (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In analysing the transcripts from the IDIs and FGDs, we allowed themes to emerge from the discussions and then compared the coded portions of the transcripts. We identified and, where needed, rectified discrepancies. We also conducted member checking, asking participants to verify whether they agreed with the views outlined in the translated transcripts (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Amin et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick and Weissman, 2021). Furthermore, we identified patterns and multiple meanings from the data and, finally, conducted triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness or validity of the data (Flick, 2004; Bernard et al., 2016).

FINDINGS

This section presents our findings, which demonstrate complex social relations of water in Mzuzu in the context of *ganyu*. The findings congeal around three main themes: a) *ganyu*, extreme poverty, and clean water; b) *ganyu*, women, and clean water; and c) *ganyu* and sexual exploitation. We use pseudonyms to anonymise participants' identities but indicate their age, sex, marital status, education level, and sometimes employment status to contextualise their views.

Extreme poverty, *ganyu*, and clean water

Many participants identified themselves as unemployed and as constantly seeking and doing menial work to survive, but they were not entirely uniform in their level of unemployment. Several participants reported having resorted to *ganyu* to get potable water in the immediate six months before this study. One of them described the trouble they go through to get clean water for the house.

I must beg for work around in the neighbourhood or beyond to get water most of the time. Water from the creeks reeks of raw sewage and I am always afraid my kids might get sick. People around here, especially children, get sick because of some parents who do not want to heed the advice from the government.

(Maria, 30 years old, female, high school, unemployed)

This sense of fear reportedly marked the everyday lives of many participants. As highlighted in the quote below, women in particular talked about the constant anxiety that comes with a daily shortage of clean water, especially the danger of children getting cholera or diarrhoea.

I have two under-fives and am always scared. Sometimes I wake up at night and have trouble falling back to sleep. Just last month my neighbour lost her toddler. I could see it was diarrhoea; from nowhere the kid lost his appetite and then started vomiting. When she got to the clinic a few days later, it was too late.

(Wezi, 36 years old, female, married, primary school, unemployed)

Participants lamented the tendency among some families in the township to resort to water from streams that run through gardens and crop fields, saying that these streams contain raw sewage from overflowing sewers, manure from animals, and slaughterhouse waste. This is what they said mainly forces them to do *ganyu*.

Everyone knows there's a slaughterhouse behind the auction [tobacco] floors and everything from there washes into this creek [pointing at the stream] (...) Still, you see women with pails on their heads every day streaming down to the same stream. I would rather do *ganyu* than drink water from that stream.

(Ernestina, 40 years old, female, single, primary school, unemployed)

Contrary to popular portrayals of individuals who do *ganyu* as somewhat 'irresponsible', participants argued that doing *ganyu*, especially in exchange for potable water, shows that you are a caring and responsible parent, one who would go to any length to keep your children safe. One woman said *ganyu* is her lifeline and the only way she can get clean water. She said her husband has terminal stage cancer and his health is deteriorating, so she cannot take chances with water. Participants, nonetheless, conceded that *ganyu* is hard labour. They said although some of the *ganyu* work, such as sweeping the compound or cleaning, may not be hard, most of the work they do is backbreaking, and it includes such chores as pounding cassava or maize, weeding farms, making ridges, harvesting, and splitting firewood. They argued that compared to the 'blood' they sweat, the compensation they receive is often an 'insult'.

Yes, you do piece work (*ganyu*) and they give you water as payment for the work you have done, which is good because water is life. But the work is always too much, way too much, and sometimes it's difficult to even say anything about it.

(Charity, 23 years old, female, single parent, high school)

Another participant reported that she has an agreement in which her employer can advance her water in exchange for *ganyu* work to be performed at an agreed-upon future date.

He allows me draw water and I do work for him in return. Sometimes I am allowed to draw water on 'credit' and do *ganyu* later, which means I do not have to be worried about water when in dire need, especially when I am ill, or my child is unwell. But the problem is that I must [then] do double the amount of work, which feels unfair. Unfortunately, I cannot complain too much lest me ruin my relationship with him.

(Siphiwe, 37 years old, female, married, high school)

Participants reported that such apparent indentured contracts are becoming more common, which they argued underscores the fact that they take up *ganyu* work mainly because they are 'truly' poor, and that although the compensation is a pittance, their life depends on it. Because of that, they are also compelled to be subservient and must always behave 'nicely' to stand a chance of being offered work again in the future.

Participants also reported that because *ganyu* work is generally arduous and done out of desperation, sometimes in full view of the public, people look at someone doing *ganyu* not so kindly, let alone if the worker is a woman. They said that people generally think of individuals who do *ganyu*, especially those who rely on it, as the embodiment of 'premodern' or as the antithesis of modernity. Set against this social climate, participants said that doing *ganyu* requires you to 'swallow your pride' and to turn a deaf ear to all 'slander' and to focus your 'thoughts on yourself and your family'. One participant, a high school graduate, summed up the shame that comes with doing *ganyu*:

I often do *ganyu*, especially when I am unemployed, and it is even more embarrassing for me because, unlike most people who depend on *ganyu*, I finished secondary school and can speak English well. I feel sad, and if I didn't have to, I wouldn't be doing this.

(Suzgo, female, 44 years old, married, high school)

Participants complained about how people perceive them when they do *ganyu*, especially the view that one must have been slovenly to vegetate to such a state of poverty.

Here in Mzuzu, when you do *ganyu*, some people think you are not a very responsible person. They say, how can you stoop so low or allow yourself to be so poor? How can you allow yourself to be used by someone else like that? You toil all day in the sun so you can get paid a bucket of water or a few kwachas [local currency].

(Favour, 46 years old, female, married, high school)

Ganyu, women, and water

Participants argued that although *ganyu* allows people to obtain water and other necessities of life, women are far more likely to seek *ganyu* and depend on it for daily needs because they tend to be overly poor, coupled with the fact that they are also directly responsible for almost all the domestic work that requires water. A participant explained:

I am responsible for all chores in my house, including getting water for cooking, bathing, and drinking. This is why I work so hard. It's not my husband's duty to draw water, although sometimes he does help me (...) when he is in a good mood! [laughs].

(Charity, female, 33 years old, married, high school).

The above concern emerged repeatedly throughout the discussions, and participants reiterated that women are almost exclusively responsible for domestic work, including going around the neighbourhoods looking for clean water to cook meals and bathe their children. According to one participant,

It is my responsibility to bring a bucket of water to the bathroom for my husband to bathe, and I am also responsible for making sure that there is enough water for all the other household chores. That's why I do *ganyu*.

(Thandiwe, female, 44 years old, married, high school).

From the discussions, it was also evident that, as unequal as *ganyu* is, it is more so for women because they tend to face discrimination in terms of remuneration. One woman narrated her own experience regarding the issue of unequal pay in the world of *ganyu*.

I have been cleaning a house in my neighbourhood for the last few years. I did not quite like the job, but it helped me buy food and draw water from my employer's house. This year I was unable to do the work because I was pregnant, so my employer hired a man to do it in my stead. I found out that the new man was being paid more than I was paid for doing the same work.

(Mabel, 35 years old, female, married, high school)

In addition, participants reported that single mothers fare the worst where unequal pay is concerned, as many of them do *ganyu* as a last resort. Participants said that providers of *ganyu* prefer single mothers, as they are more desperate, knowing that unmarried women or widows usually have no one else to fall back on. Consequently, *ganyu* providers offer them even more meagre payment. A single mother with two under-fives added:

Often, I do not know what to do, so I just accept less money for the work that another man will do, more so if you want him to give you the work again tomorrow. It's wickedness that someone can pay two people very different for the same kind and amount of *ganyu*.

(Alice, 25 years old, female, single, high school)

It emerged that the precarity of women extended beyond the realm of unequal pay to include the issue of some men who habitually seek out sexual situations in these *ganyu* contractual arrangements, as outlined in the following subsection.

Ganyu, sexual exchange and clean water

Participants also said that women doing *ganyu* in exchange for water or to earn money to buy water sometimes find themselves having to contend with the sexual advances of prospective or existing *ganyu* providers. At this point, participants mainly spoke in third person pronouns, trying to avoid any suggestion that one of them had previously engaged in such forms of exchange, whilst emphatically insisting that this was a very unfortunate but common practice in the city. To this end, participants reported that *ganyu* is risky and often exposes women to sexual exploitation, talking at length about how providers sometimes discreetly demand something 'extra' when offering these verbal labour contracts:

Sometimes you reluctantly give in to your *bwana's* (boss's) sexual advances so he can continue giving you *ganyu*. If you do not give him the green light, you may have nowhere else to get clean water, so you think about your children's life first.

(Alice, 25 years old, female, single, high school)

Participants also reported that in the face of limited *ganyu* opportunities, women sometimes 'feign' affection to stand a chance of securing work and/or maintain a line of *ganyu* work:

Sometimes women take the risk and try to pretend they are interested in the whole thing – you try to look aside or down and smile warmly and pretend to be shy, or to speak in soft voice to lure him to offer you something.

(Jesse, 35 years old, female, single, high school).

Participants were quick to point out that this should not be understood as poor women 'flirting' with men but rather as underscoring the women's depths of despair, and that for the most part, it's the men who initiate these 'additional' demands. They explained that the men often try to be discreet and tentative in their demands and that these advances at times take the form of a 'joke' to avoid embarrassment, but nonetheless the men are firm and clear in their message and in what they want. They said that some of these sexual encounters occur by happenstance, and other times men put sex as a precondition to offering or maintaining a *ganyu* contract. Women need the water to be able to take care of their children at home, so it is sometimes tough simply to 'walk away' from these demands. One participant narrated her friend's experience and concerns about the safety of young girls:

There were times when she needed *ganyu* so she can get water and tend to the school needs of her children, so she was forced to accept her *bwana's* sexual advances. I am very scared when I think about our little girls whom we often send around the neighbourhood looking for water.

(Ntritah, 38 years old, female, married, high school, unemployed)

On the safety of young underage girls going out looking for water in the face of potential exploitation, participants said they have not heard anything to suggest child sexual abuse but instead discussed the connection between acute water shortages, the practice of *ganyu*, and the potential spread of HIV/AIDS among adults. For example, participants expressed concern that some men who sexually exploit their

ganyu employees do not practice safe sex. Expanding on this point, a participant of the discussion group explained:

Ganyu has exposed our women to a lot of abuse, such that most of the men who agree to provide water in exchange for *ganyu* do not fulfil their promise, even though some of the women are sexually exploited as well.

(Harold, 28 years old, male, single, university, employed).

FGD participants also indicated that the inability of women who depend on *ganyu* to obtain fair remuneration hampers their ability to gain access to community resources such as water. One FGD said:

If a woman refuses to have sex with a *bwana*, she will probably not be able to draw water needed for cooking, drinking, and other family needs at home. This hopelessness means that women have no choice in the matter.

(Ntriteh, 38 years old, female, high school).

A participant also added that some *ganyu* providers are socially connected, and this makes women feel intimidated and reluctant to speak out about this unbecoming behaviour or to rebuff them when they weave sexual advances into these informal contractual labour arrangements:

These men know that they have the one thing most poor people in this township need to survive and use it to very selfish ends. Also because of their ego, they also can badmouth women who reject their sexual advances and refuse to sleep with them, [so they] don't get any luck looking for water.

(Elisha, 52 years old, male, married, university)

The fear of reprisal came up many times in these discussions as a major concern that speaks to the ways in which a lack of access to potable water contributes to the wider vulnerability of women.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These findings show that *ganyu* labour is a vital informal safety net through which the poor, on the verge of destitution in Mzuzu, especially women, gain access to clean water to meet daily needs in their homes. Through *ganyu*, some women earn cash to buy clean water elsewhere, or they can exchange their labour directly for clean water flowing from standpipes in the homes of the relatively well-off individuals who provide them with the *ganyu* (work). At the same time, providers of *ganyu* hold all the cards and often use their dominant position in these negotiations to extract the productive labour of *ganyu* seekers and sometimes to extort sexual favours from women who overly depend on this form of social arrangement to meet their daily household water provisions. Urban political ecology and feminist geographies bring into sharper focus the deeply politicised, unequal, and gendered contexts that dictate access to potable water for the poor in urban Malawi. Overall, the focus on water insecurity provides an important lens for analysing the ongoing process of urban social differentiation in Malawi and how this stratification affects everyday life and the wellbeing of urban populations.

Although *ganyu's* historical roots lie in rural, agrarian contexts, it is now widely practiced in urban areas, increasingly providing a vital safeguard against potentially catastrophic water scarcity among the urban poor in present-day Malawi. The study's findings especially show that, driven by the social imperative to care for their families, women increasingly resort to *ganyu* as an escape from severe water shortages in their homes, rendering *ganyu* relations an important lens for understanding the shifting social relations of water in urban Malawi, where state-led provision of water has still left a large section of the urban population off the grid.

The findings of our study show that doing *ganyu*, a socially stigmatised form of labour, in exchange for potable water signifies an extreme level of household water insecurity. Encumbered by gendered norms that render women as 'natural' caregivers, poor women in Mzuzu are compelled to go out to seek *ganyu* to access water for their families. Although *ganyu* is often portrayed in rural areas as a mutually beneficial arrangement, these portrayals were not forged in the same material and social contexts as those found in urban settings. In contrast, this study and other recent urban-focused research suggest that *ganyu* recruiters are largely self-interested individuals motivated by a desire to protect or expand their own wealth and pursue personal gratification (see Englund, 1999). Studies over the past few decades have shown this evolving ambivalent character of *ganyu* when practiced outside of family and kin ties, especially in urban areas, where ethos of individualism and self-interest hold significant sway (Englund, 1999; Mkandawire et al., 2014). Amidst rapid urbanisation and the concomitant rise in contractual and individualised social relations, this study shows that water in urban Malawi is an important mechanism through which those who have it can control and exploit the labour power of those who do not have it. This shows the need to reorient and expand our view towards water to reflect the ways in which it activates complex webs of social relationships, as some of the literature on livelihoods and ethics of care are showing (Hanrahan, 2015; Freeman, 2024).

Whilst unique, the findings of this study share broad parallels with stories about the monopolistic and arguably fraudulent nature of the water vending industry that has mushroomed across many countries in South America. Private water vendors in Ecuador, for instance, wield enormous economic power, buying water at subsidised tariffs from the municipal water supply system and selling it at exorbitant prices to the poor and informal settlements not served by the water supply network (Swyngedouw, 2004; Harvey et al., 2015). In the context of Malawi, those who commission or benefit from *ganyu* labour, effectively an emergent urban class, exhibit tendencies akin to those of the *tanqueros* (private water vendors) in Bolivia. Both are driven by a desire to extract rent from the poorest segments of the population. As in Bolivia, this study highlights how access to water in urban Malawi has been transformed into a form of power, with individuals connected to the municipal supply leveraging that access to secure the labour of those who are not.

Applying perspectives from feminist political ecology, this paper also shows that poor women are at especially high risk of both economic exploitation and *sextortion* in these *ganyu*-water contracts. This finding similarly shows that material control over water in urban Malawi can provide men with the means to control and sexually exploit vulnerable women. Although set in different social and spatial contexts, this finding is consistent with studies that have found a practice of sexual exchange in poor fishing communities along Lake Malawi and around Lake Victoria in Kenya and Uganda (Nagoli et al., 2010; Kwena et al., 2013). For instance, the fishery's value chain in terms of processing, packaging, and trading provide important avenues for sexual exchange between women and fishermen along Lake Malawi (Nagoli et al., 2010). Similarly, risky sexual practices of women trading in fish around Lake Victoria emerged within the context of population mobility for work-related activities. Having travelled to new places for long periods away from family and healthcare services, women engaged in risky sexual encounters and disengaged from HIV care. Because of the fishing industry's seasonality, these patterns were more common in certain parts of the year than others (Kwena et al., 2013).

A major tenet of feminist political ecology is that gender inequity is not experienced in isolation but in relation to other axes of social disadvantage, and that place, class, race, disability, and sexuality mediate the experience of gender. The intersection of gender and class in this study is obvious. Encumbered with domestic chores, women, especially poor women, are more likely to resort to *ganyu* to obtain water, which exposes them to the risk of labour and sexual exploitation.

But how place shapes gendered experience in this study requires a geographic conception of place that goes beyond conventional geometric or quantitative attributes. It calls for a reimagining of place as constituted through social relations, which brings issues of power into clearer focus (Massey, 2013). In this context, '*place*' refers to the historically embedded social relations and power dynamics that define

everyday life in Mzuzu, particularly within neighbourhoods and residential zones shaped by *ganyu* labour arrangements. The study reveals that the intersection of place, gender, and water scarcity amplifies existing class and gender-based vulnerabilities beyond the private space of the home. Women, encumbered not just with domestic responsibilities but also driven by an urgent imperative to care for and ensure the well-being of their families, engage in forms of labour shaped by deep ethical commitments to social reproduction. However, this ethic of care is often exploited under unequal power relations, positioning women as sources of cheap labour and objects of sexual coercion outside the domestic sphere. This, in turn, places them at heightened risk of HIV/AIDS and other forms of harm. Whilst past studies linking water and public health have focused mainly on waterborne illnesses (Khademikia et al., 2013; Muoio et al., 2020; Setty et al., 2020), the findings here suggest a troubling connection between water scarcity, exploitative labour arrangements, and the potential spread of HIV/AIDS in urban Malawi.

In conclusion, this shows that water in urban Malawi is not simply a basic need or a market commodity but a vehicle through which historical materialisations of colonial labour relations, *ganyu*, find new expression. Water in Malawian cities circulates in a way that intersects with historical inequalities to foster and reaffirm mechanisms of exclusion and domination. The increasing scarcity of clean water in urban Malawi will only reinforce the social power of individuals who are connected to the public water supply grid and buttress the sway of providers of *ganyu* over those who seek *ganyu* and need it to survive, thereby worsening social inequalities and amplifying social differentiation in a country already ranked as one of the ten poorest countries in the world.

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