

# Women of Rivers

Feminist Political Ecology of Hydropower Development in  
Eastern Black Sea Region of Turkey



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# Abstract

Hydropower projects have rapidly increased in Eastern Black Sea Region of Turkey, putting local women's socio-environmental engagements with rivers in danger. This thesis examines the hydropower projects in the aforementioned region, from the Feminist Political Ecology perspective, with an intersectional look, and thus explores how the hydropower projects have resulted in reproducing social inequalities by impairing women's identities. Drawing on Feminist Political Ecology, this thesis concerns gendered environmental responsibilities and rights, identity, access and control over the river. Following the feminist methodology, the data is collected through nine semi-structured interviews and narrative walks as part of participant observation during the fieldwork, and is analyzed through narrative analysis. The analysis is based on the theoretical concepts and themes resulting from the narratives. This research demonstrates that local women's identities are closely interlinked with the river through their social and economic livelihoods and the senses of belonging, strength, and protectionism. Yet, the socio-political process of the hydropower plants, such as privatization, decision-making, and construction phases, had changed women's engagements with the river by damaging the environment and social relations. By stating that women's livelihoods create a critical part of their identities, the thesis concludes that hydropower projects reproduce social inequality through loss of livelihoods, loss of identities, deepened social exclusion, and cultural alienation.

**Keywords:** Feminist Political Ecology, Hydropower Development in Turkey, Social Inequality, Gendered Livelihoods, Narrative Analysis

Words: 20,035

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>AFAD</b>	Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey
<b>DHA</b>	Demirören News Agency
<b>DSI</b>	State Hydraulic Affairs <sup>1</sup>
<b>EBSR</b>	Eastern Black Sea Region
<b>EI</b>	Environmental Impact Assessment
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>FPE</b>	Feminist Political Ecology
<b>HEPPs</b>	Hydroelectric Power Plants
<b>IHA</b>	International Hydropower Association
<b>IPCC</b>	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

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<sup>1</sup> *Devlet Su İşleri* in Turkish.

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# 1 Introduction



“Do you see?” asked Zehra, a 67-years-old woman from Arhavi village in Eastern Black Sea Region of Turkey, showing me the river stream that flows through the village. “Do you see how our river is crying? She has been crying for years now since they took her breath. It was not only her breath but mine”. She continued:

*“[...] My mother and her father’s, all our ancestors’. That river was both our past and future, and they destroyed it with dirty machines. The hardest part was to be ignored by the big machines. Yet we were, and are, here. We live. Seven years ago, they put a knife in the river’s heart and ripped it off. I still feel the pain in my heart.”*

(Zehra, 2021, Arhavi)<sup>2</sup>

This was the story told by Zehra during our narrative walk. However, as she also highlights, everyone in the community has their own voice in this story. The word *water* means many things for women in Eastern Black Sea Region (EBSR hereafter) in Turkey. Rivers establish their livelihoods and are crucial aspects of their identities and cultural lives (Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019). Recently, rivers have also become a shared struggle for local women<sup>3</sup> over numerous run-of-river hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs hereafter) in villages of EBSR, that the water privatization policies pursue. Local women have made a stand for the privatized rivers of their lands over the years, and they continue to resist the impacts of the HEPPs which have already started operating and the ones that are underway (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> The quotation is extracted from the data collected for this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “local women” refers to the women who live in rural areas in this study.

Hydropower is developing rapidly in Turkey (Yaman & Haşıl, 2018). Over the last three decades, there has been a push from the government to privatize rivers. Thus, the understanding of water transformed into a commodity rather than something that belongs to the public (Işlar, 2012a; 2012b; Harris & Işlar, 2013). Due to its abundance, the rivers of EBSR are particularly threatened by large-scale HEPP projects carried out by the government and private companies' cooperation (Gökdemir et al., 2012; Yaka 2017). However, such an approach that recognizes rivers only as a resource without concern for its ecological and sociological impacts on local communities is catastrophic.

Understanding women's long-lasting struggle within local communities requires particular attention to the identities generated by social relations and daily experience with water (Radel, 2012). As such, struggles over the rivers of EBSR should not be simplified as environmental struggles over nature alone. It should be acknowledged that local women also struggle over “the recognition” of their livelihoods, cultural lives, and rights to access to water (Işlar, 2012b, p. 318). The lack of identity recognition is illustrated in political and social aspects of everyday life by creating different ways of environmental and social degradation, which eventually lead to an increased level of social inequality (Swyngedouw, 2006; Schlosberg, 2007; Işlar, 2012b).

Research shows that besides local women's established spiritual bond, they heavily rely on water for their livelihoods and constitute the majority in agricultural activities (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2016; Hill et al., 2017; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019). However, the government, development practitioners, and researchers paid limited or no attention to these projects' gendered impacts. Many findings are often presented as affecting the whole community in the same way without a detailed gender analysis. Research on the impacts of HEPPs in EBSR is surprisingly limited, and the connection of identity and livelihoods is missing.

In response to the increasing local resistance, most research positioned itself within the social movements field and tried to answer “*why?*” (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; Yaka, 2017; 2019; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019). Their findings often highlighted the motivation and the strategies of women's environmental

movement against extensive hydropower projects in the villages of EBSR. However, their positionality urged me to ask the scholars another question: *Then what happened?* What happened later in the conflict when companies bought the water rights and people had to live with HEPPs? It should be strongly acknowledged that the problem cannot only be explained by the reason behind women's prominent opposition against HEPPs, but also what has been happening since they opposed. What happened after the researchers and machines left the conflict site, and what remained for the local women of EBSR of Turkey?

## 1.1 Research Questions and Aim

To understand the research problem, one should emphasize the critical notions of Feminist Political Ecology: gendered environmental practices, the connection between women's identity and livelihoods, and gendered access to natural resources. The purpose of this research is to explore and examine the impacts of HEPPs on local women's identities to gain a deeper understanding of the consequences of hydropower development over social inequalities. To that end, the research is guided by the following research question:

How do hydropower projects reproduce social inequality by impacting local women's identities in Eastern Black Sea Region of Turkey?

To answer the research question, first, there is a need to explore the connection between identity generation and rivers in the thesis context. Further, a bridge between accessing rivers and women's livelihoods, which I argue is vital to understand their identities, must be provided. This helps the research focus on the context while exploring it from different angles and understanding the changing environmental experiences from the Feminist Political Ecology perspective. The sub-questions are as follows:

How are rivers and women's identities interlinked in the context?

How does access to rivers affect women's gendered livelihoods in the context?

By exploring how social inequality is reproduced in the region when HEPPs impaired women's identities, this thesis aims to:

1. Provide a detailed gender impact analysis of HEPPs in EBSR of Turkey, highlighting the loss of gendered livelihoods.
2. Provide a deeper gender perspective on Turkey's environmental rights by connecting the Feminist Political Ecology themes with the historical neoliberal trends as water privatization.
3. Contribute to theoretical discussions of Feminist Political Ecology by providing a bridge between identities and livelihoods and highlighting how socio-environmental damage caused by HEPPs impacts women's identities.

The aims are fulfilled by using the fieldwork data gathered from interviews and participant observation. The fieldwork was held in Arhavi, located in EBSR of Turkey. The connection between local women's identity and livelihoods, and the impact of gendered access to rivers are revealed through narrative analysis. Under the themes regarding the gendered implications of HEPPs, the paths that show how social inequality reproduced in the region are explored and presented from the Feminist Political Ecology perspective.

## 1.2 Literature Review and Justification of the Research

This thesis is situated in the development studies field, exploring the impacts of hydropower projects on the environment and the social inequalities that local communities face. The patterns followed by the government and local communities implies that these social inequality practices are reshaped and recontextualized at the intersection of gendered access to the resource problem, loss of livelihoods, and changing landscapes of local cultures (İşlar, 2012b; Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; Sayan, 2017). Therefore, I hereby present the justification for this thesis, and demonstrate how the related literature contributed and inspired this research.

Previous studies on hydropower development in Turkey often used neoliberalism as the historical trend to frame the resource access problem (Kibaroglu et al., 2009; Işlar, 2012a; 2012b; Harris & Işlar, 2013; Kadirbeyoglu & Bakan, 2019). Harris & Işlar (2013, p. 55) recognized the resource access problem as a result of Turkey's water privatization policies that neoliberal vision encountered. Kadirbeyoglu & Bakan (2019, p. 81) further moved the discussion to another level and highlighted that the effects of neoliberal policies had been uneven, tending to increase women's burden. Therefore, neoliberalism is found critical to understand the background of the hydropower conflict. In contributing to that tradition, this study will be no exception as it uses water privatization in contextualizing the socio-political background.<sup>4</sup>

Extensive hydropower projects have encountered critiques regarding their environmental consequences besides the social ones (McCully, 2001; Başkaya et al., 2011). Therefore, the research field's significance in Turkey has increased over time due to the increased ecological damage. Literature shows that the primary effect of HEPPs across a river is the changing water flow and deterioration of streams (Hay, 1994; Berkun, 2010; Yaman & Haşıl, 2018). Berkun (2010, pp. 324-327) extensively stated that HEPPs damage water quality by raising sedimentation and saltiness due to the construction and operation phases. Additionally, the deforestation resulting from clearing lands for projects was found as one of the crucial problems. Considering water and land are vital for agriculture in EBSR, the reports concluded that these damages result in limited access to water and loss of livelihoods (World Commission on Dams, 2000).

Particularly after the 2000s, local protests started to arise due to the government's lack of recognition over local communities' rights, cultures, and shared struggles rooted in environmental degradation (Işlar, 2012b; Sayan, 2017; 2019; Şengül et al., 2017; Kadirbeyoglu & Bakan, 2019). The rising conflict between the government and local communities is becoming of more interest in research, especially to critical scholars within political science and social

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 2.1.

movement studies such as Mine Işlar<sup>5</sup>, Özge Yaka<sup>6</sup>, and Ramazan Caner Sayan<sup>7</sup>. The previous research in the field that comes closest to this thesis's positionality is Mine Işlar's (2012b) research that explored the local communities' struggle over the lack of recognition of their culture and water rights in Turkey. Işlar (2012b, pp. 319-324) further argued that hydropower development has separated rivers from their cultural, social, and natural connections with the communities. Thus, the practice of water control resulted in social injustice. The author's arguments related to the power over natural resources were extremely useful for the means of this thesis. However, Işlar's work (2012b) is missing the intersectional approach considering many findings are presented as having the same impact on the whole community without a detailed gender analysis, which is critical in this context.

Several studies in the literature explored the interlinkage between gendered access to natural resources and loss of livelihoods (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; FAO, 2016; Şengül, 2018). According to the FAO report (2016, p. 10), restricted access to water is extremely harmful to those engaged in agriculture the most, particularly women. Considering local women in EBSR are involved in the cultivation of various water-dependent crops such as hazelnuts and tea plants, it is highlighted that access to natural resources carries critical importance (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; FAO, 2016).

The relation between HEPPs and social inequality is a topic that the literature and policies have undervalued. The here-presented Turkish case is not an exception in this discussion. Only a few studies focused on the women's bond with water concerning the inequality reproduction (Braun, 2005; 2015; Bennet et al., 2008; Yaka, 2017). However, even though the research on spirituality, identity, and hydropower is limited, the findings are significant enough to be considered.

Livelihoods are, without any doubt, a critical part of women's lives when discussing their long-term well-being (Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019; Socheta,

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<sup>5</sup> See Işlar, 2012a; 2012b; 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See Yaka, 2017; 2019; 2020.

<sup>7</sup> See Sayan, 2017; 2019.

2020). Identity transformation is also found to be one of the consequences of women's changing relationship with nature due to the extensive water projects. Studies (Yaka, 2017; 2019, Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019) found that in EBSR, the environment is highly engaged with women's understanding of life, culture, and religion.

*“Struggles over nature, land, and meaning are simultaneous struggles over identity and rights.”*

(Braun & Wainwright, 2001, p. 59)

Highlighting the importance of connecting identities and environmental change, this thesis strongly defends the argument made by Braun & Wainwright (2001, p. 59). Previous research in the field clarified that the studies focusing on gendered impacts of HEPPs or the environmental struggle in EBSR are extremely limited. The literature review also highlights the notable lack of gender inclusiveness in the Turkish context (Mangura, 2020a). What makes this thesis different from the literature is the Feminist Political Ecology ground and the intersectional approach that reveal the gendered impacts of HEPPs and show the paths leading to the social inequality reproduction in the region. Therefore, this study's significance lies in its aim to shed light on the gendered implications of hydropower projects while supporting gender-inclusive development.

### 1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis has six chapters in order. Following Chapter 1, the thesis continues to Chapter 2 and explains the research context for readers' ease of understanding the background. The contextualization focuses on (i) the hydropower development and privatization of rivers in Turkey, (ii) the geographical considerations of EBSR, and (iii) the gender status. Chapter 3 discusses this research's theoretical roots, Feminist Political Ecology with an intersectional approach, and draws a specific framework to explore the social inequality reproduction. The methodology is introduced in Chapter 4, and the data is analyzed in Chapter 5. The thesis is finalized in Chapter 6 with the conclusion and suggestions for further research.

## 2 Contextual Considerations

It is essential to emphasize the context in which the research is taking place before continuing. This section lays out the critical points regarding the socio-political and geographical background of EBSR. First, hydropower development is introduced and connected to the water privatization policies in Turkey. Further, the geographical background of EBSR, including gender status, is explained to capture its significance for this research.

### 2.1 Hydropower Development in Turkey: Privatized Rivers

While nature is the realm where local communities' resistance to neoliberal trends has proven to be particularly pronounced, the realm of environmental politics should not be thought of as external to neoliberal practices (Heynen & Robbins, 2005; McCarthy, 2005; Harris, 2009). That strongly includes the privatization policies regarding the Turkish rivers. In this thesis, I use the definition by Peck et al. (2010, p. 184) and acknowledge neoliberalism as “a politically guided development of the market rule and commodification.”

In the 1980s, neoliberal shifts started to appear in Turkey to overcome critical economic deprivation (Kibaroglu et al., 2009; Işlar, 2012b; Harris & Işlar 2013). Following the shift, the state has moved from being the provider of electricity and water to being the regulator of the business investments for these services (Peck, 2001; Kibaroglu et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Harris & Işlar, 2013). This transformation impacted the dynamics between the government and its citizens since the distinction between public and private is “blurred” (Işlar, 2012b, p. 320).

For the newly established neoliberal policies in Turkey, rivers have become central testing grounds (Swyngedouw, 2005; Bakker, 2015; Erensu, 2016; 2018). The government and business sector considered privatization as a progressive

solution to Turkey's energy deficit, securing its geopolitical position as an energy corridor between Europe and Asia (Kibaroglu et al., 2009; Işlar, 2012b). Since hydropower was seen as a “clean and green energy alternative” to natural gas and fossil fuel by the EU (Dalkır & Şeşen 2011, p. 6), the Turkish government initiated a reform package that promotes privatizing rivers to generate electricity.

*“Now the rivers of Black Sea will not flow in vain anymore, thanks to these hydroelectric power plants.”*

(Mehmet Hilmi Güler, 2020, interview)<sup>8</sup>

As it is visible in Güler's statement, the perception of water from the government officials' perspective has transformed from the publicly-owned resource into a commodity (Erensü, 2016). The government statements, including but not limited to Güler's, show that they treat water only as a natural resource that makes a profit. The government encourages companies to take advantage of rivers for energy production and boosting competitiveness in the sector (Uzlu et al., 2011; Melikoğlu, 2013).

In 2001, an amendment to the Turkish Electricity Market Act<sup>9</sup> allowed private companies to lease the use rights to rivers for generating hydropower (State Hydraulic Affairs (DSI), 2003 cited in Işlar, 2012b, p. 320). To support electricity generation and increase the private sector investment, the Turkish government has embarked on a large-scale effort to promote HEPPs. This amendment allowed Turkish rivers to be leased for 49 years to private companies to build HEPP facilities. As also stated by Işlar (2012a, p. 377), water use rights do not grant freehold but rather resemble leasehold. They are privately owned rights and thus lead to privatization. The privatization of rivers in the thesis context is defined as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> Güler is a member of Turkish Parliament and Justice and Development Party, which is the ruling party of the Turkish government. *AK Parti (AKP)* in Turkish. This statement is extracted from Güler's interview about the hydropower development initiatives in EBSR. For the whole statement, see Kurban, 2020.

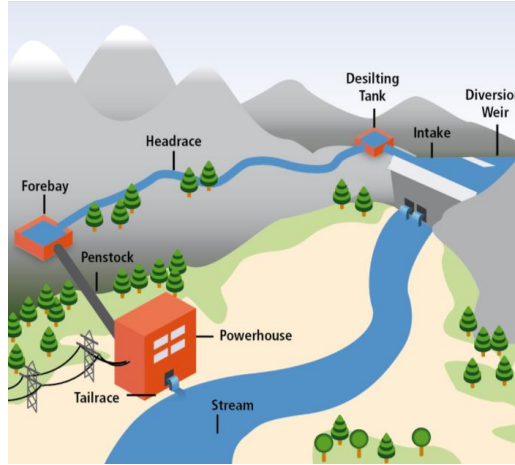
<sup>9</sup> *Su Kullanım Hakkı* in Turkish.

*“Privatization process through which activities, resources, and the like, which had not been formally privately owned, managed or organized, are taken away from whoever owned them before – and transferred to a new property configuration that is based on some form of 'private' ownership or control.”*

(Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 82)

The government's role is to evaluate hydropower projects' feasibility. Following the approval of projects' Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization grants a license to the company obliging the HEPP's responsibility. The access and control over rivers for 49 years raises particular accountability, responsibility, and social injustice issues (İşlar, 2012a; 2012b; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019). Even though community information meetings are subject to be held, and EIAs are taking place, the accountability and the transparency of the system are still questioned. The state's lack of competent monitoring enables the private sector to implement environmentally and socially destructive projects.

While the scale of each effort was considerably small, the overall action was massive. According to the International Hydropower Association (2020, p. 31), Turkey has become one of Europe's leading hydropower markets due to the country's plentiful resources, supportive government, and approving policy framework. HEPPs are the type of plants that are installed as the persuasion of privatization policies in the region. They are called the “run-of-river” type and are smaller than 15 Megawatt installed capacities (Kumar et al., 2011, p. 451). In HEPPs, running water is diverted from a flowing river and guided down a channel, or penstock, which leads to a generation house. The force of moving water spins a turbine and drives a generator. The water is fed back into the main river further downstream (Figure 2.1) (Ulaş, 2010; Yılmaz et al., 2012).



**Figure 2.1.** A typical HEPP. (Source: Kumar et al., 2011, p. 451)

Even though HEPPs are intended to be environmentally friendly, that does not necessarily mean they have no environmental impacts. As Kumar et al. (2011, p. 461) emphasized, the extent to which HEPPs have adverse effects depends on geographical and demographic differences. In Turkey, many of these HEPPs nevertheless lead to environmental destruction and social conflicts since water is diverted from its bed for kilometers without sufficient flow being released to the river basin (Berkun, 2010). In these instances, the connection between downstream and upstream parts of the river is blocked, restricting access to the water and livelihoods (Yaman & Haşıl, 2018).

The political background leads to the conflict between communities, the government, and companies. In the following section, I present and specify EBSR where HEPPs intensify. Further, the section explains the gender profile of the region, which is critical in the thesis context considering local women are on the frontline.

## 2.2 Geographical Background of EBSR

Black Sea Region is one of the seven main geographical regions of Turkey. Marmara Region borders the region to the west, Central Anatolia Region to the south, Eastern Anatolia Region and the Republic of Georgia to the south, and

Black Sea to the north. EBSR is the eastern part of the region, which includes seven provinces<sup>10</sup> and is located in Turkey's northeastern part (Figure 2.2). More than half of the population in the region lives in rural areas (Yılmaz, 2015). This makes EBSR the only region in Turkey where more people live in rural parts than urban areas (ibid.).



**Figure 2.2.** Map of EBSR (Source: Somuncu et al., 2019, p. 68)

EBSR has a steep, rocky coast with rivers that fall through the valleys of the coastal ranges. Çoruh River, which is cutting back through the Pontic Mountains, has numerous streams that flow in broad basins of EBSR. Since the mountains are parallel to the coast, villages and towns are squeezed in a narrow coastal line between Black Sea and high mountain ridges (Zaman, 2018).

Villages, where local communities usually live, are often located at densely forested high valleys with many rivers surrounding them (Çapık et al., 2012; Zaman, 2018). Access is mainly limited to valleys because mountains form an almost unbroken wall separating the coast from the interior (Figure 2.3). Due to these geographical situations, EBSR historically has been isolated from Anatolia (ibid.). This geographical situation is vital for understanding the local communities' unique bond with nature and water in shaping their identities and how they have preserved their identities for a long time (Yaka, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> The provinces are Ordu, Giresun, Gümüşhane, Trabzon, Bayburt, Rize and Artvin.



**Figure 2.3.** The shape of the mountains in EBSR (Source: Zaman, 2018, p. 323)

Rains, rivers, and mountains are the highlights of the region. The abundance of natural resources as rivers opens the region to be one of the most beneficial areas for agriculture, husbandry, and hydropower development. Even though Turkey has 25 different hydraulic basins, EBSR has greater advantages in HEPP potential that attracts the private sector (Çapık et al., 2012). However, due to the rapid hydropower development in the region, not only the rivers that have sharp streams but also the rivers with low flow rates have started to be sites for HEPP constructions (İşlar, 2012b). Currently, there are more than 246 HEPPs installed in the villages of EBSR and numerous projects in the licensing phase to come (BBC Türkçe, 2020). The region has started to be called “the HEPP Sea”<sup>11</sup> by the local community to emphasize the severity (Koçer & Kovan, 2018).

As one of the critical consequences of extensive HEPPs, environmental damage has alarmingly increased in the villages. The degradation rate was visible through the increased number of floods, landslides, and deforestation (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), 2020). Even though the impacts of climate change need to be acknowledged here, Yüksek et al.’s (2012, p. 810) research showed that climate change has not yet had a significant impact on the environment in EBSR. Therefore, approaching floods and several natural disasters in the region only as “unpredictable climate incidents”<sup>12</sup> would be

<sup>11</sup> *HES Denizi* in Turkish.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase “unpredictable climate incidents” was used by the Interior Affairs Minister Suleyman Soylu and Agriculture and Forestry Minister Bekir Pakdemirli in a joint statement they made on 24 Aug 2020 after public

incorrect. If water is restrained in numerous different spots on a river for HEPPs to produce energy, its inevitable effects on the habitat make natural disasters predictable eventually (Mangura, 2020b).

As a response to the conflict in EBSR, local protests have started to rise quickly since the 2000s (Şengül, 2018, p.60). Although the HEPP conflict was a problem that the whole country was facing, the protests were concentrated in EBSR and led by local women (Şengül, 2018; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019; Yaka, 2019).

### 2.2.1 Gender Status of EBSR

By the increasing migration from rural to urban in EBSR over the past years, the male population has left the villages to work in the cities, and the rural areas have become a place where women constitute the demographic majority (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; Aslan & Işıl, 2014). The local women who stayed in the villages have been the ones who continued “the traditional forms of production” in rural areas, which are predominantly agriculture and husbandry (Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019, p. 81). This process positioned them as livelihood providers for household members and has decreased their dependence on the household's men.

It should be acknowledged that the perception of women has not changed as a reaction to the migration flow. Historically, the women's perceived role has been shaped around engaging in agriculture and husbandry (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013). A significant contribution to the household economy comes from women's labor in fields regionally. They are engaged in hazelnut production, tea plantations, and maize cultivation, thus, highly dependent on land and water quality (ibid.) However, the situation lacks statistical data considering most women's work is informal (Şengül et al., 2017).

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blamed HEPPs as the reason for intensive floods in the region. For the whole speech, see Demirören News Agency (DHA), 2020.

Besides water's cultural context, local women also benefit from rivers for their livelihoods. Streams have been the irrigation source for agriculture and husbandry, and streamsides are also the sites for women to fetch water for their households (Şengül, 2018). Further, rivers create a particular microclimate which has critical importance for agricultural development. Considering the impacts of HEPPs on the environment, they have decreased the socio-economical level of EBSR while increasing inequalities (ibid). Therefore, this conflict in villages has affected not only women's cultural bonds but also their relations with their economic livelihoods. The inevitable environmental impacts of HEPPs were also documented as one of the leading reasons for women's opposition against HEPPs by various research (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; Aksu, 2016; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019).

The socio-economic inequalities are increasing in EBSR, according to Gazioğlu's research conducted in the field (2014, pp. 97-99). Despite women's dominance in agriculture and husbandry makes them powerful and reserves a legitimate social position within the community, they are still economically and socially vulnerable in the face of "society's patriarchal tradition" (Yaka, 2017, p. 8). For example, the FAO report (2016, p. 31) highlighted that women usually do not have ownership of the land they work on and live on. They are also traditionally excluded from family inheritance, and thus their dependence was on the male of the household for maintaining the land (Yavuz & Şendeniz, 2013; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019).

## 3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a narrative approach using the theoretical frameworks to explore and analyze how social inequality is reproduced by impacting women's identities in EBSR. The dominant theoretical frame used is Feminist Political Ecology sharpened by insights from Intersectionality. In this chapter, I argue for the utility of connecting these approaches for gender analysis of HEPPs. These interlinked analytical approaches make visible the experienced realities of local women and the environment that are traditionally rendered invisible in dominant ideologies as neoliberal visions.

Following, *Feminist Political Ecology Theory* and *Intersectionality Approach* within which this thesis is grounded are presented. These two theoretical frameworks help provide a more thoroughly analyzed answer to the research question. The critical Feminist Political Ecology themes in relation to the research problem are further explored in this chapter under *the Reproduction of Social Inequality* section, where the connection between identity, environment, and inequality is highlighted and conceptualized.

### 3.1 Feminist Political Ecology

To fully comprehend how HEPPs reproduce social inequality in EBSR, this thesis draws on concepts and concerns put forward by Feminist Political Ecology. Feminist Political Ecology (FPE hereafter) was developed as a subfield of Political Ecology in the 1990s by the feminist scholars within the discipline (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Under the inspiration of the feminist movements of the 1970s, feminist theorists started to emphasize the much-needed attention of gender over issues of nature and society in the natural resource-based livelihoods context (Elmhirst, 2015; Buechler & Hanson, 2015; Sundberg, 2017). FPE begins from the premise that environmental change is not a neutral process but rather

arises through gendered political processes, which eventually increases inequalities (Elmhirst, 2011;2015). Further, the theory makes a significant commitment towards dealing with social inequality and marginalization due to gendered axes (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Watts, 2000; Cole, 2017; Sundberg, 2017).

FPE's core understanding towards reproducing social inequality lies in its perspective on how environment, society, and identities are interlinked. Feminist scholars as Sundberg (2017, p. 1) and Elmhirst (2011, p. 131; 2015, p. 523) argued that social identities are constituted through social relations with nature and everyday material practices, which is the heart of this thesis. As Elmhirst (2015, p. 522) emphasized, women and men share different responsibilities within society due to the perceived socio-cultural norms, thus, experience the environment differently. Therefore, they often have "differentiated access and control" over natural resources (Robbins, 2012, p. 64). However, those differences should not be acknowledged as physical appearance or psychological strength. Further, those differences should be read as the results of structural positions connected with labor and environment and shaped around respective cultural identities and social realms (Rocheleau et al., 1996).

FPE has developed three sub-disciplines: ecofeminism, feminist science, and feminist critiques of development <sup>13</sup> (Sundberg, 2017, p. 3). This thesis positions itself within the third body as a feminist critique of hydropower projects. Its focus lays on gendered practices within the neo-liberalized nature (Bakker, 2015). As Shiva & Mies (1993, pp. 76-77) discussed, this particular sub-discipline resulted from rapid neo-liberalization practices across the globe and concerns how women have been marginalized and impaired by sustainable development projects. However, by embracing Mohanty's (2003, p. 22) strong criticism over categorizing gender in analysis, I reflect in this thesis that women are not acknowledged as victims, which is a homogenizing approach that neglects the diversity of women's identities, experiences, and knowledge.

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<sup>13</sup> See, Diamond & Orenstein, 1990 and Sundberg, 2017 for an overview of the different sub-disciplines of FPE.

*“The phrase ‘women as a category of analysis’ refers to the crucial assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis.”*

(Mohanty, 2003, p. 22)

The feminist critique of development further examines the ways social inequality is reproduced and feminized when women’s identities and their agency of knowledge are damaged and neglected. Braun’s research (2015) revealed how large water infrastructure projects cause environmental change and limit indigenous women’s access to natural resources. She found that the loss of livelihoods had a considerable impact on their identities by decreasing their ability to provide for their family, destroying their social and spiritual spheres, and more<sup>14</sup>.

*“As feminists, we want to represent the lives of [...] women and to give them some opportunity to represent themselves, their problems, and their solutions, while recognizing that only partial success in these aims is possible. [...] There will not be fully understanding without these voices.”*

(Townsend 2005, p. 14)

FPE scholars draw a bead on social inequality in both theory and practice and are intrigued by the identity-environment connection. This thesis is influenced by Rocheleau et al.’s (1996, pp. 10-14) conceptualization of social inequality reproduction, which is explained thoroughly in *Chapter 3.3*. Besides, I treat FPE as not only a tool for analysis but also for methodology in this research. As Townsend (2005, p. 14) emphasized, being informed by feminist objectives, strategies, and practice carries critical importance when one embraces FPE. Even though FPE includes various methodologies, many feminist scholars often use fieldwork and narratives while stressing “situational knowledge” and the importance of hearing the subjects’ voices (Haraway, 1988, pp. 581-596; Elmhirst, 2011, p. 130). As a feminist researcher myself, this thesis contributes to that

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<sup>14</sup> See, Braun, 2015 for more detailed analysis of findings in its specific context.

tradition through feminist methodology, which is introduced and discussed in *Chapter 4*.

Overall, FPE is found significant in exploring the research problem. Therefore, using FPE provides not only the conceptual and methodological tools this study needs but also develops feminist critique towards water privatization projects.

## 3.2 FPE and Intersectional Approach

Since I explore women's identities and everyday life experiences, an intersectional approach combined with FPE is needed to avoid “generalizing women” (Mohanty, 2003, p.22). Intersectionality is a framework from gender studies that focuses on the interconnections among diverse dimensions of social relationship and identity generation (Davis, 2008; Lykke, 2010). The central theoretical emphasis put in the thesis is to “acknowledge the differences among women” when studying inequalities (Davis, 2008, p. 70).

Even though intersectionality evolved from a need to avoid homogenizing women from the global south by post-colonial feminist scholars, there is a particular increase in gender and water studies that follow through FPE and intersectionality (Harris, 2009; Sultana, 2011; Braun, 2015; Elmhirst, 2015). Intersectionality in research concerned with water development projects illustrates how gender and other power axes appear accordingly with the socio-ecological destruction of the environment (Truelove, 2019). The combination, thus, helps to reveal how intersectional relations, identities, and social inequalities are developed in connection with the environmental damage caused by hydropower projects.

Intersectionality offers a significant perspective to examine local women's everyday experiences. As McCall (2005, p. 1782) explained thoroughly, the approach reveals how positions and relations within a society and political process shape women's experiences with water in various axes of inequalities. While doing so, it further highlights women's mutually constructed identities with water.

For example, Braun's research (2015) found that water development projects in Lesotho deepened the social inequality by emphasizing indigenous women who worked in agriculture and those who did not were impacted differently. Intersectionality makes visible how changing environmental landscapes reshape every women's identities differently.

Braun (2015, p. 22) noted that while intersectionality looks at the complexities of identities in various contexts such as culture and class, the environment has mostly gone unconsidered. FPE highlights the environment, explaining how resource struggles and their consequences are gendered, how the environment and gender are mutually constructed (Truelove, 2011; Braun, 2015). When combined, intersectionality works as a common platform for feminist research concerning identity transformation. By integrating intersectionality, FPE examines how environmental resource struggles are sites for reproducing gendered social inequalities. In the thesis context, it helps to understand that not every local woman in the region is affected by hydropower development in the same way or at the same level.

### 3.3 Reproduction of Social Inequality

Before presenting a deeper conceptual path to explore the reproduction of inequalities, one crucial question remains in need to be answered. Which is, as Sen (1992) puts, *inequality of what?* There are various dimensions of social inequality; thus, a clear definition has yet to be developed (Binelli et al., 2015). Inequality is a concept that varies over the context and problem. Therefore, in an effort to answer the question, this study refers to social inequality as a relational process in society due to "women's differentiated water access," knowledge, and experiences that connect their identities with water (Ahlers & Zwarteveen, 2009, p. 10).

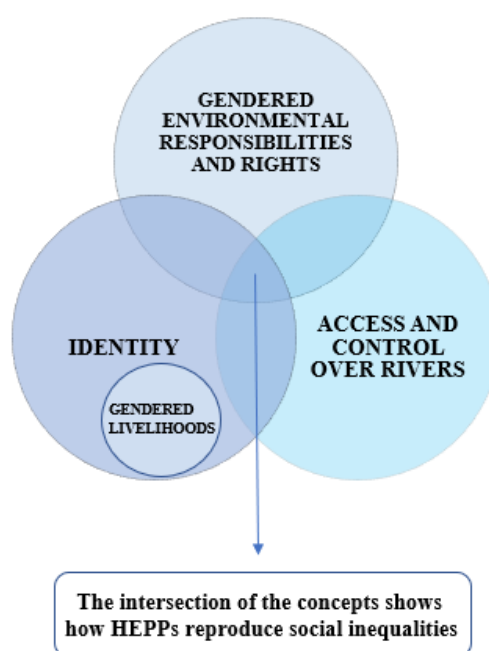
The reproduction of social inequality is the core problem of the thesis. This notion takes its leave from Braun's (2015, p. 27) work, in which she revealed hydropower projects' role in increasing current inequalities. She argued that women's identities and livelihoods are interlinked due to gendered responsibilities

and are exposed to environmental destruction. As seen from that research, FPE allows us to evaluate the (re)produced social inequalities theoretically:

*“Feminist Political Ecology [...] identifies how inequality is reproduced when women’s environmental engagements are neglected or damaged.”*

(Sundberg, 2017, p. 6)

To further explain and answer my research questions, I use one of the core themes<sup>15</sup> of FPE, which is *gendered environmental responsibilities and rights*. The theme was introduced by Rocheleau et al. (1996, pp. 10-14) to understand socio-ecological changes. The following subsections first theorize the gendered responsibilities to capture already existing inequalities. Following, it connects women’s identities with water and livelihoods. Finally, access to water is discussed, which I argue is the main obstacle by HEPPs. The framework is as follows:



**Figure 3.1.** The concepts used in this thesis to answer the research question (Author’s illustration)

<sup>15</sup> FPE has three core themes which are environmental knowledge, gendered environmental responsibilities and rights, and gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism. The themes were introduced by Rocheleau et al. (1996). However, not all themes were found necessary in this thesis since the science of survival and women’s activism are not in the research’s scope. See Rocheleau et al. (1996, pp. 9-29) for more detail about the core themes of FPE.

### 3.3.1 Gendered Environmental Responsibilities and Rights

Identities are the focus of this thesis and are generated through women's experiences with the environment. Therefore, before conceptualizing identity's link to the environment, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities must be introduced. They are particularly relevant in detecting existing inequalities and understanding why accessing rivers is crucial for women and how identities are shaped around them. As argued by Rocheleau et al. (1996, p. 10), this reflects and stresses the differentiated responsibilities shared by men and women "to procure and manage resources for the household and the community." Therefore, there is a visible gendered division regarding access to and control over natural resources, environmental processes, and the distribution of impacts.

In terms of gendered responsibilities, women are perceived as responsible for engaging with water and providing environmental maintenance to a broader extent than men in many societies (Rocheleau et al., 1996). For example, while men are often perceived as belonging to the workplace, women are responsible for carrying water home to use it in agriculture alongside their household duties. They are further responsible for maintaining a healthy environment in households, such as cleaning, cooking, and other activities that center water. But most significantly, they are engaged in agricultural activities and are responsible for providing livelihoods for their families (*ibid.*).

Women have limited legal rights to exercise and control natural resources, albeit they are recognized as responsible for water by society. In this context, I define water rights (use rights of rivers) as "rightful demands to use (part of) a flow of a river and to take part in decision-making" (Beccar et al., 2002, p. 3), particularly when HEPPs are implemented. FPE highlights the power relations in combination with gendered rights. The relations between river users and companies can quickly turn into conflicts due to gendered rights and power relations.

As responsibilities, environmental rights are also "gendered spatially" (Rocheleau et al., 1996, p. 10). They are defined as either legal or custom. Scholars argue that women in rural areas generally hold customized rights based

on practice while men are associated with legal rights. That means, in rural areas, women are not the legal owners of the land they cultivate. It is often men of the household, such as husband or father, who are the land's legal owners (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Elmhirst, 2015; Sundberg, 2017).

The responsibilities and rights ground this research to see the pre-existing situation and further understand the interlinkage between water, gendered livelihoods, and identities.

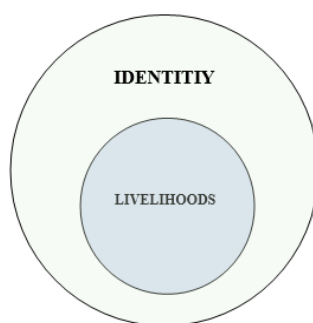
### 3.3.2 Identity, Water, and Livelihoods

Identities are generated through one's everyday life practices and social relations (Haraway, 1988; Butler, 2004; Sundberg, 2004). In this thesis, by engaging Radel's (2012, pp. 64-66) definition, I refer to identities as the social constructions of individuals' connection with their environments through various channels, including but not limited to their livelihoods in the context of a particular socio-political setting.

The new trend on FPE focuses on the implications of environmental destruction caused by development projects on women's livelihoods. However, the pathway they follow may remain insufficient in some cases as it neglects intersectionality and identity. The pathway for analysis is often presented as development projects caused extensive environmental destruction that women's livelihoods depend on; thus, losing their livelihoods results in women's impoverishment (Carr, 2015). Even though this is not a completely wrong assumption, the challenge needs to be acknowledged. The challenge for the FPE perspective is to "guide between an entire materialist approach over water and the complete concentration on identity" (Jackson & Chattopadhyay, 2000, p. 147). Jackson & Chattopadhyay (2000, p. 147) emphasized the much-needed bridge between identity and livelihoods by arguing loss of livelihoods also results in loss of identities.

Indeed, loss of livelihoods is significantly interrelated with women's identity, considering their cultural and spiritual bond and perceived responsibilities with water. In *Chapter 2.2*, I mention how HEPPs caused environmental degradation in

EBSR and how important water is for women in the region to sustain their livelihoods and everyday experiences. Radel (2012, p. 63) defined “gendered livelihood” as an interlinkage between identity and material aspects. It is central to who we are and how we fit in society. It further embodies all resources to provide basic needs, including material assets, cultural values, social relations, and spiritual bonds. Therefore, as I argue in this thesis, the environmental change does not only impact women’s economic livelihoods but their identities. Livelihoods are also acknowledged as a significant part of women’s identities in the FPE framework (Figure 3.2) (Radel, 2012; Braun, 2015).



**Figure 3.2.** The interlinkage of identity and livelihoods (Author’s illustration based on Radel, 2012)

### 3.3.3 To Access and Control Over Rivers

The last theme of FPE embraced by feminist development critique is related to access to natural resources. While I center FPE and Intersectionality to analyze how social inequalities are reproduced through HEPPs’ impact on women’s environmental practices, I put the connecting focus on changing regimes of gendered access and control over rivers at the community and household levels. As stressed in this chapter, women’s gendered rights or perceived position in society may limit access to rivers. However, in the thesis, I emphasize that the restricted access to rivers and livelihoods are not solely due to gendered power relations and rights but driven mainly by the privatization of rivers <sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The connection of privatization of rivers and access to natural resources are defined through use rights in the previous chapters. See, Chapter 2.1. for an overview of the privatization of rivers in Turkey.

*“The process of ‘privatization’ equates to a process of ‘dispossession.’”*

(Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 82)

Building on Swyngedouw’s (2005) insights, I argue that privatization of rivers damages women’s ability to access and control water. Considering the gendered responsibilities and women’s differentiated relations with water and livelihoods in society, any change in access to rivers would result in changing their identities and overall well-being without any doubt. Horowitz (2015, p. 238) supported this statement by arguing that identities and livelihoods had deteriorated when market availability increased, and large-scale development projects were implemented. The environmental impacts of these extensive projects as HEPPs, restrict access to rivers. This often destroys women’s reproductive powers as livelihoods, which are crucial for their identities and cultural bonds (ibid.)

When analyzing gendered relations and the environment, there has been a developing focus in FPE with particular stress on identity and how restricted access to resources often results in a transformation in these identities. As Harris (2009, p. 402) highlighted, attention to identity supports feminist scholars to establish that access to water is vital for women’s livelihood and ability to provide themselves, but also women’s spirituality and cultural values. Paying attention to the mutual relation of access to resources and identity allows this thesis to capture how local women’s lives and environmental practices are interlinked with their identities. As explained in *Chapter 3.3.1*, the perceived gendered responsibilities and gendered rights already set the ground for social inequality in societies. Yet, implementing extensive hydropower development projects that cause environmental conflict in communities deepens the existing inequalities by impairing women’s identities (Braun, 2015).

## 4 Methodology

To thoroughly answer the research question from the FPE perspective, fieldwork methods based on feminist methodology are deployed. Methodologically, feminist research seeks to minimize the distance between the researcher and the subjects as a reflection of the traditional power relations within the research process which has long been used as a tool of oppression (Hammersley, 1992; Naples, 2003; Angrosino, 2007). The methodology further examines social inequality by representing women's lives, experiences, and voices (Miller, 2017; Peake, 2017). In line with the aim of this thesis, feminist methodology enclosed the study in careful ways by collecting and representing women's narratives on their lives, which usually remain invisible in public and political contexts.

Driven by FPE, this study aims to understand how local women's lives have changed due to the extensive HEPPs. Therefore, the fundamental factors in selecting the methods were to consider how women's experiences can be captured. Common themes and frameworks have been established to ensure that the contexts and uniqueness of the situation in EBSR were not ignored. Following the theoretical standpoint and feminist methodology, I focused on women's narratives and conducted fieldwork in a village of EBSR. I used semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation, and analyzed the collected data through FPE by using narrative analysis. Combining different methods in this thesis creates a deeper understanding and explores the problem from a broader perspective (Mason, 2018a).

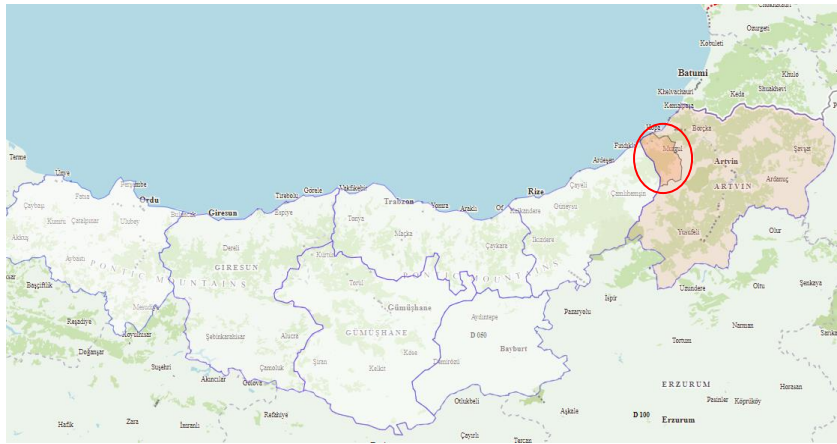
## 4.1 Fieldwork

This study applies fieldwork, which refers to conducting research in the field (Angrosino, 2007). Research using fieldwork are “detailed descriptions of a contemporary issue such as a phenomenon or a conflict” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 95). It is interested in the in-depth analysis of personal experiences (ibid.). Considering the aim is to explore women’s experiences and changed lives, doing fieldwork by focusing on one research site provides a deeper understanding of identities and the HEPPs’ impact resulting in deepened social inequalities.

As this thesis emphasizes, the environmental change due to the HEPPs is a regional conflict that numerous villages in EBSR suffer from. Given that the region is a relatively large area with over 246 HEPPs (BBC Türkçe, 2020), it was not feasible for me to visit all conflict sites. Therefore, to maximize the efficiency and richness of the data, I decided to do fieldwork focusing on one of the critical HEPP sites.

Selecting the fieldwork site carries high importance, and there are specific steps to consider. I followed the steps introduced by Angrosino (2007, p. 30). First, I searched for a site where my research problem can clearly be examined. I reviewed the news and articles about local protests against HEPPs regarding environmental degradation and the previous research carried out in the region. Further, I particularly paid attention not to pick a site that has been over-researched. During the conflict period, I was doing an internship at an environmental NGO in Turkey on a particular task about hydropower development, which helped me know the conflict site and where to look. After a careful examination, Arhavi village was strategically chosen to be the fieldwork site (Figure 4.1). The location currently has 29 HEPPs in operation and more than 126 HEPP projects in the construction and license phase (Arı, 2020). Arhavi is also one of the villages where women’s protest is active and visible. The environmental damages caused by HEPPs are recorded as the main complaint by local women (Yaka, 2017; Arı, 2020; BBC Türkçe, 2020). Even though previous research (Yaka, 2017; Şengül, 2018) studied Arhavi, the location is not overstudied since their focus was not on the impacts of HEPPs on social

inequality but the strategies of the movement. Therefore, Arhavi is decided to be a suitable choice for this thesis as it also brought a new breath to the research field.



**Figure 4.1.** Map of the fieldwork site, Arhavi.

The fieldwork lasted between the dates 28 February 2021 and 10 April 2021. During this time, I stayed in a fishery farm in Arhavi, and the community was kind enough to host me and let me participate in daily activities. This study acknowledges that doing fieldwork in marginalized communities on sensitive and political topics might come across some criticism. For instance, the most common question is whether research truly needs fieldwork and the concerns about ‘academic tourism’ (Scheyvens & McLennan, p. 5). If a researcher does not justify the methodology or put ethical consideration, a study might turn to exploitation in the form of academic tourism.

In reflection on the particular criticism, I emphasize the importance of the way research is undertaken. The way of carrying out the research has critical importance, as Mason (2018c, p. 90) noted. Therefore, I always acted by being informed of the significance of sensitivity, respect, and constructing mutual relationships that both researcher and the people in the research site could benefit from (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; Mason, 2018c).

Various data collection methods can be applied during fieldwork (Pole & Hillyard, 2016; Mason, 2018a), of which I chose semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation that includes narrative walks.

#### 4.1.1 Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews

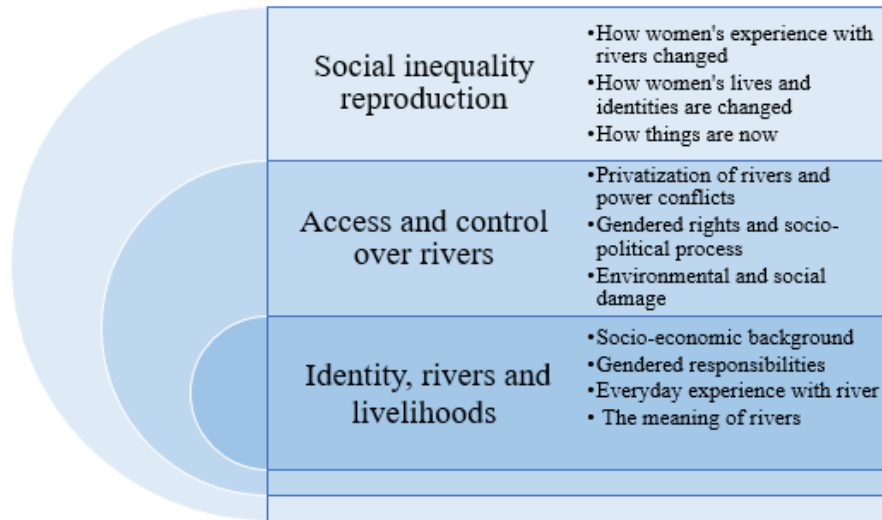
*“Interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women.”*

(Reinharz, 1992, p. 19)

Interviews are beneficial as they offer a space for “close personal interaction between the researcher and their subjects” (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). As Reinharz (1992, p. 19) highlights, interviews are also one of the most effective methods in feminist methodology to explore the research problem from women’s perspective using their own narratives. Building on Haraway (1988), this study advocates the situated knowledge, meaning that all forms of knowledge reflect the unique conditions where they are generated and reflect the social identities and locations of those who produce the knowledge. In this thesis, local women of EBSR are interpreted as active agents of both the conflict and the knowledge production process. In that regard, semi-structured in-depth interviews were preferred for the feasibility of the data collection. They were accommodating to construct women's experiences, understand the identity transformation, and examine the socio-political processes of hydropower development (Haraway, 1988; Mason, 2018a).

This thesis is grounded in a feminist framework, both in understanding the problem, the theory, the methodology, and the methods used. I was interested in exploring the experiences of local women that were mostly hidden and invisible. In-depth interviewing was applied because it helps the researcher access the narratives and voices of women among those marginalized in a community due to, including but not limited to, their sexual orientation, race, and economic income (Naples, 2003). Further, unlike structured interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews are more beneficial in exploring and understanding highly individualized and politicized experiences, as in this research case (Mason, 2018b). Therefore, I generated my data mainly through semi-structured in-depth

interviews along with participant observation. Interviews were carried out with nine women<sup>17</sup> in Arhavi and lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. The interview questions<sup>18</sup> were designed to be open-ended, divided through different topics related to the FPE themes (Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.2.**The topics used in the interviews. (Author's illustration)

Due to the aim and the research design, purposive sampling techniques were preferred. This sampling type is used to obtain in-depth information about a case by studying relatively smaller samples (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Lavrakas, 2008). Within various purposive sampling methods, the snowball method was preferred to reach the local women actively expressing HEPPs' impact on their lives. It is a non-probability sampling that requires a social network to recruit the participants (Bryman, 2011). As a starting point of the snowball, I approached the gatekeeper of this study as a local environmental activist group called "Female Hawks"<sup>19</sup> to get into the research site. The first participant was found via Female Hawks. After that, the women who were interviewed referred to other women related to the research problem. For example, one participant referred to her neighbor who cultivates hazelnut in a field near the HEPP and complains about livelihood loss. After reaching that woman, she directed me to other women in the

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A for details about the participants' profiles.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>19</sup> *Kadın Atmacalar* in Turkish.

village who used to hold husbandry near the river. The social network I built continued and expanded in this way.

Power relations are always a matter of discussion when doing interviews. Kvale (2006, pp. 483-486; 2009, p. 33) stressed asymmetrical power relations in the interview process and highlighted the significance of exploring the issue from the participant's perspective. Nevertheless, the dominance issue may be inevitable. To prevent this problem in the interview process, it is critical to acknowledge power differences and carry out the process as a "conversation with purposes" instead of a straight dialogue (Mason, 2018b, p. 116). This was one of the central principles of this thesis in the field.

As highlighted many times by Kvale (2009, p. 74), effective research is up to the researcher's qualification. It is the researcher's responsibility to connect with the interviewees and create the appropriate environment for them to feel comfortable. Therefore, the interviews were mainly conducted in the place of the participant's choice. This sometimes was their home, sometimes their field, or the riverside as part of the narrative walk. The language was Turkish as it is both my and the participants' mother tongue. Further, the primary motivation for me to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews was to obtain richer knowledge about their experiences by hearing their narratives. To offer them a comfortable space to talk, I did not direct the conversation too much and often let them share their thoughts in a natural flow. As stressed by Mason (2018b, pp. 123-124) and Kvale (2006, p. 485), a problem researcher may face when doing this type of interview is losing track of conversations by letting the participant determine. Yet, I had my interview guide and decided themes with me, so whenever a participant went off-topic, I asked follow-up questions and made sure the interview was not distracted.

#### 4.1.2 Participant Observation

In addition to interviews, I decided to include participant observation. This method incorporates collecting data from participating in the social setting and observing what is happening in the research site into the analysis (Mason, 2018b). Considering the aim of this study, tacit aspects of the cultural and ecological setting, gendered norms, and identities were in the frontline during the fieldwork.

As noted by Musante & DeWalt (2010, pp. 11-13), tacit knowledge may be embodied in the way people sit, modulate their voices, and perform daily practices. It is often participation in the context that allows researchers to get insights on tacit and make them available to analyze. Therefore, participant observation is one of the most efficient ways to capture unspoken aspects of explicit culture and identities that may not be directly visible.

Unlike non-participant observation, where participants see the research process as a “business arrangement,” participant observation allows the researcher to be seen as a “neighbor and friend who also happens to be a researcher” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 17). This also serves the researcher to develop relationships with mutual trust. This aspect was crucial in my research, considering the EBSR community is highly conservative about their culture and suspicious of outsiders<sup>20</sup>. Before I started the interview process, I entered the village through the gatekeeper first and developed personal contacts in an effort to be accepted as a person and not simply a strict researcher who came from Sweden. My encounter was successful, and the people in the village welcomed me in a great manner.

Even though I highly stressed the importance of not being a burden to the community when discussing fieldwork, it is also not always possible to control the research process. Therefore, a researcher who participates in the field must be prepared to make a tacit agreement to “go with the flow” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 18). Once I connected with the community through participation, they asked to host me at their home. I sometimes stayed with different families and got the chance to participate in their daily lives and observe their environmental experiences. I went to women’s fields to irrigate and participate in their husbandry and agricultural activities (Photo 4.1). After participating, I took notes on my fieldwork diary, where I narrated my observations regularly.

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 2.1.



**Photo 4.1** Participating in daily husbandry activities. Photo by Author, 2021, Arhavi.

**Photo 4.2** From the narrative walks. Photo by Author, 2021, Arhavi.

**Photo 4.3** From the narrative walks. Photo by Author, 2021, Arhavi.

The above-described participatory activities were used to create a behavioral context and obtain the implicit aspects of cultural settings. Yet, the majority of the data obtained from participant observation was through the narrative walks I implemented as inspired by Jerneck & Olsson (2013). With the company of the women from the village, I walked through the natural landscape surrounded by HEPPs, rivers, and forests to observe and discuss the impacts of HEPPs directly from their socio-ecological endowments (Photos 4.2 & 4.3). They led the walk and decided on the locations and the topics concerning the HEPP conflict. I posed some questions such as “What do you see when you look at this river? How have your experiences changed in the long term?” While this approach established women as the active agents of the environmental setting and knowledge production as a reflection for power asymmetry in the research (Jerneck & Olsson, 2013), it further contributed to understanding the connection between their identities and environmental experiences.

After the narrative walks, I recorded my notes on my fieldwork diary. The narrative walk technique was particularly useful for this thesis to capture the implicit aspects of women’s cultural relationship with water, feelings, and identities while also identifying the particular experiences damaged by HEPPs.

## 4.2 Limitations of this study

The global Covid-19 pandemic was one of the hidden limitations I tried to overcome a lot during the fieldwork. One might potentially ask about the limitations of performing fieldwork during a pandemic outbreak. When I was in the field, there were no travel restrictions or quarantine applications in Turkey. Under the authorities' health guidelines, I was protected through a mask and provided the necessary equipment for participants when needed. I made sure to arrange the interviews and other activities according to Turkey's curfew hours in line with the rules. Therefore, the limitations of the pandemic over this study were reduced. Yet, it still limited the participants' reachability as I could not easily reach women over 65 years old, and some participants hesitated to meet.

Another limitation was that I could not possibly visit all the villages in EBSR, so I had to choose which village to visit. Due to applying fieldwork in one village, I was unable to reach broader participants across EBSR. There were also some districts I intended to visit, but I was unable to do so simply because they were remote, and I could not arrange transportation. It would have been insightful to examine the problem in other villages and compare it with the selected site. Further, I justified the method and site selection by highlighting the goal of obtaining in-depth data. However, in order to obtain detailed data, I was unable to gather data from a large number of participants. This may impact the generalizability (Sykes et al., 2018). Even though this limitation is evaluated as a sacrifice in some studies (Angrosino, 2007), I am aware that this may affect the diversity of the findings. Overall, I am satisfied with the result, but my claims in the thesis should be evaluated in the light of respective limitations.

## 4.3 Positionality and Ethical Considerations

As a Turkish feminist critic of development, focusing on the impacts of hydropower development on social inequality, I must acknowledge my positionality in this thesis. Even though I am a Turkish woman as my participants, I am from another region with different educational and cultural backgrounds. To

present a reflexive analysis of the research problem, I constantly paid attention not to rely on my own assumptions but based my study and analysis on the themes that are developed through the FPE framework. In connection with my reflexivity, I have further been careful not to direct participants by taking sides or put any harm on them. Therefore, reflecting on staying neutral in the field and doing no harm was my main principle. However, as Haraway stated (1988, p. 589), I also acknowledged that research is never truly objective, nor can be without bias. By contributing to that argument through feminist methodology, I was not reaching for the truth driving from solely my perspective, even though this can never be achieved to 100 percent, but representing the women's lived experiences from their perspective within the particular framework.

When exploring the social inequality reproduction through women's identities, acknowledging the context in which the research takes place is critical (Woodiwiss et al., 2017). During the time I did this research, the sensitivity of the conflict in the region and ongoing protests made it crucial to protect the "anonymity" of the participants (Mason, 2018c, p. 103). For example, even though women often criticize HEPPs, some of their husbands or family members work in the plant. Therefore, I provided de-identification for participants, which is particularly crucial in Turkey where political tension and state control are relatively intense (ibid.). Even though most participants allowed me to use their names, I decided to use pseudonyms in this thesis in line with my principle of doing no harm.

Another ethical dilemma in fieldwork is the power relations between the researcher and participants, as highlighted in *Chapter 4.1*. Therefore, I have been careful in reflecting on integrity, the sensitivity of women's narratives, and my positionality. Also, since EBSR has a protective culture over identity,<sup>21</sup> acknowledging acting local was necessary. Even though I am Turkish, I needed to be flexible and act according to the fieldwork location's specific culture. Therefore, I was always respectful.

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 2.1.

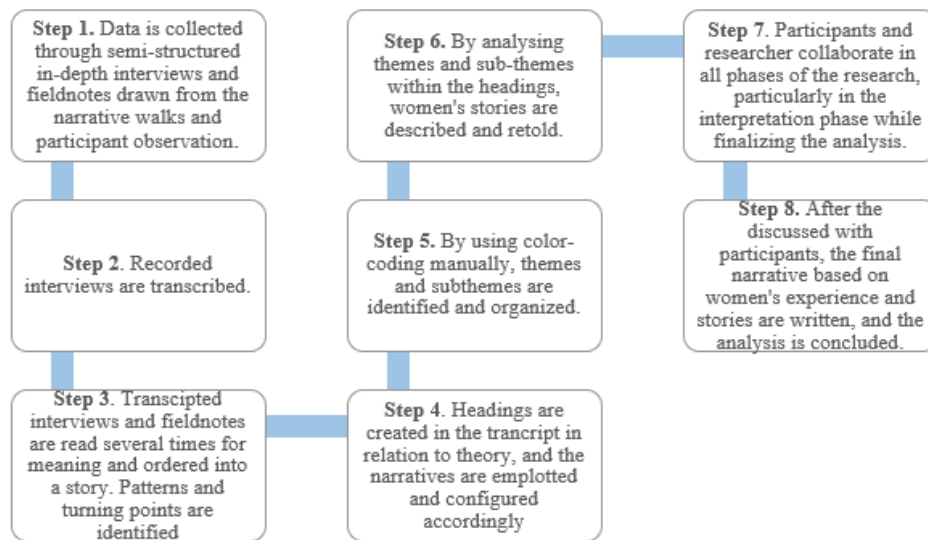
The feminist approach seeks to “minimize the harm” in the research process (DeVault, 1996, p. 33). However, as McCormick pointed (2012, p. 27), there is a particular risk of creating deeper exploitation of participants in fieldwork studies if the researcher is not careful with their position. Therefore, the researcher must follow a particular guideline and establish respectful relations (ibid). Since this thesis is a fieldwork-based study, it involves meeting and obtaining information from women and their personal lives. Therefore, getting informed consent from the participants was fundamental in this study (Bryman, 2011). Before the data collection process, I verbally informed the participants of the study's purpose and answered their questions to clarify the process. At the beginning of each interview, I got their informed consent to record the interview and use the information for my thesis. Further, by reminding them of the possibility to withdraw whenever they feel uncomfortable during the research, I made sure that the participants were aware of their rights. I also shared the findings with them as part of the collaboration.

## 4.4 Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis was performed to analyze the data obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. This method uses stories to describe the individual experience (Bruner, 1987; Riessman, 1993). Stories provide a window for women's experiences through an analysis using concepts derived from theory (Polkinghorne, 1988; 1995). I found this analysis method particularly useful for the methodological feminist standpoint since it starts from women's perspectives and represents their experiences. Further, the technique acknowledges women's agency in knowledge production and aims to represent their experiences rather than reaching the truths (ibid.).

There are various ways to conduct a narrative analysis depending on the focus on the unit and the form (Lieblich et al., 1998; Earthy & Cronin, 2008).<sup>22</sup> I chose to apply the categorical-content perspective and analyze women's narratives in

categories rather than embracing a holistic approach where narratives are evaluated as a whole (ibid). This perspective is beneficial since this thesis is interested in experiences shared by local women. It further enables me to analyze their narratives more thoroughly within defined categories by identifying themes, similarities, and patterns. I focused on the narratives' content and not solely on the form as the language women use. Even though the content is in the frontline, it was a significant challenge to exclude the narratives' form (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998). Therefore, while my focus was on the content, I also enriched my analysis by acknowledging the words they chose. The path I followed for the analysis is presented below (Figure 4.3).



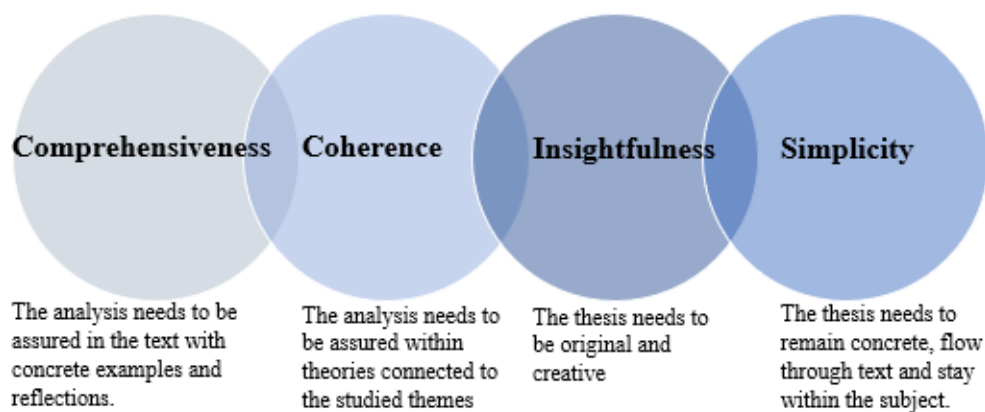
**Figure 4.3.** Steps in the narrative analysis for this thesis. (Author's illustration based on Polkinghorne, 1988;1995).

Figure 4.3. shows that I highly benefit from themes during the analysis. As Braun & Clark (2006, p. 10) also argued, themes capture the significance of the obtained data in alliance with the research question. Through the themes, this method represents the patterns of response or the meaning within the data. In that sense, Narrative Analysis can be similar to Thematic Analysis in some cases; therefore, it needs to be separated and justified. Riley & Hawe (2005, p. 229) stated that Narrative Analysis is distinct from Thematic Analysis because it

<sup>22</sup> For detailed information about all types of narrative analysis, see, Lieblich et al., 1998.

focuses on the dynamic interpretation of experiences, and it begins from the participants' perspective. Therefore, it was useful since this study aims to understand the consequences of hydropower development and how people transformed over time and context. These patterns and features are not easy to identify when using thematic analysis alone (ibid).

By its nature, applying narrative analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1988;1995; Riessman, 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998). This may raise questions about the analysis validity and trustworthiness, considering the results may change depending on the researcher's positionality and methodology. In reflecting on this particular criticism, I carefully followed the four principles provided by Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 173) to make sure this thesis ensures validity and trustworthiness (Figure 4.4).



**Figure 4.4.** The four principles of validity and trustworthiness when doing narrative analysis  
(Author's illustration based on Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 173).

#### 4.4.1 Operationalization

This thesis analyzes how HEPPs reproduce social inequalities by impacting women's identities. In order to investigate the research questions, it is essential to specify which aspects of the collected narratives are considered in the analysis. By doing narrative analysis from a categorical-content perspective, I defined my categories following the theory. Categories emerged from FPE combined with an intersectional approach as introduced when discussing social inequality reproduction. To ease the interviews for participants and enhance the validity, I

conceptualized and operationalized the theoretical themes into interview question categories which eventually guided the analysis.<sup>23</sup>

The categories used in the analysis are *identity*, *access to and control over rivers*, and *reproduced social inequalities*. Since *gendered environmental responsibilities and rights* dominated every phase in the narratives, I decided not to include it as a separate category. As discussed in *Chapter 3.3*, this thesis refers to the reproduction of social inequality as “a relational process in society due to women’s differentiated water access and experiences that connect their identities with water” (p. 20). Therefore, building on the theory, I designed the interview guide in a way that women’s changing experiences can be captured as a process within a story form. I treat *the identity* category as the heart of this thesis, where women’s identities and their link to rivers are analyzed. *Access to and control over rivers category* is used to frame and explore the socio-political process of HEPPs and the impact on accessing rivers. Further, this category also includes how gendered environmental rights were interlinked with this political process. The third category is the *reproduction of social inequality* in which the changing identities in connection with changing lives and experiences are explored.

The theory supports the analysis but has a particular attention to the themes. The themes in the analysis have arisen through the narrative content and are based on the theories. In the analysis, they are represented in different headings. The first theme, *Women of Rivers: Flowing identities*, refers to the mutual relation between rivers and women’s identities, highlighting their environmental experiences. *Privatized Futures: Restricted Access and Control* narrates the conflict process from gendered lenses and its major consequences on women’s experiences. Finally, *Fluid Lives* refers to the identity impairment resulting from HEPPs and their effects on deepening the existing social inequalities.

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<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 3.3 & Appendix B.

## 5 Analysis

This chapter presents the data and analyzes how social inequality is reproduced in the region when HEPPs impair women's identities. The focus is on the experiences that local women had and how they changed. Therefore, first, I present the findings on their identity. Following, I explore the socio-political process of HEPPs and their effect on women's lives. Finally, I explore how women's identities have been reshaped and their lives have changed. The analysis results from various conversations I had with local women during interviews and narrative walks, their representations, and my interpretations. The narrative quotations are extracted from the interviews, and the field notes are derived from my observations. They are the main pillars of this analysis. Besides, the thesis background needs an acknowledgment, since contextualizing the analysis is crucial in increasing the coherence, particularly when focusing on narratives. Therefore, the reader should keep *Chapter 2*, where the privatization of rivers and gender status are introduced, in mind while reading.

As mentioned in the operationalization, the analysis is structured under the following categories and themes: *Women of Rivers: Identities within the Flow*, *Privatized Futures: Restricted Access and Control Over Rivers*, and *Fluid Lives*. The sections' names are created based on the narratives' content and the concepts applied in this thesis.

### 5.1 Women of Rivers: Identities within the Flow

To explore how hydropower projects impair women's identities, first, the connection between local women's identities and rivers needs to be analyzed. Therefore, to understand women's constructed identities, I asked questions on their experiences with rivers, how they identify themselves, and how they identify rivers. Questions related to experiences were central during the interviews since

identities are generated by women's everyday environmental practices and social relations (Butler, 2004). Considering the participants have diverse backgrounds, *rivers* meant different things for women. It was sometimes their “*bread and butter*,”<sup>24</sup> their “*childhood*,” and sometimes a social sphere to “*blow off steam with friends after work*.” In their narratives, rivers and identities are connected and concentrated around their economic livelihood experiences and social activities. Yet, there were also common feelings such as the sense of belonging, freedom, and protectionism.<sup>25</sup>

*“[...] Do you know what is the sphere of women in this society? We have a child, a kitchen, and a garden. Here, a dead garden means a dead household. So, the river was our bread and butter. She<sup>26</sup> fed our home, our soul. We fed her with our songs, our love stories, our swims. And she fed us through the life she gave. I spent my years walking there fetching water, catching fish to bring on the table [...].”*

(Rümeysa)

Rümeysa was born and raised in the village by the river and worked as a farmer. Initiating with gender as a social structure, it is arguable that there are cultural and social expectations from a woman to take good care of her family by providing livelihoods and raising children. The river is described as a “*life-giver*” that provides water and food when needed. The connection between Rümeysa and rivers has been through economic livelihoods. This narrative was also similar to the narratives of other women engaged in agricultural activities as Zehra, Nurdan Aysel, and Lale. For example, in her description, Nurdan identified rivers as her “*essence*”: “*Rivers were my essence, how I earned my crust. I used to think when I was younger. If this river is gone, then how would I support my family? What would I bring on the table? [...]*”. The economic livelihoods that rivers provided were also significant contributions to increasing women's overall well-being:

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<sup>24</sup> *Ekmek teknesi* in Turkish.

<sup>25</sup> Even though these are considered as sub-themes, I chose not to divide them under different sub-sections in this section as the concepts are highly interconnected with each other.

<sup>26</sup> Turkish language is a genderless (gender neutral) language. Therefore, referring to the river as “she” was my own choice during the translation process, based on the meaning and coherence in the narratives.

*“[...] I collected tea plants my whole life, besides my cows. I was raised in this village and made a living through these rivers and lands. If there was not our tea, my family could not send me to school. Like my family, I could not support my daughter’s education if there was no tea. If there is no river, there is no tea. There is no future.”*

(Zehra)

*“[...] When I was young, my father was a worker in a factory and had never worked in our field, unlike my mother. My mother was the only person who cultivated tea and hazelnuts in our garden. I was helping her carrying water around. Growing up in a house like that made me realize how important land and water were. If our river is gone, there is nothing else to do for us [...].”*

(Gülümser)

Living in rural areas with limited economic and social resources, women use their environmental knowledge and practice to increase their families’ well-being. Farming and husbandry are the common environmental practices that are carried out by local women in the village, including but not limited to Zehra, Nurdan, Rümeysa, and Gülümser. Men of the households usually work in jobs outside of agriculture, such as factories in city centers. Women are the ones engaged in agriculture and contribute to the household budget significantly to support their family members’ education and nutrition. Aysel also associated river and livelihood as her “*future*” where she can provide for her family’s well-being.

Looking through the experiences of women engaged in agriculture, the connection between the material aspect of rivers and their self-identification on “*who they are*” was evident in their narratives. One might argue that these women “reproduce gendered roles and norms in their narratives,” considering their responsibilities were narrated central to child-care, agriculture, providing food, and similar to these (Bloom, 1998, p. 62). Gendered environmental responsibilities were also interpreted as a burden by many Feminist Political Ecologists (Rocheleau et al., 1996). However, rather than increasing their burden and vulnerabilities in society, many women’s narratives highlight how their hard labor in agriculture increases their legitimate social position in the village. For

example, as Zehra, Ayşe, Lale, and Rümeysa, Nermin also challenged the gendered power dynamics rooted in norms: “[...] *This is my house, my garden, my rules. If he [her husband] does not appreciate the food or money I bring, he can be off to collect by himself. I do not need him. I can send my child to school myself [...]*”.

Simplifying women only as farmers connected to rivers through only their economic livelihoods would be a misinterpretation. Besides the river's material aspect, women, regardless of their level of engagement in agriculture, also identified rivers as “*a social sphere with life.*” Riverside was described as a place where people of the village socialize. In addition to their agricultural activities, social activities also have a crucial value to them:

*“We, as the village girls, used to go to the riverside to sing and sell our crops. It was a social place for us to socialize with others, share and enjoy our lives. Men also used to come down the river and drink rakı<sup>27</sup> by mixing the river’s water. [...] We used to organize headfirst-dive competitions where we jumped off hornbeams. I was very good at it.”*

(Lale)

*“I grew up with my grandmother in the village. I was not engaged with agriculture as much as her since I went to school in the city. When I was off school, I would always go to the river by following the stony footpath. That path smelled like a rotten leaf and ‘lazma’<sup>28</sup>... We knew we would be home when we followed this path. The river was the place where everyone got along. It was full of life. Young ones used to jump off the stones to the river on one side, and elderlies used to wash and sing on the other side.”*

(Demet)

Lale and Demet’s stories provide a grasp of the social aspect that shaped their identities. The socializing experience around the river can also be analyzed as part

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<sup>27</sup> Rakı is a traditional Turkish alcoholic drink.

<sup>28</sup> Lazma is in the Black Sea dialect of Turkish. It means *Manure* in English.

of their economic livelihood experiences, where they sell the crops from their garden. Considering their daily experiences were described as *hard laboring* taking place around their farms in Lale and Demet's narratives, being able to socialize with each other in an area beside their households or gardens was a valuable option. It was a place where women create social contacts. Ayşe described her experiences around water as a "*source for enjoyment and peace.*" For other women as Gülümser, Aysel, and Nurdan, the river's social aspect hosted their love stories. They narrated their relationship with the river through their love stories. For example, Gülümser told her story of how she met her husband: "*One day, I was singing while washing my yellow apron. And I saw him across the river. [...] He heard me singing. We fell in love. We even named our beautiful girl 'Nehir.'*"<sup>29</sup>

In shaping women's identities, livelihoods have played a significant role. Rivers are acknowledged as part of economic livelihoods and social livelihoods. Therefore, the interlinkage between the material aspect of rivers and the social meaning that women attributed shaped their experiences and "gendered livelihoods" (Radel, 2012, p. 1). Gendered livelihoods were central to how these women identify themselves and how they fit into society. The connection between their identity and gendered livelihoods represents the resource they need to provide for their needs. It includes but is not limited to the material assets, cultural and spiritual values, and the social relations women have.

This chapter's focus is on the content of women's narratives. Yet, the words they chose connect the dots in understanding how their identities are shaped around rivers. While they were telling stories describing their experiences during the narrative walks, some sub-themes have been created. *Sense of belonging* was one of the sub-themes that derived from women's narratives. All women related their experiences and themselves through their childhood and life memories.

*"Friday, 19 March 2021. [...] During the narrative walk, Nurdan brought me to the riverside and showed me the tree she used to lay*

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<sup>29</sup> Nehir means *River* in Turkish.

*down and dream. When I asked about her long-term experiences with rivers, she also talked about her childhood, as Ayşe, Lale, Gülümser, Aysel ve Demet. While referring to the river, I realized that they were always referring to rivers as ‘my,’ as something belongs to them.”*

(from Author’s field notes)

The narratives originated by women often include possessive suffixes as “my” or “mine” while talking about the river, which pops up the question of possession: who owns the river? Ayşe grew up by the riverside through living similar experiences as other women in the village, such as having a wash in the river, socializing by the river, and sometimes helping her mother collect tea. She identified the river as *her* childhood: “[...] I am in love with this river. She is **my** childhood, **my** whole life. I was born and raised in that house right by the river, where you see the plant now [...] My mother used to take me with her to the tea field and wash me in the river afterward. I was so peaceful and free. After she passed away, the river has become a place where my happy memories **belong**. It was indeed **my** childhood. Now it is **my** children’s childhood.”

Following Ayşe’s narratives, other women also talked a lot about their bodily experiences that make the river a vital part of their economic, social, and cultural life in shaping their memories, cultural legacy, and identity. It was sometimes sleeping with the river sound, as Rûmeysa narrated: “I used to go to sleep listening to that voice, it gave me such peace and sense of safety. [...]” It was sometimes “learning swimming for the first time” (Demet) and other family memories by the river.

*“River is **my** life. I have been cultivating hazelnuts and tea plants since I was 15. So, I have been talking to rivers since I was that age. I am 65 now. Rivers’ and my language are **the same**. As well as bears’ and sheeps’ who come to drink this water, the valleys’ of which rivers flow through. For many years, I have worked beside it. I cried. I fell in love there [...]. We are **the same**. We **belong to each other**. I am a woman of rivers.”*

(Zehra)

Zehra's narrative answers the question of "who owns the river" and shows that instead of seeing the river as a property of their own, which they use all the time, she sees it as a mutually constructed relationship. As Rûmeysa also said before, *they feed the river; the river feeds them back*. It is not only seen as providing through food but also through their soul. Lale also identified the connection as a form of belonging: "[...] *River does not belong to anyone; we belong to her [...]*". Therefore, it is arguable that the link between women's identities and rivers has been shaped around this mutual relationship called "belonging to one and other."

The sense of strength and freedom often supported the sense of belonging in the narratives. Strength and freedom come from the feeling when they are by the riverside, dipping their toes in the water, or singing songs. Aysel further described her connection as *freedom* along with her belonging to the river: "*In the riverside, I would return to myself. I was strong, free from everyday life stress. The streamflow used to take me with it. What a peaceful life it was!*" In Gülümser's narrative, the outcome of her experience with the river was described as *a source of strength*. Hearing the sound of the river makes Gülümser stronger. She likens this relation as the relation between eating food and being healthy: "[...] *It is the same logic. I feel stronger when I hear the river sound.*"

Sense of belonging and strength in women's narratives brought *the sense of protectionism* along with it. As their identities have been shaped around their environment and rooted in gendered responsibilities and experiences, it can be arguable that a desire to protect rivers relates to a desire to protect themselves. In the narratives, Ayşe and Zehra talked about the Black Sea tradition of *Karkalaki* that emerged from long-lasting engagement with rivers to protect the environment. *Karkalaki* refers to collecting woods from the riverside instead of cutting trees. In motivation to protect the natural environment, women have also aimed to preserve their lives from any damage outside:

*"In EBSR, we believe one thing. If you give to nature, nature gives back to you. If you take from nature, it takes back from you. If you protect it, it protects you even more. That was the belief my grandparents passed onto me [...] We collect the woods piled up by the*

*stream so that no tree goes to be cut. In the end, we belong to each other and are only free in our rivers and forests.”*

(Ayşe)

*“The river was **my past and future**, where I earned my money, washed my clothes and my child, gather up with my friends. It was **my lifeblood**<sup>30</sup>. **That was all I had**. I used to tell my children, ‘Look at here. Rivers are all I left to you. A pure life, **peace, and freedom**.’*

(Zehra)

Zehra, who described her engagement with rivers through economic and social aspects, identified the river as her past, future, and *lifeblood*. Building on timeless continuity, Zehra also intended to leave the river as a *legacy* to her children. Considering in EBSR traditional gendered rights inhibit women from owning land, they usually do not own the land they work or the house they live in.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Zehra’s desire to leave the river to her children was described as a *heritage*. Arguably, by leaving the river as a legacy, she would transfer her identity, spiritual bond, and culture she has protected. In addition to Zehra, Nurdan also highlighted this identity heritage by saying that she wants to leave the childhood she had to her grandchildren: *“You cannot separate rivers from children. [...] This is part of our culture here. If you are a girl of Black Sea, you must know **your soul** comes from rivers. I want my grandchildren to have a childhood that I had.”*

Through these women's narratives, it is evident that their identities are connected to rivers indeed, constructed through different channels as social and economic dimensions resulting from gendered responsibilities and rights (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Elmhirst, 2015). *Senses of belonging, freedom, and protectionism* were at the heart of women’s narratives, and they connected the dots in understanding the identity construction. Therefore, it is clear that in the

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<sup>30</sup> *Can damarı* in Turkish. It cannot be translated directly, since “can” means something different than material life, it means something similar to *soul*.

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 2.2.1.

HEPPs struggle in the region, it is not only the nature that women are trying to save but themselves. It is not only the rivers and the environment exposed to hydropower projects but also their identities, experiences, and culture. Nurdan, draw the line between her identity and privatization of rivers by referring to the power struggle in control over rivers:

*“During all my life, this river was all I have to do with...All my work, all my enjoyment. My love is for rivers, for nature [...] I mean, flowers always make me happy, but I love even the spikes. It is a perspective. Some people, such as the President, see this river as money. Not me. I see it as **my whole being, my freedom, and myself**. These are the things you must protect; you cannot replace with money.”*

(Nurdan)

Before moving on to how the privatization of rivers and its socio-political process impaired women’s identity, one might ask if their identities were impacted indeed. The answer can be hinted at by looking into the form of women’s narratives. Unexceptionally, every woman identifying their connection to rivers used past tense in their descriptions as *was* and *used to*. For example, even though the impact on the identity and how it served to reproduce social inequalities are analyzed thoroughly in *Chapter 5.3*, the narratives in this chapter where women described their relationship with rivers also provided early evidence for changing experiences.

## 5.2 Privatized Future: Restricted Access and Control Over Rivers

After capturing the connection between women’s identities and the environment, I asked participants to describe their experiences on accessing and controlling their lands during the socio-political process of hydropower projects to see the relational process behind social inequality. In their narratives, women agreed that water privatization had restricted access and control over rivers. The conversations regarding access and control over resources also proved that the

process was highly interlinked with gendered rights and power dynamics (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Beccar et al., 2002). Accordingly, women's experiences have changed depending on the gendered practice of land rights and ecological damage (Harris, 2009).

### 5.2.1 “We are not sitting at the same table.”

*HEPP* was a newly introduced word in rural EBSR when water privatization policies started to be operationalized in the early 2000s (Işlar, 2012b). The narratives resulted that all women had never heard of the phrase until they faced companies in their yard, except Demet. Demet was the only one that had considerable knowledge on hydropower gained in her school. Yet, she never expected that the theoretical knowledge and the experience differ in practical life that much:

*“I thought HEPPs were useful. In high school, I learned that industrialization and electricity production are good for people's well-being. That was what I knew. But as I see now, it is the massacre itself! It not only steals but kills.”*

(Demet)

As a relatively younger and educated woman, Demet was familiarized with HEPPs long before the constructions started. Lale was also informed casually when the village's mukhtar<sup>32</sup> came to visit the family and notify them about ‘the great projects’: “[...] I was excited to hear. Then, he said he would bring us more water by giant pipes. I thought this was impossible to do, and we do not even need that water, we have our own, and it is enough”. Being a woman with critical contacts made the information available for Lale. Besides Demet and Lale, all women were informed after the project decisions were made. After getting the EIA, companies need to organize information meetings to inform communities about the project plans (DSI, 2003 cited in Işlar, 2012b, p. 321; Kadirbeyoğlu & Bakan, 2019). Even when they are held, information meetings were seen as a

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<sup>32</sup> *Muhtar* in Turkish. It is the person responsible for the administration of village.

“formality” by the powerholders as companies. Gülümser was the only woman who has attended an information meeting, and it was out of coincidence. Based on the content of the meeting, she said that even the decisions are made together with communities, they are just a symbol: “[...] They stayed for 10 minutes and showed us some maps. I did not even know what that maps were for. They are just a symbol to bear the eyes of ours.”

Yet, companies did not organize the meetings or held the sessions in a particular place without notifying all parties, particularly women, and including them in the decision-making process. Zehra was one of the women without notification:

*“[...] I did not know. I heard they organized it one time in the kiraathane<sup>33</sup>, my husband told me. I was not even invited. Companies did not take me seriously because I was a woman. They thought I should be sitting at the table in my kitchen, not the one where decisions are made. However, I was the one working in that soil and water.”*

(Zehra)

The path in Zehra’s narrative was similar to Ayşe, Aysel, Nermin, Rümeyşa, and Nurdan’s, where they said that companies did not notify about the meetings. Deep-rooted gendered norms in the political dimension of everyday life, such as the perception that women belong to the kitchen and not to the decision-making table, prevented them from being decision-makers of their own lives and futures. Companies’ and the government’s patriarchal position also neglected their “environmental agency” (Rocheleau et al., 1996, p. 289).

In combination with gendered norms, gendered rights also played a significant role in determining women’s ability to negotiate. Particularly, land rights were the wild card in this process and were also the differentiation point in women’s narratives. As mentioned in *Chapter 2*, traditionally, most of the women in EBSR do not own the land they work on. Therefore, when companies need land to pave

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<sup>33</sup> *Kiraathane* is a coffee house where men go to read newspapers, drink, and socialize. It is a socially accepted norm in Turkey that women are not welcomed in kiraathanes.

the way for construction, they often buy from communities. As the title belongs to households' men, companies neglect women and directly communicate with women's husbands, brothers, fathers, or sons. Nermin said companies have never reached out to her, but her husband multiple times:

*"[...] I heard they first contacted with Mustafa, who was the mukhtar and the richest man in the village. They offered money to him so that he could persuade our men by buying them. After meeting Mustafa, my husband also changed his mind and decided to sell our land to the company. Where I am in this story?"*

(Nermin)

Nermin was one of the women who did not own the land she worked and lived on, as Gülümser and Nurdan. Their narratives also repeated Nermin's, saying that companies and "powerful names" reached their husbands. On the other hand, Ayşe and Aysel were the only women who were holding the land title. Aysel was fully holding the title left by her deceased husband since her son was under 18. She was also the only women who sold the land to companies in favor of HEPPs due to economic reasons and her lack of knowledge:

*"There was nothing to do. Because I did not know it was going to be something like this. [...] I lost my husband five years ago, now I am alone with my son. He needed a job. They told me that they would give him a job. That's why I accepted it."*

(Aysel)

Due to the perception of hydropower as "a masculine sector" (Moraes, 2015, p. 78; Shrestha et al., 2019, p. 134), men in the village were perceived as decision-makers by companies, and the government-fed gendered rights supported this situation. Ayşe's experience was similar to Aysel's. She was sharing the title of the land with her brother as part of her father's heritage. Her land was located by the project site; therefore, companies consider her land as extra valuable. She was against the HEPPs and waited to reject the offer. However, companies ignored Ayşe's title and communicated directly with her brother to negotiate:

*“[...] I was going to say that I never sell! But they turned to my brother first, who owns the other half, and they offered him a job and load money. He accepted without even asking me and sued me to give up my half. Can you believe that, just for money?”*

(Ayşe)

Looking through women's narratives, it is arguable that both the government and companies' actions neglected these women's agency in decision-making. While the hydropower sector's masculinity left women without titles out of the game, it also ignored the women with titles if there was a male option to contact. These experiences show that the control over rivers and resources was restricted even before the HEPPs installations.

### 5.2.2 “Dispossessed lands.”

Companies contracting with landowners to buy their land was not always the case in the process. Power was structured to enable the HEPPs operations by the government. As introduced in *Chapter 2.1*, the political power was operationalized by the government's privatization regulations and cooperation with companies. Therefore, in line with privatization policies, if a certain land needs to be cleared to enable HEPP construction, such as for electricity grids, tunnels, or transportation roads, companies have been given the rights to take over the land under “urgent expropriation” decisions (İşlar, 2012a, p. 384). Zehra encountered a company official who was making measurements in her field without permission:

*“[...] I asked him who he was and yelled at him to get out of my property. He said this field belongs to them now, and they would upholster pipes underneath. I was shocked, would not let them steal my garden [...].”*

(Zehra)

Similar to Zehra, Rümeysa was also visited by company officers who notified them of the land acquisition. Rümeysa said she and her husband tried to resist the decision: *“[...] He [the officer] said he has the right to do whatever he wants, and it is not my place to oppose. Yet, he tried to silence us by job offers and money”.*

On the other hand, Lale and Demet were never contacted but aware of the situation. All the women described this situation as “*dispossession*” of their lives in exchange for money:

*“[...] Even if we do not sell, who protects us? Our president gave our rights to companies. He stole us. He stole our rights for money.”*

(Demet)

*“The government sees this river as a money-giver rather than a life-giver. [...] They stole our water, our lives for money. Electricity in exchange for our future. What did they earn? Nothing but our hate.”*

(Lale)

Lale and Demet’s narratives show similarities with other women’s experiences and descriptions. They all described the socio-political process of hydropower as dispossession and stealing practice of their lives. As their stories show, the government and companies’ exercise of power undermined both women’s and the community’s rights in general in the case of land acquisition by regulation. At the end of this process, women’s control over their resources was reduced by the government and companies’ joint power practice (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Ending this section with Zehra’s words describes the severity of the political process:

*“My life was dispossessed. They took my land, my tea, my future. They stole. What could I do afterward? I had no control over my river, my soil anymore.”*

(Zehra)

### 5.2.3 “Where is our environment?”

The companies also restricted women’s access to rivers and natural resources accordingly by dispossessing the control. During the narrative walks, all women chose to lead the walk into the surroundings of the river while narrating their lives and struggles (Photo 5.1 & 5.2). They expressed in their narratives that they had not had access to rivers and lands since the operations started. Their expressions concentrated on two things: inability to access due to the construction and significant environmental destruction.



**Photo 5.1** The narrative walk. Photo by Author, 2021, Arhavi.

**Photo 5.2** Kavak HEPP in Arhavi. Photo by Author, 2021, Arhavi.

Access to rivers was restricted by a set of walls by the companies during the construction phase. Demet and Nermin encountered a big wall all of a sudden and described this moment as the beginning of the restricted access:

*“[...] I was coming from school and decided to go to the riverside to drink and sing with friends. I followed the path, and when I arrived, I saw this three-meter-long wall. Let accessing the river, I could not even see her through the wall. I fell onto my knees and started to cry my heart out. I felt a searing pain, almost like someone was trying to rip myself out of my body.”*

(Demet)

*“[...] For all my life, I have been living in this nature. There was not a single machine. One day, a wall appeared. That was the beginning of our end.”*

(Nermin)

Following the wall, other tools as dynamites also affected the access: *“[...] Then, they started to explode dynamites to make way for tunnels. My home was shaking and got damaged. Did we need to live with it? It was not enough that they took our river but our homes now?”* as Rûmeysa said. Nurdan also highlighted the dynamite explosions by saying how tired she was to listen to dynamites all day (Photo 5.3).

Both in the construction and running phase, the environmental destruction caused by HEPPs was undeniable. In the region, deforestation, water insecurity,

and increased floods were seen as the major problems in accessing the needed resources by all of these women. For example, Zehra, Nermin, and Nurdan had hard time reaching water, as the excavation polluted the water and more: “[...] *All our water was gone, now the mud flows through our river. After a while, there was no water at all because of the dynamites. It changed the groundwater. Before, the rivers were babbling freely. But then, it disappeared. Where is our environment?*” (Nermin). The decreased water level was also recorded by Nurdan, who was involved in the fishery: “[...] *Fishes used to catch birds in the air. That is how fruitful our river was. Now let fishes, we do not even have water.*”

The lack of water quality had impacted the whole habitat, particularly the soil quality, which is vital for agriculture. Gülümser, Aysel, and Rümeyza detected different kind fungus and poisonous flies around the river and their gardens which was never seen before:

*“I never had this kind of fungus before the HEPPs [...] I have now because there is no flowing water, but stagnant.”*

(Gülümser)

*“[...] I call this kind ‘vampire fly.’ After the HEPPs, I started to see this everywhere around my field. It killed my plants.”*

(Aysel)

On the other hand, Ayşe and Zehra, whose activities concentrated on husbandry, faced significant deforestation. Ayşe, who was also engaged in beekeeping and living on the hill, recorded substantial deforestation due to the construction of transportation roads: “[...] *Normally my field was covered by greenery and long trees all over. But to clear up the roads, they tore the forest into pieces [...]*” (Photo 5.4). Zehra, who held husbandry, also expressed her devastation when she encountered one of the cleared areas: “[...] *I was going to turn the cattle out to grass. I went the usual path, but what I saw was a glade area. I could not know what to do [...].*”



**Photo 5.3** One of the cleared areas in Arhavi for tunnels by using dynamites.

Photo by Lale, 2016, Arhavi.

**Photo 5.4** One of the cleared areas in Arhavi for the roads of HEPPs.

Photo by Lale, 2016, Arhavi.

On the other hand, the increased level of floods and landslides were the common struggle recorded in all these women's narratives. The severity of the floods reduced these women's access to their lands, water, and livelihoods. To avoid the repetition, I will include only Lale and Demet's narrative as they were the narratives' representatives:

*"The climate balance has broken completely. After the HEPPs, landslides started to increase in this region. I saw the soil in my field sliding down after the rain with my bare eyes."*

(Lale)

*"One day, I woke up at the sound of our angry river. When I looked, I was shocked by seeing how the flood took big rocks and trees along with it. Thankfully, my house was located a hundred meters away from the river, so I was safe. But our field was destroyed."*

(Demet) (Photo 5.5)



**Photo 5.5** The flood in Arhavi on 28 September 2019. Photo by Demet, 2019, Arhavi.

As the narratives shared by these women show, it is clear that the HEPPs restricted access to natural resources. In addition to limited access, it is arguable that women's livelihoods (economic and social) were impacted highly due to environmental destruction.

## 5.3 Fluid Lives

After exploring women's identities and experiences in this particular socio-political setting, I asked participants to narrate the impacts of HEPPs on their everyday experiences and how things have changed. Three themes concentrated in all women's narratives can be listed as follows: *loss of livelihoods, social exclusion, and cultural alienation with migration.*

### 5.3.1 "Livelihoods were not the only thing we lost, but ourselves."

Due to the limitations that the HEPPs imposed on natural resources, women's environmental and social experiences have been reshaped. Notably, the ecological damage played a critical role in decreasing women's ability to provide for themselves and their families, resulting in the loss of economic livelihoods.

Women who supported their family through agricultural income, as Nermin, Lale, and Gülümser, expressed the harvest's poorness, mainly because there was "*no river, no life*" (Lale). Lale lost her income that she earned through hazelnut cultivation: "[...] *I used to collect and sell a crazy number of hazelnuts, like eighty ninety sacks of hazelnuts. But now, I consider myself lucky if I get four to five sacks, which is not even enough to sell.*" In addition to the low harvest, the quality of crops has also drastically dropped. Nermin also had to quit agriculture not only because the production is low, but also the quality: "[...] *Yes, it was low but also damaged, I can't sell these, or even eat.*" Besides the economic contributions that crops provided, they were barely enough for women to provide for their families. This was visible in all women's narratives who engaged in husbandry and agriculture-related activities. Zehra, Lale, Gülümser, and Nermin had to stop their activities due to lack of efficiency:

*"[...] It is due to economic reasons. I used to have ten to twenty cattle. I stopped going out to graze. I have one cow now, which I can afford. And it is only to provide diaries for my household. My economic income is finished."*

(Zehra)

*"I could not grow any vegetables after the HEPPs, even just for the family. There is no life under or on the soil because our river is dead. I cannot fetch water. And the tap water they provide does not reach my field. I lost my economic income. We got poorer as a family. Now we have to buy vegetables in the city center, which are expensive and not healthy".*

(Gülümser)

Environmental destruction had a significant impact on these women's economic livelihoods as it increased their vulnerability to manage financial maintenance. In the end, it forced them to quit or reshaped their environmental engagements. Accordingly, Ayşe, Demet, and Nurdan left the village and moved to the city center and highlands.<sup>34</sup> The loss of economic livelihoods and income resulted in increasing women's workload in household responsibilities and decreasing their bargaining power within the household. This concerns that the women who have not left the village and have been facing the consequences. After Nermin *"had to quit,"* her responsibility as a mother and wife was increased: *"[...] I am always inside the household now, taking care of children, cooking something, watching day-time shows... I don't have anything to do."* Zehra and Gülümser were also saying that their responsibilities and the time they spent within the household had increased.

*"[...] I am relying on my husband for a living now. We eat whatever he affords to bring [...] I stopped going out. I feel like I lost my self-reliance."*

(Zehra)

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<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 5.3.3.

*"[...] I bought my calves without debt, without relying on anyone. I could send all my four children to university. It was fruitful. My income was enough [...] Now I cannot earn money and am depending on my husband. He found a job in the HEPP, he is happy. But what about me? I am always inside, cleaning, cooking, spending time knitting. I am sick of these sometimes and want to escape. But I cannot even do that [...]."*

(Gülümser)

After losing their economic connection with rivers and finding themselves an increased pile of household duties, Zehra and Gülümser's sense of strength and freedom have been damaged significantly. It was also visible in Rümeysa, Lale, and Nermin's narratives as well. These women had legitimacy within and outside the household due to their economic contribution. Yet, after losing their ability to provide for themselves and bargain within the household, the gendered responsibilities deepened and damaged their sense of strength (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Thus, this resulted in increasing women's dependency on their husbands, insecurity about their future, and exposure to various possible socio-economic inequalities.

When combined with the restricted access to rivers, women's increased responsibilities further brought the loss of social livelihoods along with it. Each woman stated in their narratives that their social engagement practices, such as singing or dancing together, had severely stopped. The riverside is now seen as "dead" and "dangerous." After the HEPP, Nermin stopped going to the riverside because she thinks that it lost its spirit and is now dangerous with rocks, walls, and wires: *"I can't remember what the last time I sang was. Last week my granddaughter asked me if she could go there, and I panicked. I am scared to send her. After they killed our river, that place became dangerous."* Lale, Rümeysa, and Demet also intentionally avoided the riverside as Nermin: *"[...] because I always feel pain in my heart when I am there."* (Demet). To be socially entertained, Demet started to spend more time at the malls in the city center. On the other hand, Gülümser said even if she wants to visit her memories, she cannot simply do so due to the physical barriers around the riverside: *"[...] They put up a wall around her. Even if we crossed the wall, there is no water, no life. Our songs, picnics had stopped. A rocky area dry as a bone."*

A loss in their gendered livelihoods as social, spiritual, and economic meanings of the river had damaged their sense of belonging and protectionism, which were the essence of who they were (Radel, 2012). Being unable to access livelihoods, social spheres, and memories were expressed in Demet's narrative as *losing connection with herself and her family*. As analyzed in Chapter 5.1, memories tied in with women's spiritual and social bonds constructed through the meanings that are invested into the river. Losing a social sphere where they swam, laughed, and socialized together, was "*a bleed in heart*" for Nermin.

*"[...] Tea was our everything, our bread and butter, our soul, our future. They killed our belonging, our spiritual bond. Yes, I lost my livelihoods, but myself too."*

(Ayşe)

*"[...] We have no river there anymore but plenty of rocks. No past, no future, but plenty of rocks. They killed us."*

(Lale)

By establishing ties between the economic livelihood and her belonging, Ayşe's narrative represents the women who stressed losing their "*future*" as their power to provide was taken away. While talking about the "*long-lost future*," during our narrative walk, Nurdan burst into tears: "*Our water is gone. My life is gone. My heart bleeds for our lost lives [...]*." Arguably, women's sense of belonging was impaired after their environmental experiences were reshaped due to the socio-ecological destruction and the patriarchal power holders' ignorance constraining women's agency. Rümeysa and Ayşe also stressed about losing their "*legacy*" and "*being*" after the belonging was damaged:

*"Do you see this mask<sup>35</sup>, dear? You cannot breathe freely. My life after the HEPPs is the same [...] I am an old lady and will die soon. But it is very heartbreaking that I lost everything I saved for my grandchildren and their children. I will die as a woman without a past or future. I don't even want to be buried in this village."*

(Rümeysa)

*“I wanted to leave this river that I saved for my grandchildren. I wanted to protect where we came from and where we are heading. But I lost it. No, they stole it. They stole not only my water, but who I was, who I am, and who I would become.”*

(Lale)

Lale and Rümeyşa’s narratives also coincide with the other narratives. Rümeyşa’s narrative shows how alienated she is, to the extent that she does not even want to be buried in the town she was born, raised, and belonged to. Losing the river is seen as losing a life, considering their identities were shaped around their engagements with rivers. Therefore, building on women’s narratives, the loss of their livelihoods can be affirmed as losing identities.

### 5.3.2 “We are socially excluded.”

Social exclusion can be considered as the significant other of social inequality in this case (Lakhani et al., 2014). Local women’s exclusion in the socio-political spheres, such as decision-making processes, was analyzed in *Chapter 5.2.1*. Yet, since the decisions were made and the projects were completed, their exclusion level had deepened given the fact that they experienced loss of losing livelihoods and identities. As explored in *Chapter 5.2.2*, men of the village were offered jobs during the gendered socio-political process in access and control over rivers. Considering women’s livelihoods depend on rivers and the land that rivers feed, this situation became a social conflict in the region between the ones who welcomed HEPPs and those who expressed their protests. Women in the village organized protests to show their opposition. Lale, Ayşe, Demet, Zehra, and Nermin confirmed that they attended these protests with pride: *“It was the time of solidarity. We lost our river, but we have our sister’s honorable solidarity.”* (Lale).

Women’s protests to show the HEPPs’ impact on their lives were not welcomed by the community members, nor the companies or political elites:

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<sup>35</sup> This interview was held during Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the participant was referring to the medical mask.

*“They call us ‘terrorists’ just because we did not support their destructive projects and tried to protect what was ours.” (Demet). Engaging in the protests against the government’s policies excluded women from engaging in other economic and social activities. Zehra said she could not sell her crops in the bazaar because no one wanted to buy from “someone like her.” On the other side, Nermin was also excluded socially by the wives of men who work in the plant: “[...] Neighborhood relations are dead. No one speaks to me anymore just because I stood up for myself.” Lale was one of the women who got threatened during the conflict: “[...] A company official said he would kill me if I do not shut up and no one would know. I was not afraid.” The conflict and exclusion also left women open to male-violence risk. And the violence sometimes directed not to women but their families; After Ayşe stood up to her brother for her rights and refused to sell her land, he beat her husband and threatened to kill her as well: “[...] I could not believe. Just for money. Just like that, we were out of our family. I don’t speak to anyone from my family now.” Ayşe’s story also shows that the exclusion is not only from outside but may also divide families.*

*“Thursday, 25 March 2021. [...] While talking with Lale, I realized she always refers to ‘we’ whenever I ask about her personal experience. As the same, she always refers to ‘they’ when talking about the conflict. This was also something I came across with other women.”*

(from Author’s field notes)

The conflict and social exclusion in women’s narratives were also noticeable in their words besides the content. While referring to their personal experiences, not only for this section of the analysis but in general, the pronouns were concentrated around “we,” “us,” “they,” and “them.” By reading between the lines, the narrative’s form shows that their struggle was shared. The solidarity was born from it. It also explains how it resulted in social polarization, as the village was divided as “us” versus “them.”

On the other side, Aysel is the only woman who sold her land to the company in exchange for a job for her son. Even though the HEPPs also damaged her identity, she said she did not join women’s solidarity simply because she was “ashamed.” However, being on the side of pro-hydropower did not immunize her

against being socially excluded. This time, the exclusion was from the women who protested towards the ones who supported: “[...] *Half of the village does not talk to me anymore, they call me ‘traitor’ and do not buy my crops. What I wanted was to secure my child’s future. I did not know this would result like this.*”

Privatization policies undermined women’s land and water rights and failed to provide gender-inclusive solutions, which led to a broader social exclusion. Looking through women's narratives, it can be argued that living under the masculine norms and a patriarchal government had influenced socially acceptable behaviors. The impacts of the deepened exclusion were visible through women’s inhibited access to economic and social spheres, as they feel alienated, cannot amplify their voice, socialize with each other, and their dignity is not rendered equal respect and protection.

### 5.3.3 “Nobody here!”

Following the installation of HEPPs, the source of income and the region's economic activities have changed, and the employment channels have reshaped. Agricultural activities, which were dominant in the area and consisted of women, have stopped due to the loss of livelihoods and land acquisitions. Having said that agriculture and women’s connection to their environment significantly contributed to preserving their cultural identity<sup>36</sup>, after the engagement was damaged, women have become alienated from their culture. The reason concentrated on women’s previous experiences since they were relatively more active in environmental responsibilities. Yet, the alienation rooted in women’s experiences also impacted the whole village, including men and children.

While describing the loss of agriculture as loss of their future, Zehra talked about how people in the village started to look for alternative sources of income: *“This region lives off agriculture, fishery, and husbandry. Yet, they kill us off. People, who could afford it, left. Nobody here anymore. But I will stay. I will not abandon my roots just to spite these companies who want me gone.”* Zehra’s

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<sup>36</sup> See Chapters 2.2.1, 5.1. & 5.3.1.

narrative was pointing at the class division within the village. Families who could afford moved to other places to look for alternative income. Nurdan was one of the women who moved into an apartment located in the city center's coastal line to continue fishery:

*"[...] I left and moved into this house. I had to. My life is different now. It is more expensive, my income is lower, and you cannot see a single hornbeam tree around you, kind of sad. I lost my culture."*

(Nurdan)

Even though Nurdan had the economic power to leave the village, her life was not the same, and her experience with the environment was dramatically changed. Changing landscapes and engagement with nature made Nurdan feel as she lost her bonds. Demet, the youngest participant, also moved into the city center with her family and started working as a cashier in a supermarket: *"[...] I need to contribute to the family budget. Life is expensive. I thought I would continue our tradition, but now we are stuck in the city center after losing our livelihoods. Everything is strange here, not like the way we had in the village."* Demet and Nurdan's narratives show that their long-protected culture and traditions built-in economic and social livelihoods had been damaged, and they still feel insecure about adapting to a new life.

Ayşe, on the other hand, was the only woman who afforded to buy new land and move to the highlands and has maintained her environmental engagements. Ayşe has continued her agricultural activities. Yet, her *belonging* and *past* were still damaged, which were parts of her culture and who she was:

*"[...] I left my home, my memories, my past. There was nothing left for me. I lost my livelihoods. My family turned their back at me. I did not feel safe and belong there. So, I left everything and moved to the highlands of the village, where there is still life."*

(Ayşe)

It was not only women who became alienated from their culture but also the new generations to come. Nermin stressed how the life she protected for her children was lost: *"[...] My son does not know how to hoe or how to grass down."*

*Our tradition I tried to save my whole life is now long-lost.” Rümeyisa also highlighted the same problem of losing the river. She said the lack of water had a drastic impact on the new generations following their culture: “There is no one to follow agriculture now. The children of this village are growing without a river. I asked my granddaughter where the river is. And she did not know, so she said, ‘you don’t have any.’ What can she do anyway? There is no water, no culture. No one wants to strive anymore.”*

*“Our culture is dying. After we lost our river and our past, our children grew up without touching the water, absorbing the life she brings. [...] There is no job, and everything is the same. Our agriculture is dead, and there is no additional source of income here. So, they also left for cities. And their families followed them.”*

(Zehra)

Concluding the analysis with Zehra’s words, it is arguable that losing their long-lasting traditional engagements with the environment and the sense of who they were made these women feel culturally alienated and lost. This is visible through the narratives of not only the ones who managed to find an alternative source of income as Ayşe, Lale, Demet, Nermin, and Nurdan but also the women who stayed in the village continuing their daily practices as Zehra, Rümeyisa, Gülümser, and Aysel. Therefore, HEPPs’ impairment on women’s identities cannot solely be based on material aspects such as loss of economic livelihoods and land but also the spiritual and cultural bonds. In the end, social inequality reproduction resulted from losing the women’s long-lasting connection with their gendered livelihoods and rivers.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis has provided a detailed gender-based perspective on hydropower projects and water privatization in EBSR of Turkey by drawing on narrative analysis and adopting the Feminist Political Ecology concepts as identity, gendered rights, access, and control over the rivers with an intersectional approach. It highlighted the ways in which social inequality in the region is reproduced when local women's identities were neglected and impaired.

The aim of this research was to explore how extensive hydropower projects reinforce existing social inequalities in the region by deteriorating women's identities. The findings were presented and analyzed through the Feminist Political Ecology perspective with an intersectional grasp of the subject. Building on the relational process of social inequality concept, the analysis followed a particular path in an effort to answer the sub-questions: *“how women's identities are interlinked with rivers?”* and *“how does access to rivers affect women's gendered livelihoods in the context?”* Consequently, the thesis revealed that women's identities are highly interlinked with the river through the economic and social livelihoods, as they were earning their income through agriculture and husbandry depending on rivers and using the riverside as a social sphere. Based on the gendered livelihood patterns, the mutual connection between women and the rivers had been built on the sense of belonging, strength, and protectionism. Further, it is evident that women's experiences with their environment have changed due to the socio-political processes initiated by hydropower development. This was visible through the government and companies' way of exercising gendered rights in the socio-political spheres, as they neglected women's land rights and their agency in decision-making. As part of the process, environmental damage also impacted women's changing experience with rivers significantly due to the limited access, resulting in loss of gendered livelihoods.

Having read the analysis chapter that served the research question revealed that the loss of gendered livelihoods impaired women's identities. It changed the unique connection built on belonging, strength, freedom, and protectionism. The hydropower projects have reduced local women's access and control over the rivers and have left them open to livelihood loss, have deepened social exclusion and alienation, and have impaired their identities by breaking their engagement with the environment. While these findings show that social inequality is reproduced in the region due to women's changing experiences and identities, it also implies that women's insecurity has increased. Concluding the thesis, the results should not solely be evaluated as an increased form of inequality and women's insecurity. Further, there is an acknowledgment needed for the increased solidarity and resistance power of women of rivers resulting from this struggle.

In contributing to a broader debate in Feminist Political Ecology, this thesis also highlighted how identities are interlinked with livelihoods, accessing and controlling natural resources. Therefore, it calls for an intersectional and deeper perspective on livelihoods and urges scholars not to steer the material meaning of livelihoods but also embrace their social and spiritual aspects. Demonstrating this argument also opens space for the government's future initiatives to include gender impact assessments for water privatization projects as hydropower plants and supports gender-inclusive development.

## 6.1 Suggestions for Further Research

For researchers willing to build upon this thesis project, there are particular pathways applicable. Firstly, considering the thesis scope was on women's identities, men's identities and experiences were excluded from the study. However, the fieldwork, which included casual interactions with men, suggested a link between nationality and men's identities that have changed since the HEPPs. Those interested in development projects and nationalism can expand toward that direction. Secondly, the fieldwork also showed that the development projects in the region are not limited to hydropower projects, even though this research focused on water privatization. There are numerous mining projects and

constructions on the rise in addition to hydropower that also impact socio-environmental engagements. Building on this thesis, arguably, political polarization has increased due to the government's environmental policies and projects. Political ecologists interested in this dimension can include EBSR in their scope. Lastly, it would be appealing to expand this thesis further on a country basis as part of comparative research and see if women in the other parts of the country who suffer from the same problem experience the same impacts on their identities.

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## 8 Appendix

### Appendix A. Participants of this research

This section presents the participants' profiles and pseudonyms for the readers' ease in the analysis chapter:

PSEUDONYMS	AGE	SOURCE OF INCOME	HOUSEHOLD STATUS
<b>Zehra</b>	67	Husbandry and agriculture	Married with three children
<b>Nurdan</b>	59	Fishery and agriculture	Married with two children
<b>Ayşe</b>	38	Husbandry	Married with one child
<b>Nermin</b>	61	Agriculture	Married with four children
<b>Demet</b>	25	Working at a supermarket/ Student	Single
<b>Lale</b>	64	Agriculture	Married with one child

<b>Aysel</b>	47	Agriculture/ wife pension	Widowed with one child
<b>Rümeysa</b>	81	Agriculture	Widowed with two children
<b>Gülümser</b>	56	Agriculture	Married with four children

## Appendix B. The interview guide and questions

(During the interview process, questions may not be asked following the particular order or the designed form as it depends on the natural flow of the conversation. However, the interview conclusively follows the themes in which the questions were created accordingly.)

<b>GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT WOMEN AND RIVERS</b>	
<b>(Identity &amp; Gendered Responsibilities)</b>	
<b>1. Could you tell me about yourself?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age, how long have you been living here, marital status, etc.</li> <li>• How do you earn your livelihoods? Occupation? (agriculture, husbandry? or else?)</li> </ul>
<b>2. What do the words <i>water</i>, <i>river</i> mean to you?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do you think it means that?</li> <li>• Do you think your culture is related to the river? <i>If yes</i>, how?</li> </ul>
<b>3. How is your everyday experience with water?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have any responsibilities/tasks related to the river in your household? <i>If yes</i>, what are they?</li> <li>• Do you have a plantation field? Or animals? <i>If yes</i>,</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you engage with the river in terms of your livelihoods?</li> <li>- Do you have the right to own your field legally?</li> <li>• How do you usually engage with rivers socially? Any specific activities happening around the river?</li> </ul>
<p align="center"><b>QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HEPPS AND THE PROCESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE</b></p> <p align="center"><b>(Access and Control Over Rivers)</b></p>
<p><b>4. What does <i>privatization</i> mean to you?</b></p>
<p><b>5. How did this environmental conflict start?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was your communication with the government/company officials during this process?</li> <li>• Any information meetings? Environmental Impact Assessments?</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. How did you feel when the HEPPs were installed in the village?</b></p>
<p align="center"><b>QUESTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACTS OF THE HEPPS</b></p> <p align="center"><b>(Social Inequality Reproduction)</b></p>
<p><b>7. What are the results of HEPPs in the village?</b></p> <p><b>8. How important for you to access to the river? Why?</b></p>
<p><b>9. How is the environment affected by the HEPPs?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any environmental destruction? <i>If yes</i>, how did it impact your livelihoods?</li> </ul>
<p><b>10. How do you think the HEPPs impacted in your access to river?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any diminishment? To what extent?</li> <li>• What are the main challenges you faced in terms of access to water/river?</li> </ul>
<p><b>11. How do you think your relationship with the river has changed after the environmental change occurred by privatization of rivers?</b></p>

- How have your everyday life experiences with water changed compared to the years when HEPPs were not yet built?
- How do you feel?
- What do you think about the overall result of this development projects in your community and yourself?