

“In Partnership and Sisterhood”:

Diving into the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network’s* Construction
of a Feminist Discourse on Transboundary Water Governance

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Abstract

Despite the clear-cut articulations in the Dublin Statement which stress the need to include women in decision-making on water at all levels, women are significantly under-represented in transboundary water governance, and scarce attention has been devoted to understanding spaces in which women might create distinct discourses on transboundary water governance. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of such spaces through examining how the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network* constructs a feminist discourse on transboundary water governance in the Nile basin. Rooted in the theoretical framework of intersectional feminist political ecology, the study aims to uncover the potentials and constraints of creating feminist discourses in the field. Focusing the analysis on key texts from the network, the research examines how meanings are constructed through privileged signs in the discourse. The analysis focuses on key texts from the network, revealing how an identity is constructed around *women water leaders*, and how the concepts of *sisterhood* and *cooperation* creates an alternative to hegemonic discourses in transboundary water governance. While the network presents alternatives to dominant narratives, the analysis also uncovers constraints concerning essentialism and intersectionality, underscoring the need for further efforts to ensure a truly transformative feminist approach to Nile basin transboundary water governance.

Key words: gendered transboundary water governance; feminist political ecology; discourse theory; sisterhood; alternative water discourse; the Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network

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Abbreviations

CoE	- Chain of equivalence
DT	- Discourse Theory
FPE	- Feminist political ecology
TWG	- Transboundary water governance
TWC	- Transboundary water cooperation
WWDN	- the Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network

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1. Introduction

Women are significantly underrepresented in water governance, particularly at the transboundary level (Earle & Bazilli, 2013). Meanwhile, many women bear differentiated embodied experiences with water and the inclusion of women has been acknowledged as imperative to creating sustainable futures in water governance. Research suggests that all-women's decision-making forums in transboundary water governance (TWG) produce more inclusive outcomes which to a greater extent considers marginalised women (Wong, 2016). Research also suggests that women hold vast potentials to generate counter-hegemonic discourses which present transformative alternatives to dominant notions of water (Harris, 2015). The current state of inquiry into gendered TWG displays a focus predominantly upon questions of inclusion, barriers and enabling factors (e.g. Carmi et al., 2019). However, women's constructions of feminist discourses in water governance remain largely unexplored, particularly at the transboundary level. This thesis hopes to commence a process of resolving this invisibility and bring to the light how women might construct a feminist discourse on TWG. Beyond this, potentials and constraints of these discourses to the aim of transformative social change, inclusive waters, and sustainable futures is brought into discussion.

1.1. Research Aim and Question

As stated briefly above, this thesis aims to explore the construction of a feminist discourse on transboundary water governance and to contribute to a deeper understanding of what potentials and limitations are present in constructing such a discourse. To be more precise, this thesis looks at how the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network* (WWDN), an all-women's network in a traditionally male-dominated field, constructs a feminist discourse in the context of Nile basin hydropolitics. Intending to examine how the discourse challenges hegemonic discourses, as well as how it could unintentionally perpetuate them, this thesis aims to generate an understanding of both transformational potentials and limitations of the discourse. To guide this aim, this research poses the following research question;

How does the Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network construct a feminist discourse on transboundary water governance in the Nile?

1.2. Overview

This thesis now provides a background on transboundary water governance (TWG), the content of the Nile, and feminist perspectives on the genderedness of TWG. The background further introduces the empirical focus of the thesis, the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network* (WWDN). Thereafter, the theoretical framework of feminist political ecology (FPE) is outlined and put into conversation with the methodology, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory (DT). Going into the method, the case-study research design and an introduction to the materials is provided, following a presentation of the analytical toolkit of discourse theory, namely the components of discourse, along with an exposition of the course of action in the analysis, and lastly delimitations and ethical considerations are accounted for. Thereafter the analysis commences by mapping the discourse and examining key articulations and nodal points such as *women water leaders*, *sisterhood*, *inclusive decision-making*, *cooperation*, *peacebuilding*, and *the Nile Basin*. Diving into a theoretical account of the analysis, the discussion constructs a deeper connection between the analysis and perspectives retrieved from the theoretical framework. Concluding the thesis is a deep-dive into the experience of doing research within the field of this thesis, and some final suggestion of paths, or rather, streams forward for scholarship of allied directions.

2. Background

In the following section, the broader topic of transboundary water governance, the situated context of the Nile basin, and the empirical focus of the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network* is introduced, along with a presentation of the genderedness of TWG.

2.1. Transboundary Water Governance in the Nile Basin

Transboundary water governance (henceforth TWG), concerns the governance of the transboundary water resources shared by 153 countries globally (UNESCO & UNECE, 2021, p. v). Beyond sustaining human life and functioning as a key to socioeconomic development,

water transcends its physical capacities and extends far into the social realm, which prones for complex water governance processes. In this complexity, questioning which power structures hegemonic water governance reinforces, and exploring what counter-hegemonic alternatives are constructed is important (Boelens et al., 2016, p. 4). This thesis utilises Sehring et al.'s conceptualisation of TWG as “a dynamic field where different state and non-state actors with different interests and backgrounds interact in processes of decision making on shared water resources, with different degrees of institutionalised cooperation” (2022, p. 4). More concretely, Sehring et al. employs the term “to refer to the institutions (including organisational structures as well as formal and informal rules and norms, processes, and practices that regulate water use, protection, and management at a transboundary level” (2022, pp. 3-4). Through this conceptualisation, a broad spectrum of actors beyond the state-centric analytical level are considered, which is enunciated by feminist political ecology scholars as important to holistically understand the complexities of environmental governance processes (Agostino et al., 2023, p. 5). Engaging scales beyond the state is especially important as climate change and changing water demands are leading to water insecurity, water variability, extreme floods, and droughts which disproportionately affects marginalised peoples (UNEP, 2021, p. 4). Inclusive TWG is in this sense critical to achieve sustainable and just societies, but also to the contestation of prevailing structures of power and domination.

TWG in the Nile accentuates how hegemonic and masculinist discourses might shape power dynamics, both between riparian states, and within states concerning local communities. Particularly, the recent conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) illustrates how dominance functions through hydro-hegemony as downstream Egypt asserts control over the Nile waters by affirming its water security at the expense of upstream Ethiopia's developmental aspirations (Acquaafredda, 2021, p. 22; Hailu, 2022, p. 96), and as local populations are immensely affected (Vaughan, 2020, p. 4). Beyond displaying entrenched geopolitical power-asymmetries, the conflict is also profoundly gendered. Mostly in its gendered effects (Abdelhady et al., 2015, p. 77), but also as large-scale hydraulic projects reproduce masculinist water-practices of domination (Braun, 2015, p. 19). Generally, TWG-discourses in the Nile tend to favour state-centric and technocratic solutions, which has received criticism for de-politicising civil society engagements along the river (Abazeed, 2021, pp. 226, 229). Moreover, the masculinist character of TWG in the Nile often results in

the exclusion of women and marginalised local communities from decision-making processes (Sehring et al., 2023, p. 3).

2.2. The Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-Network

The *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network* (henceforth the WWDN-network, or simply ‘the network’), is an initiative which has gained significant attention for its transformative approach to TWG (Zambezi Watercourse Commission, 2024). Established in 2017 under Stockholm International Water Institute’s (SIWI) Shared Waters Partnership programme, by the request of women working in water governance in the Nile, the network has represented a strong voice in promoting more gender-inclusive dialogue in the Nile. Notably, through their members, the network has been influential in decision-making processes at the highest level. For example, four to five network members participated in the GERD-negotiations, which had an impact on the diplomatic process according to Nadia Gefoun (SIWI, 2020).

The network unites senior and mid-career women leaders holding key positions and representing key ministries to the governance of the Nile basin from the 11 riparian states, actively challenging the male-dominated character and discourse of TWG in the Nile. Allied in the aim to construct a platform in which women in hydropolitics can exchange experiences, support each other, and enhance their collective capacity, the members jointly advance an alternative discourse to remove barriers to the inclusion of more women in the sector (SIWI, 2024). By bridging differences and connecting women in the basin across borders, the network fosters partnerships which facilitate and promote cooperation and peacebuilding in the region. The network represents a progressive initiative to address the longstanding gender disparities within transboundary water governance practices in the Nile basin and beyond. As the WWDN-network’s approach inspired the implementation of similar basin-networks, the Nile-network has evolved into the global *Women in Water Diplomacy-network* which connects decision-makers with influencing intermediaries such as scholars across borders and between basins around the world (Zambezi Watercourse Commission, 2024). Particularly, the Nile-network is a relevant case to examine through its position within a unique geopolitical context, its influence in high-level negotiations, and its commitment to fostering solidarity among women leaders.

2.3. Feminist Perspectives on Transboundary Water Governance

Water has long been recognised along gendered lines, as women have been predominantly responsible for collecting water for domestic uses (Myrntinen, 2018, p. 199). While recognised at the local level, water decision-making has largely been framed as masculine through a vast focus on large-scale hydro projects (Braun, 2015, p. 20). Challenging this framing, the Dublin Statement, adopted in 1992, acknowledges the central role of women to the provision, management and safeguarding of water, and foregrounds women's inclusion into TWG-processes (World Meteorological Organization, 1992; Schilling et al., 2018, p. 182). Despite this, two seminal contributions to the field of gendered TWG reveal that while women might be included in water governance at local levels, they are systematically withheld from it at the transboundary-level (Earle & Bazilli, 2013, p. 116), and that research on TWG rarely recognises women, and when considered, women are predominantly framed as passive water users, rarely as agents of change (da Silva et al., 2018, pp. 212, 221).

While most writings in the field of gendered TWG optimistically propose women's increased participation as a path to more inclusive decision-making, Sam Wong accounts for a more critical perspective, arguing that women's representation might unwillingly lead to inequality (2016, pp. 83, 90). In a case study on local-level TWG in the Volta River Basin, West Africa, Wong (2016, p. 89) found that gender quotas in TWG did not make substantial changes to women's representation as only elite women were included. These women did not feel connected to marginalised women in their communities, and hence did not represent, nor advocate for, their interests. This finding reveals the importance of considering intersectionality to holistically understand the power dynamics in TWG, which is further stressed by Fletcher (2018), and Schilling, Froese, and Naujoks (2018). These accounts provide a rationale for critically examining discourses produced by women in TWG from a bottom-up perspective, in order to grasp who and what is rendered invisible even in discourses which are celebrated as progressive. Furthermore, Sehring, ter Horst and Said (2023) extends the critique of gender quotas in TWG by concluding that obstacles to women's participation in TWG are embedded in norms, practices and ideas beyond numerical representation. Consequently, it is meaningful to examine the potentials to construct

transformative discourses, which articulates cross-cutting alternatives, and contests inequality and domination in TWG processes as well as outcomes (Harris, 2015, p. 159).

Medha Bisht (2023) posits that there is a need to transcend discussions which advocate for the inclusion of women into masculinist decision-making forums, which are characterised by epistemological positions favouring state-centred and rationality-based approaches. Instead Bisht (2023, p. 77) suggests exploring the potential for creating a distinct feminist water governance discourse. Informed by a conjunction between feminist theory, diplomacy studies, and network studies, Bisht argues for a shift in the focal point from traditional diplomatic *practices*, towards networked diplomatic *processes* which privileges situated knowledge and bottom-up perspectives, suggesting that examining networks is insightful to the process of feminising water (2023, p. 74). Considering Bisht's arguments, this thesis directs focus to the possibility of constructing a feminist discourse on TWG in and of itself, rather than elaborating on enabling women's inclusion in TWG in its current state, as women, to succeed in state-affiliated positions, often must conform to male-centred discourses (Aggestam & True, 2024, p. 83). A feminist discourse concerns a shared perspective, which might not be overtly labelled as 'feminist', but does "establish a distinctly 'feminist politics of articulation'" (Lazar, 2007, p. 3).

Correspondingly with Bisht (2023), Wong (2016), in above mentioned critical account of gender-quotas also concluded that TWG decision-making groups consisting exclusively of women made decisions which were more attentive to marginalised women. This finding leads to the question of whether fostering feminist discourses on TWG could pave the way for more equitable governance practices. Wong's findings contribute to the justification of researching specifically the WWDN-network, as it, in capacity of being an all-women's network, holds potentials to generate alternative and more inclusive TWG discourses. Furthermore, Wong's findings also provide a rationale for critically examining the network's discourse from a intersectionality-attentive bottom-up perspective to further understand the transformative possibilities, and account for the constraints, in creating feminist discourses on TWG. A framework which enables such a perspective is found in feminist political ecology.

3. Theoretical Framework

This thesis employs a feminist political ecology (hereafter FPE) theoretical framework, which this section introduces further. Thereafter, in order to sustain the internal validity of the thesis, FPE is brought into conversation with the theoretical foundations of the chosen methodology, discourse theory.

3.1. Feminist Political Ecology

Built from the postulate that environmental processes are not neutral and “amenable to technical management” (Elmhirst, 2015, p. 527), FPE argues that these processes are inherently political and intertwined with multiple intersecting social structures and power relations (de Moraes, 2015, p. 79). Evolving through contestations, multiplicity and dialogue as “a work in *process* (not progress)” (Rocheleau, 2015, p. 57, italics in original), FPE constitutes a critical framework which, rather than providing specific understandings of politics or environments, shares aspirations of transformative political change. By posing critical questions about the ways in which power and knowledge is produced and reproduced in environmental processes (de Silva et al, 2018, p. 216), FPE critically examines how subjectivities inflict with human-environment interactions through a gender-relational understanding (Elmhirst, 2011, p. 130). As Resurrección succinctly articulates it, FPE “enables a multi-scalar analysis of knowledge production, gendered rights and responsibilities, and more pointedly, the workings of power and politics in the use, access, and distribution of resources in the context of neoliberal economic growth and structural adjustment trajectories” (2017, p. 76).

Engaging with complex workings of power, FPE-scholarship examines how power is contested and reproduced through situated and embodied experiences, knowledges and emotions from a bottom-up perspective (Elmhirst, 2015, p. 527). FPE encourages us to “rethink our relations to complex natures ‘otherwise’” (Harris, 2015, p. 158), and thereby giving voice to alternative renderings of environmental interaction. The commitment to alternative ways of structuring, understanding, and interacting with environmental processes allows FPE-scholarship to expand and uplift marginalised envisionings of the future which fosters transformative political change (Escobar & Harcourt, 2018, p. 285). Similarly, Sultana

posits that FPE scholars bring “epistemological and methodological insights for both rigorous and robust comprehension of the world but also insights on how to change it” (2021, p. 160).

FPE engages with an intersectionality- and poststructuralist approach. This entails that the necessity to consider subjectivities as produced by multiple social stratifications which jointly produce complex forms of marginalisation(s), or simply the subject as situated and complex (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) is recognised. In a poststructural sense, the subject is further understood as fluid, multiple and contingent (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2017, p. 182), which is emphasised in FPE as pivotal to holistically comprehend power and injustice (Thomson, 2022, p. 172; Fletcher, 2018, p. 41; Braun, 2015, p. 21). Informed by above understandings of subjectivities, this thesis reasons that experiences in, and of, TWG are not homogenous, but influenced by intersecting, fluid, and multiple subjectivities (Elmhirst, 2015, p. 523; Buechler & Hanson, 2015, p. 5), which are co-constructed through embodied human-water interactions (Bourguignon et al., 2023, p. 130). An intersectional-FPE approach is applied through adopting a “a particular sensitivity to situated knowledges, or knowledges born out of specific spatial and embodied practices” (Hayman et al., 2015, p. 190) and the conscious search of complexities in discursively constructed inclusions, exclusions, essentializations and generalisations.

Research rooted in FPE enables critical understandings of the ways women, understood as a diverse group of intersecting and complex subjectivities (Buechler & Hanson, 2015, p. 4), navigate and challenge hegemonic institutions. By emphasising women as important players in resource and environmental management, FPE gives rise to alternative discourses, and elevates marginalised voices (Harris, 2015, pp. 163-164). Traditional approaches to TWG largely fail to account for the gendered dimension of water politics, and when considering power asymmetries, the framework tends to be state-centric (e.g. Zeitoun & Warner (2006) on hydro-hegemony), rendering local marginalizations of dominant TWG practices invisible.

Situating the thesis within FPE implies a dual analytical approach. On the one hand, the focus on alternatives foregrounds an analysis on how the network constructs a feminist discourse on TWG and how the network negotiates and contests power in predominantly male-dominated diplomatic spaces. However, a critical lens stemming from FPE brings the analysis into the realm of intersectionality by destabilising the discourse’s categorisations and posing questions about who the discourse includes, excludes, and what power relations are

present in these processes. Through these dual analytical strands, FPE is applied as a framework for understanding how the WWDN negotiates and subverts hegemonic discourses, but also investigating wherein the network might reproduce dominant discourses and power relations through logics of inclusion and exclusion.

3.2. Bridging Feminist Political Ecology and Discourse Theory

FPE and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (henceforth DT) intersect in their transformative social goals and commitment to understanding and challenging power structures. Rooted in poststructuralist perspectives, both FPE and DT emphasise linkages between power and knowledge and take interest in how social change can be performed by reconfiguring existing paradigms. Bridging FPE, the notion of hegemony, and water, Leila Harris suggests the usefulness of FPE to initiating a process of "prying open possibilities for challenging particular hegemonies of thought and practice in the environmental governance realm" (2015, p. 160). While combining DT with other theoretical frameworks "often sacrifices ontological and epistemological coherence" (Jacobs, 2018, p. 310), this is navigated through drawing on a shared poststructuralist approach and this above-mentioned transformative goal.

While FPE focuses on the intersections of gender and environmental processes, DT delves into how discourse shapes social realities and power dynamics. Laclau and Mouffe (2001, pp. 117-118) argue that social change occurs when alternative configurations of meaning emerge which challenge and disrupt the hegemonic discourses that sustain power-structures of subordination and oppression. FPE similarly envisions social change through the adherence of alternative ways of being and understanding the world (Rocheleau, 2015, p. 56). By integrating DT, FPE leverage a more concretely political analytical framework to address and potentially shift hegemonic patriarchal, neoliberal, developmentalist and imperialist discourses in TWG as DT seeks to create spaces of contestation in which alternative meanings and practices can emerge and challenge prevailing power dynamics.

4. Method

This section explains and reasons about the methods through which the research is conducted. First it introduces the research design, followed by an introduction to the data employed, namely the materials to be analysed. Then, the methodology employed, Laclau and Mouffe's DT, is presented along with the course of action through which the method will be applied. Concluding the section is an account of limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations.

4.1. Research Design

Aiming to enable a deep-dive into the complexities, nuances and contexts of the WWDN-network's construction of a feminist discourse on TWG, this thesis is situated within qualitative social science and employs a case study research design. Utilising a case-study design entails that the research puzzle is put into a situated context and examined in a thorough and detailed way (Robson & McCartan, 2016, pp. 20, 151). While enabling rich insights, the approach also poses limitations to the generalizability and external validity (ibid, p. 110). From the perspective of FPE, Buechler and Hanson (2015, p. 5) however affirms the importance of recognising situated particularities in women-water research, hence the limitation of generalizability correspondingly constitutes a strength.

4.2. Materials

This study employed purposive sampling to identify the materials to be analysed, a sampling strategy commonly utilised in qualitative social science research (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). The overarching empirical focus is the discourse of the WWDN-network (see section 2.2.). However, as the discourse must be operationalised and delimited into an analysable material, a selection of documents and articles published by the WWDN-network will now be presented and discussed.

The network's joint statement (WWDN, 2020), issued by participants of the 2020 'Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile Workshop', will be analysed as a key text of the network as it represents their core aims, intentions, and formulations and encompasses the network's discourse. Furthermore, the summary publication "Tapping our Potential" (2019) constitutes

a key document of the network by more thoroughly explaining the network's motivations and reasoning, and will hence be included in the analysis on the basis of representativeness and importance to the network. Beyond these publications, two articles retrieved from the network's website in which member's voices are uplifted will be analysed. Namely one interview with Theresa Wasike (Gupta & Ndjiki, 2022), and the article "Lessons from the Women in Water Diplomacy Network in the Nile" (SIWI, 2020). Included to contribute to the materials with personal and reflective notions of the network, the articles bring the delimitation of the discourse closer to its members and informal practices in line with the FPE-aim of analysing lived experiences. Lastly, aiming to make a selection of materials which accurately reflects and represents the actual practice of the network, their annual newsletters between the years 2020-2024 were analysed, however these did not pose novel insights, hence they were not included in the analysis and functioned instead as a general compass for the discourse's direction.

4.3. Methodology

In line with FPEs endeavour to "capture greater detail, nuances, connections, and complexities" (Sultana, 2021, p. 160), and examine how power operates in the realm of environmental governance (Resurrección, 2017, p. 76; Elmhirst, 2015, p. 527), the analysis proceeds from Laclau and Mouffe's DT, a methodology which provides the means to intricately understand constructions of meaning and their political affordances (Shepherd, 2021, p. 31). This section presents and discusses relevant components of discourse, functioning as analytical tools. Following this, an account of the practical application of the methodology is presented.

4.3.1. Discourse Theory and Components of Discourse

Positioned proximate to poststructuralist premises, Laclau and Mouffe's DT assumes the ontological stance that the world is fully embedded in discourse, and argues in an epistemological sense that we can only understand the world through discourse, hence suggesting that all phenomena can be analysed through the same discursive logics (Winther-Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 6). These discursive logics are rooted in the understanding of discourse as *contingent*, meaning that it is a fixation of meaning which is

possible but not necessary (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 96), and that discourses only acts *as if* it was possible to fix meanings in a perfect Saussurian sense (Jacobs, 2018, p. 204). Therefore, discourses are temporary fixations of meaning through webs of relationships which exclude all other possible meanings. Discourse is in this sense a reduction of possibilities which might always change (Winther-Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 27).

Articulation is a practice which structures meanings through establishing relations between *elements* which fix their meanings, making them *moments*, in a way which becomes a *discourse* in its structured totality (Winther-Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 26). All possible fixations which the discourse does not articulate are located in the *discursive field*, which constantly poses a challenge to the stability of discourses as moments are *polysemic*, meaning that the discourse is never stable but might always change (ibid).

Signs are the basic components of discourse, and their meanings are produced relationally through logics of inclusion and exclusion (Mukhtar-Landgren & Svärd, 2022, pp. 146-147). In this thesis, both chains of equivalence (CoE's), and logics of difference are considered in the analysis. However, logics of difference permeates the thesis more thoroughly yet implicitly through a sensitivity to how difference is constructed in the network's discourse and a constant interrogation of silences and questioning of who is rendered invincible. Conversely, CoE's are discussed in terms of explicit meaning-making in the analysed discourse. Discourse gains structure from privileged signs such as *nodal points*; "a very dense core" (Jacobs, 2018, p. 303) around which other signs relationally accumulate meaning, or as Thomas Jacobs formulates it, "a star in astronomy, a nodal point in Discourse Theory" (ibid). Examining nodal points and their relationships to other signs is a key to mapping discourse's priorities and central themes (Winther-Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 30), hence this thesis analysis is centred around the examination of nodal points.

4.3.2. Course of Action

While DT might resemble an approach more than a designated method for analysing text as it does not provide concrete analytical proceedings (de Cleen et al., 2021, p. 27), Winther-Jorgensen and Phillips suggest a guiding question by which a DT-analysis might commence, "focusing on expressions in their capacity as articulations: what meanings do

they establish by positioning elements in particular relationships with one other, and what meaning potentials do they exclude?” (2002, p. 29). Further, they suggest this question to be analysed by identifying nodal points of the discourse, looking at which signs hold privileged positions and how they are defined in relation to other signs in the discourse (ibid, p. 30).

Guided by these suggestions, the analysis was conducted from the following procedure. In the first step of the analysis, the materials were read in search of key terms and phrases. The signs were then identified as a specific component of the discourse and mapped out in terms of nodal points, the ways other signs connect to nodal points, and how meanings are created through chains of equivalence. Concretely, nodal points were not identified quantitatively but rather as an interpretation of the overarching meanings constructed in the discourse.

Secondly, a more theoretically rooted reading and interpretation of the materials was conducted in order to construct an in-depth understanding through the lens of FPE. This reading thoroughly explored power dynamics in the discourse, and took logics of difference into account by considering whose voices are heard, whose are rendered invisible, how intersecting identities inform these constructions, and what alternative meanings might be excluded. In this part of the analysis, intersectionality was a key-word as focus was dedicated to examining if, and how, the discourse articulates diversities in women’s experiences with TWG in the Nile. Throughout this stage, the mapping of the discourse was revisited and revised as new themes and insights emerged. Lastly, central themes and insights, informed by FPE and guided by the research question, which had emerged in the preceding steps were structured into thematic sections.

4.4. Limitations, Delimitations and Ethical Considerations

Concerning the theoretical framework, as discussed above, FPE and DT align in several ways. However, they diverge in their analytical focus, with one directing focus to language and signs, and one on embodied experiences. These focuses are not mutually exclusive, however the full scope of FPE’s emphasis on lived, embodied, and emotional realities of women might not be captured adequately in a document-based discourse analysis.

As elaborated upon in section 4.3., the methodology of this thesis is a poststructuralist DT, which possesses delimitations regarding the thesis’ focus and scope being restricted to the

realm of language and signs, hence the thesis does not assess actual outcomes or the effectiveness of the network. Moreover, the network's sparse availability of documents poses a limitation to the breadth of the analysis. As the global network evolved, materials published specifically from the Nile-branch have been largely restricted to newsletters. While the selected materials provide valuable insights into the discourse, its limited number might not fully represent its broader discursive strategies. This also concerns the character of the materials, as the network's practice and discourse principally is conveyed in seminars and workshops for members, strictly document-oriented materials might be a flawed way to analyse the network and risks omitting informal or internal discussions that could diversify and offer additional, contesting or more nuanced perspectives.

Conducting this research, ethical considerations must be addressed. Firstly, my positionality as a white woman, affiliated with a university in the 'global north', analysing women in the 'global south' entails vast potentials for epistemic privilege, violence and authority (Agostino et al., 2023, p. 6). Consciously and sensibly bringing this positionality with me into the research process, I have intended to hold myself accountable and practise reflexivity methodically by acknowledging my "own subjectivity and its effects on the production of scientific knowledge" (Zienkowski, 2019, p. 6) in a thesis-diary which has been engaged throughout the analysis. Refraining from claims of objectivity, this thesis rather emphasises the inherent subjectivity in research (Kapoor, 2004). As Haraway (1988, p. 190) posits, claiming objectivity by separating the subject and object is itself an expression of power in the politics of knowledge, hence a delimitation is the subjective understanding of knowledge.

5. Analysis: Diving into the Discourse

Structured and guided by the research question; *how does the WWDN-network construct a feminist discourse on TWG?* This analysis aims to understand the construction of a feminist discourse on TWG in the materials. Endowing direction to the analysis, sub-sections based on identified nodal points of the discourse are formulated, under which constructions of meaning through the nodal points and their connections to other signs in the discourse will be analysed. Throughout the analysis, silences, exclusions, and alternative ways of constructing meaning will be scrutinised from the perspective of intersectional FPE.

5.1. Women Water Leaders

The sign *women water leaders* re-emerge throughout the materials in capacity of a key nodal point, identified as such as it encompasses the structure and meanings fixed to other signs of the discourse as illustrated in section 5.1.4. The term furthermore constructs a subjectivity in the discourse which entails that the sign potentially can reveal inclusions and exclusions of the discourse. The network positions *women water leaders* as pivotal to sustainable resource management and decision-making by emphasising their cooperative competencies and differentiated ecological knowledge, experience and sensitivity. However, the articulation predominantly focuses on professional women in a technocratic manner, potentially excluding and marginalising grassroots women who engage significantly with water but lack formal credentials. This raises questions about whose voices are heard in TWG in general, and the WWDN-network in particular.

By deconstructing *women water leaders* through its components, an initial understanding of the meanings constructed is formulated. Firstly, the notion of ‘women’ in *women water leaders* seemingly refers not to all women, but women who are considered as ‘leaders’ specifically in the water-sector. A logic of difference is present in the way the network categorises women either as water leaders or as water users, which risks essentializing the category of women. FPE-considerations of de-stabilising the category of ‘women’ urges us to recognize the intersectional differences within these categories, challenging the homogeneity implied by the discourse.

In an FPE-rooted discussion on the narrative of “modern waters”, Hayman et al. state that “this notion of a passive, yielding (feminine) water has been constructed with the ideological footprint that it *needs* to be managed” (2015, p. 192) further noting that “interlacing of colonial ideas about water, gender, purity, and power has suppressed other water worldviews” (ibid). Bringing this into the analysis of the network’s formulation, by connecting the signs ‘water’ and ‘leaders’ the discourse suggests that water is something which specific women can lead, a notion which might be subjected to Hayman et al.’s critique. Contrasting sentiments of ‘leading’ water versus ‘managing’ water, the suggestion of ‘leading’ water constructs a less dominance-inflicted conception of human-water interactions. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘leading’ evokes associations to hierarchical water practice. Also, conceptualising certain women as ‘water leaders’ excludes women whose interactions with

water are not perceived as formal leadership. On this note, the inclusions and exclusions present in the discourse concerning the subject-position and identity-formation around *women water leaders* will now be analysed.

Recurringly, *women water leaders*-signs are clustered by the subject-pronouns “us”, “we” and “our”, which refer to network members. In this way, the discourse incorporates a relatively sparse number of women within their articulation of *women water leaders*. Extending the scope of application, the term is also used to refer to “women water professionals” in general and, in the specific situated context of the Nile Basin, “a number of women throughout the Nile Basin [who] have successfully risen to leadership positions at various levels of water governance” (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 4). This technocratic perspective on *women water leaders* obscures women’s domestic and informal interactions, use, and relationships to water, despite portraying women as “playing a central role in managing and safeguarding water for both domestic and productive uses” (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 2). This suggests that the scope of *women water leaders* could be extended to informal practices and roles to include a diversity of women's experiences. It would also be in accordance with the articulated justification for including women in TWG decision-making; that it “provides an opportunity to include their distinctive knowledge, diverse perspectives, and experiences to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of relevant water issues and challenges and to identify a broader set of equitable solutions to those challenges” (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 2). Additionally, it would endorse the network’s objective of “enhancing the collective capacity of women throughout the basin” (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 4). That is, advancing the scope of women water leaders to include the invisible water labour of women at the sub-national, community, and grassroots scales.

It is expected of *women water leaders* to promote cooperation and inclusivity in decision-making. This is indicated by the following quote from the joint statement “We agree, in our capacity as women water leaders, to continue to work together to further cooperation as well as contribute to the enhancement of inclusive decision making across the Nile” (WWDN, 2020). This entails that there is a substantial meaning to, and expectation upon, *women water leaders*, extending beyond their profession to the outcomes of their work.

5.2. Sisterhood

Informing, extending and contesting the possibilities of the WWDN-discourse is the connection between the signs *women water leaders* and *sisterhood*. Enforcing a sense of empowerment through unity, the network articulates its aim as not only to include women in TWG, but also to unite them, increase their collective capacity and evoke a sense of solidarity amongst women. Although *sisterhood* is overtly mentioned only occasionally, its strategic placement at the beginning and end of the joint statement allows it to encapsulate the network's overarching aim, purpose, and essence. Firstly, through the articulation that "We join together to elevate our voices in sisterhood, as peacemakers, mediators, and water stewards" (WWDN, 2020), and lastly as the signoff "In Partnership and Sisterhood" (ibid).

Engaging the discourse beyond explicit mentions of *sisterhood*, its meaning penetrates the discourse through a sense of unity in collective struggles and aspirations. bell hooks developed an account of sisterhood as "political solidarity between women" (1986, pp. 125, 127), arguing that the concept of sisterhood as solidarity (or solidarity-sisterhood) brings power through unity for the feminist movement as it "strengthens resistance struggle" (1986, p. 127), through bonds "with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources" (hooks, 1986, p. 128). Solidarity is central to hooks' (1986, p. 129) understanding of *sisterhood* as it allows the concept to transgresses the universalisation of women's experiences which was widely prevalent in second-wave feminism's sisterhood-conception, which Chandra Mohanty argued further to have created a false sense of unity among women in the movement (2003, pp. 109, 118). Bringing the concept into the realm of third wave feminisms, hooks advocates for a *sisterhood* which recognises difference and intersectionality through pursuing a self-reflexivity. Hence understanding the concept of *sisterhood* beyond explicit articulations entails, correspondingly with FPE, an examination of self-reflexivity and intersectionality in the discourse.

Informed by hooks' notion of solidarity-sisterhood, the sign could be understood to articulate different meanings internally and externally of the network. Internally, the notion of *sisterhood* and spirit of articulations unite members of the network. Partly through common experiences of oppression in barriers to their participation, mostly pronounced as cultural norms, and partly through their common goal of transforming TWG decision-making forums and strengthening one another. In this sense, the network constructs a solidarity-sisterhood

internally. Differences in experiences are recognised mainly as countries of origin and differences in professions, but these are not emphasised as the network aims to construct internal unity.

Externally, the employment of *sisterhood* constructs meanings in different ways and functions through logics of inclusion and exclusion. Firstly, as mentioned above, there is a tension between the discourse's articulations of women's local and embodied experiences as differentiated, and the competence of *women water leaders*. Displaying a degree of critical self-reflection in the joint statement through articulating that "As water leaders and professionals, we recognize the remaining challenges that weigh heavy on our peoples" (WWDN, 2020), and further that "the path to sustainable water management" (ibid) has brought hardship upon communities. However, it is articulated that "despite the challenges, we are bound together and thus recognize the significant benefits to regional development and economic integration that can result from improved transboundary cooperation" (ibid). Noting particularly identity formations, the articulations above simultaneously produce difference through emphasising water leaders and professionals as separate from their peoples, and acts to unify *women water leaders* with their communities through stating that they are bound together. Going into *sisterhood* in this instance, the discourse builds a sense of solidarity by recognising the hardships of their peoples in sustainable resource management, and connects the identity with its exclusions through the common goal of "benefits to regional development and economic integration" (WWDN, 2020). However, this notion of solidarity to marginalised externalities of the identity of *women water leaders* does not significantly transfer into subsequent documents, where a sense of *sisterhood* increasingly circulates horizontally as articulations concern internal *sisterhood* in which solidarity is performed amongst *women water leaders* regionally or globally.

Extending the analysis to the realm of human-nature relations, understandings and interactions, solidarity could be understood as a nodal point which connects the overarching concepts of the discourse across human-nature boundaries. Formulating TWG in terms of *sisterhood* evokes a sense of solidarity and unity across borders, amongst women in the network, and to some degree with women's embodied experiences, but also across human-nature boundaries. Through articulations such as "Women have differentiated knowledge that is vital to sustainable resource management" (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 5), the importance of women's equitable inclusion to sustainability is emphasised in the discourse. In

this sense, it could be argued that through employing *sisterhood* in conjunction with *women water leaders*, the discourse constructs a sense of solidarity and unity in women-water (/human-nature) relationships, as women and water are dynamically co-constructed. Therefore, through employing the concept of sisterhood in conjunction with women water leaders and their articulated importance to sustainable transboundary water futures, the discourse of the WWDN transcends the scope of hegemonic discourses in TWG which tend to (1) frame human-water relations in a more dualistic and separated manner, and (2) inflict a relationship of domination in human-water interaction through the framing of water as something to be controlled and managed (Harris, 2015, pp. 161, 165).

Bringing a more contemporary perspective on sisterhood into conversation, Janet Conway states that a “politics of global sisterhood” has evolved into “one of intense networking and coalition-building among feminists in NGOs [non-governmental organisations], academia, government and intergovernmental institutions premised on the recognition of difference as the basis for feminist collaboration” (2017, p. 209). Similarly, through advocating for solidarity-sisterhood and the “need for diversity, disagreement and difference” (1986, p. 138) in feminist movements, hooks feeds into FPE’s interest in the simultaneous situatedness of human-nature interactions and their global implications. In the network’s discourse, difference is internally confined by being recognised mainly as member’s countries of origin, yet this difference is also one of commonality by the uniting emphasis of the Nile setting.

5.3. Equitable and Inclusive Decision-making

Another central point of the discourse is *inclusive decision-making* in TWG, a formulation which emerges throughout the materials. Inclusive TWG decision-making is framed as the equal participation of women in these forums, indicating that inclusivity is constructed as a gender-issue with an account of intersectionality largely absent. Repeatedly underscoring that “*more inclusive decision making is critical*” (WWDN, 2020, italics in original), inclusivity is central to the discourse’s envisioning of TWG. Articulations advocating for gender-inclusive water governance link its potentials to improved decision-making outcomes particularly in terms of sustainability and gender-sensitivity, exemplified in this formulation;

Engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in decisions around shared waters broadens the set of environmental and social impacts that are considered and the knowledge and skills employed to address them, thus increasing the likelihood of developing sustainable and equitable solutions (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 1).

This entails that a relationship is articulated between inclusive decision making and the quality of outcomes, hence adhering to a substantial notion of inclusivity rather than regarding it as inherently meaningful. In the joint statement more inclusive decision-making is remarked as “Specifically, this necessitates the importance of enhancing women’s role as decision makers” (WWDN, 2020), emphasising further the focus on women’s substantial contribution to decision-making processes. In a statement in a blog-post on the network’s website, Theresa Wasike, Ministry of Water in Kenya, captures the construction of inclusivity as women’s contributions as follows;

Water is a woman’s affair. Especially at the domestic level. It is a woman who looks for water whether it is piped water or collected from a river or stream. A woman normally has a wider perspective and considers several factors before making a decision (Gupta & Ndjiki, 2022).

5.4. Transboundary Water Cooperation, Mediation and Peacebuilding

Emerging repeatedly in the discourse is a chain of equivalence (CoE) which articulates *women water leaders* as catalysts of *cooperation — mediation — conflict prevention — peacebuilding*. At the core of this chain is the construction of women’s role in TWG, and in a broader perspective; women’s role in international relations, peace and security, and environmental resource management. The CoE rests upon two assumptions, (1) women’s innate peacefulness and cooperative nature, and (2) that “a woman normally has a wider perspective and considers several factors before making a decision”, as network member Theresa Wasike (Gupta & Ndjiki, 2022) states, suggesting that women make better-informed decisions which ensures inclusive and sustainable outcomes. The components of this CoE will be scrutinised further in this section.

Strongly emphasising the frequently emerging sign of *cooperation*, the network articulates that they “share a cooperative vision for the Nile Basin” (WWDN, 2020). *Cooperation*, or *transboundary water cooperation* (TWC), is clustered by signs such as *improved*, *more*, *essential*, *important* and is appointed as “essential to water security and development in the region” (Troell & Yaari, 2019, p. 1), and pivotal to other processes which the network advocates for such as to peacebuilding, sustainable water management, and realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The network’s embrace of *cooperation* resembles what Karin Aggestam describes as “the water-peace discourse” (2018, p. 103), a notion embraced in global forums (Keskinen et al., 2021, p. 2), which designate transboundary waters as holding vast cooperative potentials. Yet, contestations reject its essentializing framings of water cooperation as inherently positive, conflict as inherently negative by arguing that TWC-agreements enforce and institutionalise power-asymmetries by favouring hydro-hegemonies, and exacerbate marginalizations (Sehring et al., 2022, p. 4; Aggestam, 2018, p. 104). This critical account allows for a critique towards the networks’ imagining of Nile-TWG, and the place of women in that framing.

Throughout the materials, *women water leaders* are framed as contributors, if not catalysts, of TWC and peacebuilding. When asked about her vision for an ideal world for women in water, Theresa Wasike answers that;

My dream is that with time we will meet at the negotiation table, people from different countries, but with the same dream. That we raise issues that hinder our development, in a coherent and peaceful manner, and resolve those issues. Without any friction or without seeing each other as being from different countries. We should be able to look at each other and understand what is being said. And then we come to a decision that is beneficial to all (Gupta & Ndjiki, 2022).

The answer exemplifies the envisioning of inclusive TWG and the role of women in these processes. By constructing women as peaceful, understanding, and pragmatic, the network subscribes to meaning constructions of the WPS-agenda, which has been subject to vast critical feminist contestations for essentializing women as inherently peaceful (cf. Shepherd, 2011; Basu, 2016; Basu et al., 2020). Constructing such a fixity to *women water leaders*, as “peacebuilders, mediators, and water stewards” (WWDN, 2020), indicates a sense of de-politicisation of, and reductionism to, the subject position. From the perspective of FPE,

framing women as non-conflictual, rational, and mediating actors in TWG rejects women their complexity, their diverse experiences, and their political agency, as well as disregards the role of emotions in water politics (Sehring & Wolf, 2023, p. 905). In this sense, the discourse reproduces subjugations of women in TWG through reductively envisioning their agencies. Constructing women in this fashion imposes technocratic lenses upon women, a tendency which is traceable throughout the discourse through the privileging of women's distinctive ecological knowledges through their embodied experiences, but rendering their emotional connections to water invisible. However, it should also be noted that Nadia Gefoun, a network member, expressed in relation to the GERD-negotiation and the four to five women present that "we are one group – a Network. If that continues that will be very good for the negotiations" (SIWI, 2020). This sense of collectiveness and unity between women is not an insignificant discursive construction.

Constructing meaning beyond the subject position of *women water leaders*, Wasike's answer reveals a vision for TWG in the Nile which is rooted in unity and pragmatism, neglecting differences and conflict and instead resolving issues and coming to "a decision that is beneficial to all", in accordance with the contemporary apolitical technocratic tendencies of Nile-TWG (Abazeed, 2021, p. 226). Suggesting that TWG processes go about "without any friction or without seeing each other as being from different countries" could further be criticised for reproducing a de-politicised notion of water politics. Herein it is important to recognise that "we need to adopt a sensitive political gaze in order to critically engage with depoliticised discursive constructions of water" (Aggestam, 2018, p. 104).

5.5. The Nile Basin

While the discursive employment of the Nile could be argued to unite members through a shared goal of improving TWG in the region, it could also be argued to universalise women's experiences around its water. What is clear is that the Nile, in a sense, encompasses the *raison d'être* for the network and is hence a critical nodal point to examine. The following statement illustrates the Nile's centrality to the network;

Together, we recognize the unique and intrinsic social, cultural, ecological, and economic value of the Nile Basin and its essential role and relevance in all aspects of

our lives and communities. It is due to this shared heritage that we join together to elevate our voices in sisterhood, as peacemakers, mediators, and water stewards (WWDN, 2020).

Deconstructing this statement, the Nile is framed as a collective identity-marker which transcends time through emphasising its current role, its historical significance, and its potential futures through articulating the need to elevate voices in sisterhood to promote peace, conflict-prevention, and water protection. Noting particularly the employment of the sign of *sisterhood* in the Nile context, the concept could be understood as transgressing human-nature boundaries through extending the notion to include the waters of the Nile. Moreover, through positioning *women water leaders* as central to the future of the Nile, the future is envisioned as a sustainability in terms of water through appointing the sign “water stewards”, and in terms of institutionalised cooperation and peaceful coexistence through the signs “peacemakers” and “mediators”. In conclusion, the past, present, and future of the Nile are linked through the construction of *women water leaders*.

6. Discussion: Diving into the Theoretical Field

The analysis examined how the discourse is structured around certain nodal points which give meaning to each other and other signs of the discourse, for example by creating a specific identity around *women water leaders* as central to TWG in the Nile, and its future. The subject position is also given meaning through relational bonds between the signs *cooperation*, *peacebuilding* and *sisterhood* which emphasise a sense of solidarity of *women water leaders* in their roles as catalysts of cooperation who bring unity and mediation to negotiations, and in their work to further inclusivity in TWG in the Nile. However, there are some logics of exclusion at play in the discourse which foremost render grassroots-women largely invisible in the discourse as inclusivity, sisterhood and leadership is constructed as equal to professional career-women. These findings and more are discussed in the sections below.

6.1. Constructing a Feminist Discourse on Transboundary Water Governance in the Nile

This thesis asks how the *Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile*-network constructs a feminist discourse on TWG. In the following section the network's construction of a women-in-water identity, situatedness, inclusions and exclusions across borders, place, social identity makers, and human-nature boundaries, and its engagement with the notion of sisterhood will be discussed. The discussion does not claim to provide not a unitary, 'complete', or 'objective' answer to the question, as in DT, "the taking apart of discourse is always a project of radical possibility" (Shepherd, 2021, p. 32), instead the question is discussed through multiplicity and the recognition of subjectivity in constructing discourse theoretical research (ibid).

Dianne Rocheleau, one of the mothers of FPE, reflects on the emergence and evolution of FPE through decoloniality by emphasising research on "creating spaces of gender equality, *otherwise*" (2015, p. 57) within social movements. She succinctly describes FPE as embracing "the politics of *being, differently*" (ibid). Harris expands on this by asking how FPE might learn from feminist, decolonial, and post-colonial perspectives to "illuminate features and aspects of current environmental policies and practices that could be 'otherwise'" (2015, p. 160). Focusing on the articulations *otherwise* and *being differently*, this discussion will dive into the network's role in shaping identities around, and knowledge production on, TWG from the perspective of FPE. The discussion tackles how the network constructs a discourse which is *otherwise* and *differently*, but also how it neglects difference and reproduces hegemonic discourses.

6.2. De-centering Women Water Leaders: Intersectional Accounts

As FPE pays attention to embodiment, emotions and the production of, and tensions across, scales (Sultana, 2021, p. 157-158; Truelove, 2011, p. 144), dynamics between career-women and grassroots-women evoked by the articulations of *women water leaders*, *sisterhood* and *inclusivity* must be discussed further.

Appearing in the analysis on inclusions and exclusions in the network's identity construction was a line of difference between women as water leaders, and women as water users. The network creates space for women to be *otherwise* by appealing to the *differentiated* ecological knowledge of women through embodied experiences of water-collection. However, a reflexivity on women's varied experiences of water along social divisions and across scales, is inadequately accounted for. In this sense, the discourse generalises grassroots-women's knowledge of water by equating them with professional career-women's experiences with water. Through this generalisation, the discourse reinforces power dynamics beyond the category of gender. Furthermore, the promotion of inclusivity in decision-making is largely equated with the inclusion of *women water leaders*, without broadening the scope to the voices of grassroots-women in TWG, which strengthens the observation above.

Bringing in *sisterhood*, the discourse constructs political solidarity between the network-members, and while it does not fully render women who are not water leaders invisible, to actualise hooks' solidarity-sisterhood, *women water leaders* would need to be decentered, or vertically destabilised as a category, in the discourse. Constructing a feminist discourse on TWG through employing the concepts of *sisterhood* and *women water leaders* risks falling into association with essentializing and problematic feminisms unless coupled with a clearly articulated self-reflexivity on privileges and power-relations embedded in the network's own water leadership. Nevertheless, employing the concept of *sisterhood* in a TWG-context could create alternative feminist space for *being, otherwise* in relation to dominant discourses in TWG which will be further discussed in the section below.

The network's ambition to promote women's equal inclusion in TWG is occasionally rationalised along formulations which resemble hegemonic patriarchal, imperialistic, and developmentalist discourses on water (Harris, 2015, p. 165). hooks posit that "to develop political solidarity between women, feminist activists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture. We must define our own terms" (1986, p. 129). However, there are traces of hegemonic discourses on TWG throughout the materials. Circling back to Wong's (2016) finding considering the ineffectiveness of non-intersectional gender quotas in TWG, and that all-women forums in TWG proposed more inclusive outcomes, the WWDN-network does encourage the process of *being, differently* by creating a separatist women's forum. Yet as the network consists of elite-women who circulate knowledge amongst each other, non-professional grassroots knowledges, experiences and emotions are

not explicitly or formally heard. This focus on *women water leaders* constructs ‘professionalised activism’, a type of activism which has been questioned in relation to feminist transnational solidarity for lacking transformativeness of the lived experiences on the ground (Choi et al., 2023, p. 566).

6.3. Essentialisations and Envisioning Women and Water *Otherwise*

Emerging in the analysis was an essentialization of *women water leaders*’ contribution to TWG by celebrating them as peacebuilders and catalysts of cooperation. This framing seemingly aims to promote the member’s inclusion and equal participation in TWG decision-making. However, through this construction the network bypasses a reckoning with their members’ positions as practitioners of a political process in which cooperation and peacefulness might not serve their interests, or the interests of the people they represent, or the interests of marginalised communities. Reasoning, and recognising, that the governance of the Nile in its current capacity reproduces power relations of dominance and renders grassroots communities invisible, constructing its members as catalysts of cooperation might interfere with the network’s substantive notion of *women water leaders* as enhancers of inclusive TWG with more equitable and considerate outcomes.

On this note, through conjuncting the construction of unity through *sisterhood* and the reproduction of the water-peace discourse through framing women as mediators, it could be argued that the WWDN-network develops a depoliticized feminist discourse on TWG. Through envisioning women’s inclusion and equal participation as leading to cooperation, pragmatism and optimal solutions through unity, broader considerations of issues, and differentiated ecological knowledge. By constructing a unity of *women water leaders* in *sisterhood*, and by placing them at the core of solutions to TWG-issues and ambitions in the Nile, the network does construct an alternative to hegemonic discourses on TWG in the basin. However, this alternative reproduces the technocratic tendencies of dominant Nile-governance discourses.

Herein it is important to note that poststructuralist feminist approaches to discourse analysis recognises restrictions of the individual subjects’ possibilities as they “are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the régime of truth, of a particular period

and culture” (Hall, 1997, p. 55). In DT, these restrictions are claimed to be false, yet still restrictive to the extent that hegemonic discourses limit our ways of thinking through appearing as if they were ‘natural’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). However, a DT-approach, similarly to FPE (see section 3.2.), also “highlights the contingency of these norms. In doing so, it shines light on possibilities for being and acting otherwise – and for imagining more just and ethical conditions” (Gavey, 2011, p. 185). Considering this, the WWDN-network’s discourse could be understood contesting the ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980, pp. 23, 30) of hegemonic discourses as the network initiates an understanding of meanings’ contingency, indicating that a foundation for new and alternative ways of thinking is established.

It is important to be critical of the ways exclusions work in alternative imaginings. This is highlighted especially in FPE and DT by means of focusing on the ways power operates through constructions of inclusions and exclusions which reproduce, contest, or exacerbate marginalizations. Furthermore, this is important in TWG as women’s relationships to water at the local grassroots-level, if properly, thoroughly and sensibly considered, could transform ways of thinking about and interacting with water in more collaborative, sustainable and inclusive ways (Hayman et al., 2015, p. 194). Therefore, it is important to advance feminist discourses on TWG beyond a shallow conception of women’s differentiated relationships with water, and instead recognise complexities across scales. This however does not suggest a fragmentation of feminist organising. Rather, it suggests the necessity of hooks’ notion of sisterhood as a political solidarity between women which recognises differences within the workings towards collective goals. It also emphasises the necessity to, in the examined case, leverage a solidarity between women across scales, vertically and not solely horizontally. Introducing the notion of sisterhood is a hopeful initiation of such a process of opening up space for thinking *otherwise* and creating feminist alternatives to TWG in the Nile.

7. Conclusion: Diving Head-first into Research

This thesis set out to explore the WWDN-networks’ construction of a feminist discourse on TWG. The thesis’ topic and focus emerged when I stumbled upon the joint statement by the WWDN-network. I thought it was one of the most hope-inducing and beautiful things I have read. Particularly the notion of sisterhood in conjunction with water moved me. During my university studies I have written multiple essays and a research proposal on questions

surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, but I had never come across a text that moved me in this way. On a, even more, personal note, the joint statement was written in 2020 in Naivasha, a town renowned for its lake which I also visited in 2020. I felt that this further connected me to the network and their formulations. However, as the research process evolved, I increasingly found myself criticising the network, partly for their lack of grassroots-engagement, and partly because I felt they could be more active in articulating and expressing their visions for how women, or rather a feminist perspective considering intersectionality and grassroots-women, could be more deeply included in water diplomacy. These critiques are problematic for a number of reasons, firstly because they are formulated by me in my positionality as a white, western, woman who have very limited insights into the situated context and embodied experiences of both professional and grassroots-women in transboundary water governance in the Nile. Secondly, Hommes et al. (2023, p. 2) argue in relation to ‘New Water Justice Movements’ that we should not criticise progressive movements, but oppressive power-structures, a statement which resembles arguments made in feminist theory’s agency-structure debate, namely that there is a tendency to ask of women to do everything, to be perfectly inclusive and so on, which is neither productive nor fair (cf. Fraser, 1997). Lastly, my critique is problematic as it builds upon the assumption that the WWDN-network has feminist ambitions for TWG, which might represent my aspirations rather than reality, as the network aims to unite and bring together women working in water diplomacy in the Nile to build relationships among women, and to promote their collaboration and cooperation to enable solutions to water-issues across borders, not to construct an alternative discourse on TWG. Whilst these critiques are problematic, they are fundamentally rooted in my belief that a feminist discourse on TWG which dynamically connects grassroots-women and women in water diplomacy, and realises the full potential of the notion of sisterhood in human-water relationships, is possible. A belief which I did not have prior to engaging with the Women in Water Diplomacy in the Nile-network.

7.1. Streams forward

To build upon this thesis, there are multiple pathways, or rather streams, to follow. The gaps in the academic field of gendered TWG are vast, and there is a need to evolve both theory and empirical insights. Much can be gained by turning to the fields of ‘hydrosocial territories’, and ‘new water justice movements’. Herein there is a clear compatibility with

intersectional and gendered approaches and scales interrogated range from the global to the transboundary, and to the locally situated. Moreover, questions regarding silences repeatedly fluctuated in the process of conducting this analysis. Logics of difference and the workings of exclusions in gendered TWG discourses is a research gap which puzzled my mind during this research and if such research was conducted, significant insights to how power works in TWG-discourses would be gained. Such insights hold the potential to further transform the way we think about TWG, feminism, and power.

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