

---

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Women's Activism for Gender Equity in Africa -  
Joint Special Issue with WAGADU: A Journal of  
Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*

Article 2

---

Oct-2008

# “How Can I Stay Silent?": One Woman's Struggles for Environmental Justice in Lesotho

Yvonne A. Braun

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Braun, Yvonne A. (2008). “How Can I Stay Silent?": One Woman's Struggles for Environmental Justice in Lesotho. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(1), 5-20.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss1/2>

## **“How Can I Stay Silent?”: One Woman’s Struggles for Environmental Justice in Lesotho**

By Yvonne A. Braun<sup>1</sup>

This article explores one woman’s activism in the context of a large scale dam and infrastructure project in Southern Africa. Since 1986, Lesotho and South Africa are building one of the largest multi-dam water schemes in the world, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). Local communities impacted by the LHWP face resettlement, increased risk of impoverishment, and changed access to natural resources. Much like with other projects of this type and scale (Scudder, 2006), the multidimensional costs of the \$8 billion dollar World Bank funded water scheme will fall hardest on rural women. Rural Basotho women are at the front lines in negotiating a changed landscape, and lead the struggle to speak out about their experiences and organize impacted people against transnational environmental injustice. This paper privileges one woman’s activist experiences as a way to explore in depth the diversity of actions and choices that activism might entail and the contexts in which activism can take place in the everyday lives of women in Lesotho, specifically, but also throughout the world.

### **Social Movements and Women’s Activism**

The sociological study of social movements, in the U.S. particularly, has tended to focus on formal organizations, emphasize particular definitions of activism, and analyze a standard range of activist behavior. Much like feminist analyses of other areas of social life, feminist critiques have challenged this construction by revealing how certain types of social movement activity and social movement actors are rendered invisible in analyses that privilege formal or institutional social action, to the neglect of other types of work and activism. This privileging is often gendered, raced, and classed in particular ways (Naples & Desai, 2002).

The literature on women’s movements, in particular, is often framed within a set of assumptions about their relation to larger political and economic forces and who participates in such movements. Based largely on the Western experience, or the dominant discourse on the Western experience, it is often assumed that women’s movements arise solely around the desire for rights based development or that they are an outcome of advances in industrialization, modernization, and development (Basu, 1995). For example, Basu illustrates how analyses have suggested that women’s activism arises from these economic and political advances, forging a middle class that fuels the movement. Such narratives often conclude that there is, perhaps, a threshold of industrialization or development needed before such activism emerges.

Southern scholars and studies of movements in the global South have challenged these assumptions, emphasizing the ways in which this privileging has either rendered some movements and social actors invisible or constructed activism in the South, particularly women’s activism, as simply about survival (as opposed to quality of life or

---

<sup>1</sup> Yvonne A. Braun, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Oregon. The author conducts research on issues related to gender, development and environment in Southern Africa. Please direct any correspondence to ybraun@uoregon.edu or Department of Sociology, 1291 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1291.

rights based) (Visvanathan, Duggan, Nisonoff, & Wiegersma, 1997). It is worth noting that while many movements and actors within movements are responding to social relations, forces, or policies that might indeed threaten their survival, the false dichotomy that women's activism in developing areas is rooted in issues of basic needs (survival) (Sen & Grown, 1987) while women's activism in more industrialized areas is rooted in strategic needs (rights) (Beneria, 2003), artificially reifies these hierarchical social relations and misses the ways in which all actors might be concerned with basic and strategic needs (Lind, 2005; Pala, 2005; Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002).

Further, this privileging of certain types of activists and social activism – middle class actors in more industrialized societies – reproduces global and local hierarchies of what is considered “legitimate” activism and constrains our investigation and understanding of a broader range of social actors and social activist behavior. Melucci (1989) suggests that in looking beyond what might be considered formal or institutionalized arenas of activism we can find spaces where other social actors are doing activist work that might be rendered invisible in most social movement analysis.

If we engage Melucci's call for a broader conceptualization of social movement activity and activism, and problematize the privileging of certain social actors and the need for a threshold of industrialization, we open our eyes to seeing a much more diverse array of activism, and to rendering visible the activist work of those marginalized from or on the margins of institutionalized social movement organizations (Basu, 1995; Naples & Desai, 2002). Even further, anti-globalization movements and activity throughout the world suggest a closer look might reveal the ways in which the social relations of the international political economic order generate the need for activism and possibly the conditions that make it possible (Reitan, 2007).

Within these social relations, Nnaemeka and Ezeilo argue that women in less industrialized countries may experience two levels of violence: external violence resulting from the global inequities of the hierarchical world system, combined with internal conditions of violence against women (2005). Development policies, such as those associated with the LHWP, might “link the two directly in women's lives” (Nnaemeka & Ezeilo, 2005: 9). In this sense, the presence of international development projects, not the presence of industrialization itself, and the violent impacts of international development policies may contribute to the conditions that give rise to women's activism.

As women in Lesotho negotiate the impacts of the LHWP in their lives, they experience the intrusion and privileging of the transnational and local interests that organize and finance such projects as the LHWP. As some women lose their land and homes in this process, many more also experience a changed landscape that includes the loss of access to significant natural resources such as land, water, and plants. In this paper, I privilege the experiences of one woman, Refiloe Kolisang,<sup>2</sup> with the LHWP to reveal the social relations of transnational environmental injustice and the ways in which local relations are organized by these extra-local social forces and interests. This privileging allows a feminist analysis that centers one individual's choices to strategically

---

<sup>2</sup> Refiloe Kolisang is a pseudonym. Although part of Refiloe's activism is documented in public settings and now in a public position, I have chosen to use a pseudonym in this context. I have discussed a small part of Refiloe's story in another publication using a different name. Refiloe is roughly pronounced ra-FEEL-way.

challenge this organization of social relations in multiple and creative ways. Her activism spans a range of institutional and extra-institutional means, revealing the limits of only institutional analyses, and presents a powerful representation of women's agency on behalf of both basic and strategic needs in the context of transnational environmental injustice.

The rest of this article is organized to provide some background context on both Lesotho and the LHWP, followed by a discussion of my methods. The remainder is dedicated to voicing my narrative of Refiloe's activism in the context of the LHWP, followed by brief conclusions.

### **Lesotho**

The majority of the two million people in the landlocked, mountainous Kingdom of Lesotho overwhelmingly live in rural areas (84-86 percent) (Hassan, 2002; Tshabalala & Turner, 1989). Households in these rural highland areas utilize a variety of strategies for income and survival, and these are part of a gendered village economy in rural Lesotho (Ferguson, 1990; Gordon, 1981; Hassan, 2002; Murray, 1981). Women are usually the farmers, in charge of selling and marketing, as well as carrying water and collecting fuelwood, and possibly raising poultry and small animals. Men are involved in some aspects of farming, raising livestock, and wage labor, including, at least historically, oscillating migration to the mines in South Africa.

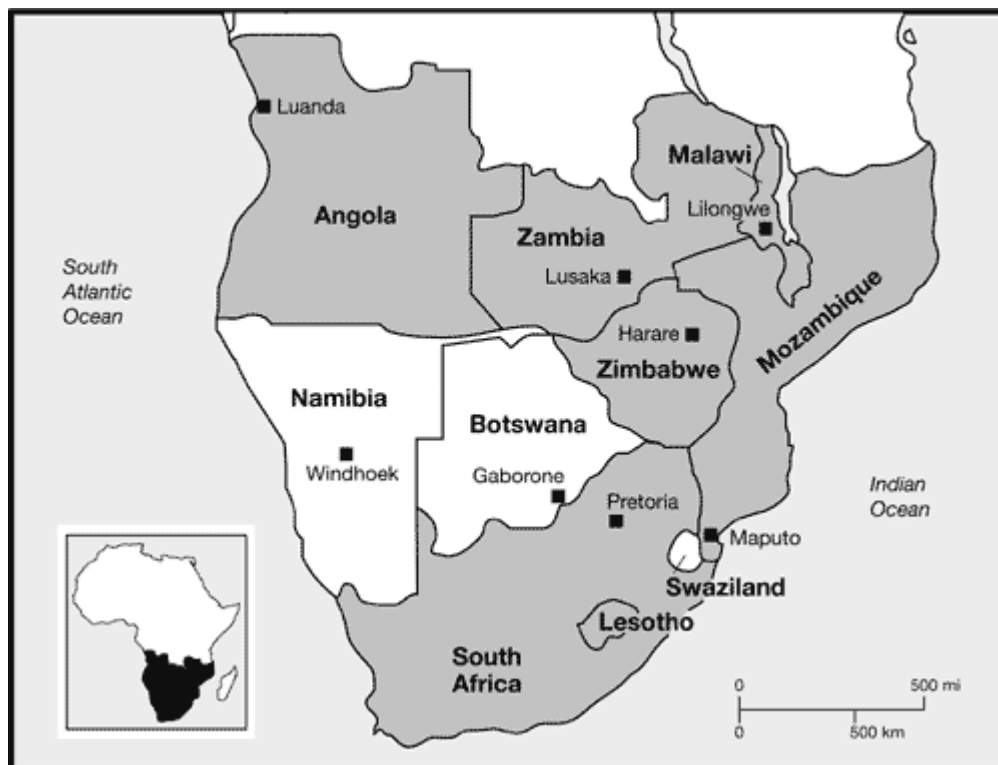


Figure 1. Map of Southern Africa. *Source:* Christian Aid (2005).

As a traditionally patrilineal and patrilocal society, households and inheritance are organized around the lineage of men. Households tend to be extended family compounds, with an increasing number of nuclear family households, especially in urban areas, in part

due to the shortage of good arable fields and employment opportunities. Despite rising entrenchment, many men from poorer, rural areas remain migrant workers in South Africa (roughly 13-20 percent, and providing 17 percent of GNP) or elsewhere in Lesotho (Hassan, 2002; Tshabalala & Turner, 1989), often making women de facto heads of household. Women in this respect have relative amounts of autonomy within the household, especially if the male head is away (Gordon, 1981).

Money is a domain of contestation within the household in Lesotho, and the struggle to gain access to resources is a dynamic, ongoing process (Epprecht, 2000; Ferguson, 1990; Gordon, 1981; Letuka, Matashane, & Morolong, 1997; Murray, 1981). Women are less likely to have direct access to cash, yet they are responsible for care of the family. Women need to, literally, get their hands on men's money to fulfill their responsibilities of maintaining the household. There are multiple strategies women use to get and keep money within the household, including informal economic activities such as beer brewing, selling fruit, vegetables, bread or other foodstuffs, or taking lovers (*bonyatsi*) (Ferguson 1990).

## **Gender**

Customary and legal policies in Lesotho mark women and girls as legal minors throughout their lives. Women of any age need men to access the full rights of adulthood in Lesotho – land ownership, bank accounts, LHWP compensation, and so on. Women's legalized secondary status as designated in the Constitution of Lesotho contributes to a culture of violence, undermines the rights of women and girls in multiple ways (Letuka, 2002), and has significant impacts on their education, career, income, health, nutrition, sexual and reproductive rights, and safety from violence, and serves to legitimate other customary relations of gender discrimination (Letuka et al., 1997; Matela-Gwintsa, 2002; UNICEF, 1994, 2003). Women in Lesotho receive little support from the state, and this inequality is reproduced in the not-so-gender-neutral policies of the LHWP development authority.

At the time of this study, women's rights were diminishing, as development policies of the LHWP reinforced rather than challenged gender inequalities. For example, in another article (Braun, 2007), I argue that the compensation, rural development, and credit policies of the LHWP served to intensify patriarchal patterns of gendered relations and access to resources. As households lost their homes, agricultural fields, grazing lands, and other resources to the construction of the LHWP, policies were implemented in such a way that men were designated to receive the compensation for these losses (money, food, or fodder), and women did not have access to it except through a husband, father, or, in some cases, the chief. This happened despite the fact that most women were the primary farmers and feeders of their families, and that they might have had primary decision-making responsibilities regarding these household resources for many years prior. This reinforcement of patriarchal power can be understood as the state's retooling of local hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1993, 2002), in that it occurs at a time when masculinity is in crisis in the rural areas of Lesotho. Basotho men were increasingly being retrenched from the mines without replacement employment, and the LHWP was appropriating agricultural and grazing lands that were integral pieces of the means of production for many rural households.

## Lesotho Highlands Water Project

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) is a multi-dam infrastructure and development project between the governments of Lesotho and South Africa. Based on a treaty signed in 1986, the \$8 billion project is funded in part by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Community, and several European funding agencies, and implemented by the parastatal Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) in Lesotho. The water delivery scheme will eventually include five dams linked to cross-national tunnels constructed in four phases over a period of 30 years (1987-2017). The data for this article draws from the first phase of the LHWP (Phase 1A and 1B) which includes only the first three dam areas, Katse, 'Muela, and Mohale. The first objective of the LHWP is to sell and deliver water from rural Lesotho to the industrial region of South Africa.

Water is an abundant resource in the rural mountain areas of Lesotho and, lacking other natural resources, the government of Lesotho enacted a development strategy of extracting and selling water from the rural highlands to South Africa to generate national level revenues.<sup>3</sup> The creation of the dams and the tunneling infrastructure has, ironically, changed many local people's access to water as once crossable rivers were transformed into massive reservoirs and some natural springs changed course or dried up as a result of the riverine changes (Braun, 2005). Royalties received from the sale of the water thus far have largely gone to paying back the debt on the LHWP and towards urban development; whether they will ever "trickle down" to the rural highlands is yet to be seen.

The second objective of the LHWP is to create a hydroelectric power station at 'Muela allowing Lesotho to create electricity domestically.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note a third documented obligation of the project is to not worsen the current standards of living of people impacted by the LHWP (Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA), 1986). It is worth emphasizing that the wording here obligates development authorities "to not worsen the current standards of living," as opposed to instituting an obligation to improve the living standards of those the project directly impacts.

Choosing large dams as development involves significant social and environmental impacts, including displacement, social disarticulation, and loss of means of production for those directly impacted. As noted by the report of the World Commission on Dams (2000), the consequences of dam-development projects have been increasingly criticized for the devastating costs, in contrast to the minimal beneficial results, absorbed locally by those directly affected. Generally, these losses and impacts disproportionately burden the rural poor (Scudder, 1997, 2006), and create especially intense pressures on women (Braun, 2005). For example, collective resources such as wild vegetables and herbal medicines that grew in river basin valleys were some of the losses that many households reported losing without receiving compensation from the development authority. These collective goods were important resources for poor households who relied on the wild vegetables and herbs for low-cost nutrition and

---

<sup>3</sup> South Africa was anticipated to pay approximately \$55 million in royalties to Lesotho each year. Recent reports show that Lesotho has received closer to \$18 million in average annual revenues (Hassan, 2002; United Nations, 2003) due to reduced amounts of water than estimated.

<sup>4</sup> The small number of households electrified prior to the LHWP imported electricity from South Africa. Preliminary figures suggest that even after the operation of the 'Muela hydropower station, the cost of setting up electricity has prohibited new consumers and the small proportion that had electricity prior to the LHWP continue to import it.

medicine. As poor households absorb these losses, most could not afford to buy replacements and so it was women that were charged with walking further and spending significantly more labor time in pursuit of finding new sources of wild vegetables and herbs. When replacements and new sources were not available, women were often the first member of the household to go without these foods and medicines at a potentially high nutritional cost to themselves (Braun, 2005).

The highlands areas chosen for construction contain some of the most remote and poorest communities within Lesotho, with some of the highest rates of unemployment and destitution (Sechaba Consultants, 1994; Tshabalala & Turner, 1989). At the beginning of the LHWP, 60 percent of households in both areas of Katse and 'Muela fell below the average income for each area and are considered "very poor" ((POE), 1991:25; Tshabalala & Turner, 1989:9). An extensive geographical area is impacted by the LHWP and created material losses arising from the construction of the dams themselves; the vast infrastructure for the dam and tunnel system through Lesotho to South Africa; the construction of roads through mountains; and the construction of employee "camps" due to the duration of LHWP (Braun, 2005). At Katse dam, the latter also generated significant social impacts as prostitution and sex work flourished around the employee village which housed mostly foreign, white men on relatively privileged contracts with the development authority. Beyond the physical and health risks of such income strategies as prostitution, family and community members spoke widely of the social disruption and disarticulation brought about, at least in part, by the influx of relatively wealthy foreign men working for the LHDA (Braun, Forthcoming). Overall, approximately 20,500 residents in over 120 villages in the Phase 1A area were affected by the LHWP in a variety of these ways (Tshabalala & Turner, 1989).

## **Methods**

This article draws from two periods of research and forms a small part of a much larger project on the social impacts of the LHWP. In this section, I detail both periods of fieldwork and provide an overview of this larger research from which this paper draws only indirectly. While I do not report on most of that data here, some of which has yet to be analyzed, my intention is to situate my work in Lesotho and its relation to the LHWP, provide the context for Refiloe's narrative of environmental justice activism, and detail how the intersection of our two projects brought us together.

In 1997, I spent two months working with an indigenous non-governmental organization, the Highlands Church Action Group (HCAG), to conduct an exploratory investigation of the social impacts of the LHWP on local communities at all three dam sites. I conducted thirteen semi-structured, open-ended interviews (in English) with development officials and twenty-five semi-structured, open-ended interviews (in Sesotho, with English translation) with people directly impacted and living in the three dam project areas. After the equivalent of one year of language training in Sesotho in 1999, I returned to Lesotho in November 2000 through December 2001 to conduct primary multi-site ethnographic fieldwork. During this time, I worked as a Research Associate at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and I lived and worked in all three areas of the LHWP impacted areas with households that were directly impacted by the dam project. The specific objectives of my research were to document the social impacts of the LHWP on communities directly affected at each of the three dam sites,

with particular attention to the ways in which impacts might be gendered.

The core of my research design involved conducting two waves of surveys and semi-structured interviews with households in villages impacted by the LHWP.<sup>5</sup> For each site, surveys and interviews took place approximately five to six months after arriving, and again around nine or ten months after arrival (winter and summer, respectively). In the second wave, approximately fifteen percent of the households from the first wave were re-surveyed and re-interviewed with the new sample of households.<sup>6</sup>

Villages in my sample were chosen and stratified by dam site, categories of impact, and other socio-economic characteristics obtained from development authorities, consultants, and NGO workers. In my total sample there were ten villages in the Katse area, fourteen in the 'Muela area, and seventeen villages in the Mohale area. Households within these villages were then chosen randomly. In order to carry out the scale of this research, I hired and trained six teams of research assistants and we surveyed and interviewed approximately 40 new households at each site in both waves for a total of 263 households.<sup>7</sup> Participants were given a small gift of money at the end of the survey and interview, in addition to their photograph being taken and delivered to them at a later time. A slight majority of my respondents were women.

For each site, surveys and interviews took place once in winter and once in summer. Survey questions were focused on the household, community perceptions of and relationships with the environment, labor, resources, gender, inequality, and standard of living. These included a household census, including household resources (livestock, access to land, material possessions, etc.); an economic survey: wages, limited migration history, participation in the informal economy (beer brewing, etc.), education levels; natural resource questions; and surveys of the household division of labor by age and gender. The focus was on the relation of these to the LHWP in particular, and to recent social changes more generally. The survey data has not yet been analyzed.

The interviews were semi-structured allowing for open-ended responses on particular experiences with the LHWP, and ranged from 15 minutes to 1 hour and a half (beyond the survey). Respondents were asked about their experiences with the LHWP and how they perceived the impacts on themselves, their communities, and their nation

---

<sup>5</sup> This research design is a scaled-down variation of the Solomon-Four Group Design that retains some of the advantages (such as controlling for response bias, historicity) of the Solomon Four while minimally compromising validity and reliability (Bernard 1995; Campbell and Stanley 1963; Cook and Campbell 1979; Jorgensen 1994, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The logic of this method is to account for the response effect and testing biases, and for history (Bernard 1995; Campbell and Stanley 1963; Cook and Campbell 1979; Jorgensen 1994). In addition, it creates a way to avoid threats to validity that may arise as people become used to the questioning, being observed, or remember their answers, etc. It also builds in a way to control for history; by re-surveying a sample of the original sample again, as well as introducing a new sample, the general patterns of change since the intervention should emerge and negate any peculiar circumstances. This staggered group and time approach allows for the potential explication of how households and communities try to remain the same, begin to either adapt, or continue to struggle after the intervention.

<sup>7</sup> Permission from the village chief was obtained prior to visiting any households in the sample. Once received, participants were approached at their homes, informed about the study and their rights, and their voluntary consent was sought. If they agreed to participate, respondents were then offered the option of retaining confidentiality through a system of identifiers. The participation rate was outstanding with very few people choosing not to participate and many respondents refusing confidentiality, expressing a desire to have their story documented.



more generally. Most interviews were conducted in the villages of the highlands of Lesotho, either by the research assistants or me. Other interviews were also conducted with resettlers who had moved to urban centers during the resettlement process. Interviews were conducted in both Sesotho and English<sup>8</sup> and were recorded when possible, then transcribed and translated into English when needed. Steps were taken to check reliability in both translation and transcription, with multiple people translating and transcribing a portion of the interviews.

At the time of my fieldwork in 1997, the Katse portion of the project was mostly finished and 'Muela dam was being built and eventually completed in 1999. Mohale Dam was also under construction during this time. During my second fieldwork period in 2000-2001, local people had endured the presence of this large infrastructure project and were possibly receiving compensation from the development authority for over ten years. Most participants were eager to discuss their experiences with the LHWP, although a few were skeptical about my relation to the project. Of these, some thought I might work for the LHDA or the World Bank and were fearful of being open. Others thought I might have more power to change conditions than I did. A frank discussion of my research project, the limits of my status, and casual conversation with my research assistants, me, and, at times, the chief of the village, seemed to put those with concerns at ease.

Most participants had ambivalent feelings about the project as a whole. While there were benefits that most people embraced, such as new roads, many respondents spoke feelingly about the intimate impacts that the LHWP had on their lives, detailing experiences of loss, fear, frustration, uncertainty, and, less often, satisfaction and happiness with the LHWP. They often reported specific grievances with the substance and execution of the policies of the project and its impacts on their lives. Many were also upset about the lack of jobs and the material losses of land, graves, homes, and resources, including their changed access to local water sources.

In addition to the above surveys and interviews, I also conducted interviews with development officials, NGO workers, and persons of particular interest, like community activists. For the purposes of this article, I focus my discussion on the series of interviews and meetings that I had with one woman, a community activist, Refiloe Kolisang, in Lesotho throughout 2001. My interviews and meetings with Refiloe occurred during my larger project described above and our conversations were certainly influenced by that work and Refiloe's ongoing activist work in regards to the LHWP. Refiloe's activism is inspired by direct experience as she was resettled due to the building of Mohale Dam; Refiloe's experiences with the LHWP are exemplary in some ways and unfortunately common in others. How Refiloe responds to her experiences and the actions that she takes to create a different experience for herself, her family, and community, reveal a courageousness of spirit and a strategic, pragmatic activist with a strong vision of social justice. I offer an extended analysis of Refiloe's narrative, as constructed by me from my multiple meetings with her, as a way of illuminating her and others' understanding of and challenges to the ruling relations (Smith, 2005) that permeate and organize the transnational politics of place and environmental injustice at the sites of such internationally financed dam-development projects as the LHWP.

---

<sup>8</sup> Due to my limited language training, I always conducted interviews in Sesotho with a translator present.

### **From Margin to Center: Confronting Power**

Refiloe and I first met at a conference in the capital, Maseru. This meeting was part of the World Commission on Dams “publicity” tour – one of many stops where a WCD representative meets to discuss the recent report with stakeholders in dam project regions. Attendees included some of the top executives of the LHDA along with representatives from local NGO’s involved in the LHWP. A few expatriate development workers and scholars, such as me, filled the remaining chairs in the compact hotel conference room. Just before the start of the meeting, I moved my way towards the faces I recognized among the NGO workers and sat next to a friend, a fieldworker for the Highlands Church Action Group (HCAG), on my left and a woman I would come to know as Refiloe on my right. Differences in dress and appearance marked Refiloe as not one of the professionalized development elite, scholars, and NGO workers; she sat quietly, her head slightly lowered, hands clasped in her lap in front of her, occasionally speaking softly to another fieldworker in Sesotho or smiling gently to those around the room who caught her eye. In comparison, others in the room moved authoritatively, even loudly at times, to their seats or to get water, to joke with someone across the room or to assert their demands for introductions or answers to a question. And yet, in this packed conference room full of development professionals of various types, Refiloe’s expertise and knowledge of the effects of dams and what development means in the LHWP context was much greater and more precise than all of us who sat around her armed with our glossy brochures, international reports, and statistics.

Refiloe was there that day to speak from her experience as a person in a household who was resettled as a result of the LHWP. Refiloe was displaced in March 1998 from her home in the village of Molikaliko, which was to eventually be submerged by the reservoir of the Mohale Dam. Most of her family was moved to Ha Matala, a peri-urban area outside Maseru. Her father remained in the “unaffected” part of Molikaliko, too old and tired to make the move. Refiloe brought her four siblings, their children, and the daughter of her sister’s husband with her to Ha Matala and, at age 32, lived as the head of the household for her extended family.

I soon learned that this was not the first time Refiloe courageously spoke out about her experiences with the LHWP. Two years prior, Refiloe was sponsored by local and international NGO’s to travel to Cape Town, South Africa – for the first time in her life – to speak at the Southern African Hearings for Communities Affected by Large Dams. These hearings were designed and facilitated by three NGO’s (Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), International Rivers Network (IRN), and Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM) to create a space where impacted communities would be able to share their experiences with representatives from the World Commission on Dams (WCD) (EMG, 1999). At these hearings, Refiloe stood up as a representative of all the resettled and impacted people of the LHWP and spoke about her experience of being resettled which was then written down, translated, and prepared for submission to the WCD. This is Refiloe’s statement, unabridged and unedited, as she spoke it in 1999:

Here is our position before the Lesotho Highlands Water project came. We were living in peace and harmony. Our life was a simple undisturbed life. Our mode of transport was ourselves – we were traveling on foot, also using donkeys and horses to go to

the clinics and the shops.

We were planting maize, wheat and everything that sustains our lives, including marijuana. We know this substance is illegal, but it enables us to send our children to school, in other words we were planting money, literally. We were watering these plants with water which is found in abundance at our places. And then the project came. When the project came we were told we were going to be affected, therefore it was time that we decided which places we wanted to go to. They asked us questions trying to find out how we felt and what we wanted. We were told that resettlement was compulsory. Our concern was how we were going to live in new places.

One important thing we were told was that our lives would improve (sic), at least it would not be lower than the lives we lived in our original places. We were promised that we would get the services of doctors and that we would get full compensation for all assets that would be lost due to dam construction.

Our property affected is the following: trees, houses, huge fields, gardens, pastures, medicinal plants, and other natural resources.

Property which has been compensated already is the following: houses, fields and some people received their garden compensation while others have not. The people are not satisfied with the compensation they are getting because it is below what was initially promised. Our lives are seriously affected by compensation which comes once a year because when it arrives, it finds us already suffering. Compensation package is too small to sustain our lives. It comes when we are already in debt, not having money to buy paraffin and candles to light our houses.

Our lives in the new location leave a lot to be desired: our lives are deteriorating day by day. We are not accepted by the host community at Matala. They have, on a number of times expelled us from using the community graveyard in this place. Sometimes we are forced to squeeze our dead in habitable places, which is not a good thing to do.

I was personally involved because my grandmother died and there was no place to rest her body. We were finally helped by one chief adjacent to the village we were staying in. This year again I was hit by death when my own mother died on the 4<sup>th</sup> April but we couldn't find a place to bury her so we finally took it upon ourselves to bury the body of my mother in the place of residence. I'm sad to tell you...on the 20<sup>th</sup> October, the project authorities came to tell us we have to exhume the body of my mother. This is the saddest thing I've come across. They were all ready to exhume but my family refused. I'm not sure what is happening back home – I might find my mother is exhumed. We have to point out that we

don't have good relations with the host community. The excuse that LHDA put across was that they were going to exhume because of the bad relationship between the resettlers and the hostees, but that site belonged to LHDA.

One thing I want to now pass on is the compensation - we were promised compensation for all the assets lost. Our lives are in danger and we have not been compensated. When compensation does finally come it is very late and only once a year. Some have received and some have not. Amongst the things that LHDA promised were the stoves to heat our houses but that has not happened yet. We were also promised to get water, there is one consultant working in the village but that water is not good to us. LHDA said we have to bear the cost of the water but is our feeling that we don't have money. We are asked to pay but we don't have money.

You see our lives deteriorating day by day - we are worse off. Now our life is sustained by friends and passers by. Our future is uncertain because we have not been trained on things that would sustain our lives once compensation comes to an end. The project had initially promised that we would be trained on self-reliant projects that would include income generating activities. Nothing is happening.

As the community of Matala we have asked that we be resettled again. So in conclusion, our lives have not got any better.

When I visited Refiloe's new home months later in June, I learned her mother had been exhumed and things were the same since 1999 and had also "gotten worse." Sighing deeply, she said she "can not feel [all the pain] anymore" because she could not "see each day" and go on if she did. To make some income, Refiloe was brewing beer and running a small, makeshift shebeen on her lot. Her sister had just found temporary work at the nearby jeans factory to also support their extended family. But even with these incremental economic achievements, Refiloe spoke of their collective situation as resettlers despairingly. Ha Matala was still embroiled in battles over resources, burial grounds, leadership, and rights forming a tense landscape where the politics of belonging were constantly under negotiation and demarcation.

The resettlers of Ha Matala have no chief; they have no place to bring their grievances and no one to represent them. When I conducted surveys and interviews in 2001, the resettlers of Ha Matala described their lives as ones of fear: fear for their security; fear for their health, and how they will eat and live; fear for their children and their education; and a fear for their ancestors and the generations to come. As Refiloe declares in her statement, and reaffirmed with me two years later, some believed their life was so difficult that they would even want to go through another resettlement rather than live as they were in Ha Matala.

Sitting in the living room of Refiloe's "new" house, we talked more about her experiences with the LHWP, resettlement and speaking out. It was at that time that Refiloe handed me a copy of her statement that she gave at the Southern African hearings

in 1999. It was a typed statement of Refiloe's words, originally spoken in Sesotho and here translated into English – a language that Refiloe does not understand but that others with power, with professional “expertise,” or simply those outside the local context of the LHWP dam areas, privilege. A fieldworker from one of the local NGO's that sponsored her travel to the hearings in 1999 had typed her statement and given her copies. She now took every opportunity to give copies to those she thought might listen or might have power. Even though Refiloe could not verify the accuracy of her own statement for herself, she told me confidently that these were, indeed, her words. I was struck by her declaration; in one quick moment, Refiloe had once again centered her experiences, and the experiences of her community, by challenging the marginalized and silenced position in which resettlers like her are placed in the discourse around the LHWP, in particular, and the impacts of dams, more generally. At the same time, her stated affirmation that these were “her words” as she handed me that typed statement was a striking acknowledgment that revealed her savvy understanding of the politics of language that undergirds the international political and economic interests that attempt to circumscribe her words, her voice, as outside the professional development discourse and, therefore, subjugated, illegitimate, and suspect.

As we talked at length about these social relations, I was conscious of my own location in this configuration. As a white American woman, as a graduate student choosing to conduct her dissertation fieldwork on the LHWP in Lesotho, I enjoyed much greater potential to access development executives than Refiloe, and others like her, did – despite her very real, if forced, relationship with the LHWP. Just like Refiloe understood the positions of much larger political and economic players in these relations of ruling (Smith, 2005), she also understood mine: she knew that, despite our shared age and her unmatched personal knowledge of the LHWP, I embodied some aspects of privilege, realized or not, that she could not challenge or achieve in the immediate moment. A pragmatic and dedicated activist, Refiloe capitalized on the opportunity to put her statement in my hands, and in the hands of others, for the potential that lay in our privileged locations vis a vis her own. Her experiences directly confronting these hierarchical relations of knowledge and power in her public statements at professional meetings and spaces had guided her to examine creative ways in which to challenge these in more private spaces.

In fact, an opportunity to confront professionalized power had come to the door of her home in the last year. As part of a routine visit to their project sites, representatives from the World Bank (WB) were brought by LHDA officials to the Ha Matala community. Their goal was to meet and interview resettlers and hosts in Ha Matala to hear about their experiences so they could send a report to their offices at headquarters. Word of some of the conflicts around resettlement had reached the Bank via the NGO's and possibly from the LHDA as well. The Bank representative did not speak Sesotho and Refiloe did not speak English; the bilingual LHDA representative was the interviewer and translator for the conversation. This arrangement also allowed the LHDA representative to control the flow of information to both parties, and the ways in which information was translated and interpreted. Refiloe described this “conversation” as one of manipulation:

When the World Bank members come here to hear if we are satisfied, they have to call LHDA because they are educated, so they would translate Sesotho to English and also English to Sesotho acting like linkmen between us and those white people [WB representatives]. But they always tell lies, sometimes they lie to those people saying that we said we are satisfied with everything.

Interestingly, Refiloe and other resettlers are not the only ones manipulated by such arrangements. The World Bank representatives relying on the translation of LHDA workers are dependent on them for their information. However, given that Bank representatives have much greater resources at their disposal to ensure access to “genuine” first hand accounts, their seeming satisfaction with such arrangements suggests complicity with superficial investigations into the conditions of resettlement. The manipulation of Refiloe and other resettlers, in contrast, becomes possible because they lack the resources and power to challenge these social relations of development that privilege English as a gatekeeper to being a true partner in the conversation. When I asked Refiloe what she thought a solution to this might be, she suggested that for resettled people to really be able to contribute they needed to organize to “send some people to school just to learn English so that they can represent us at such meetings.”

In lieu of taking the many years to learn another language, Refiloe’s typed statement in English, printed and ready to disseminate, was one way in which this courageous activist resisted her subjugation in these relations of ruling. She was acutely aware of being silenced by the LHDA translators in her meeting with the WB representatives, and has directly challenged the symbolic silencing that other impacted people, like herself, endure in this process of the LHWP. Indeed, within the transnational interests that design and implement this multi-billion dollar water scheme, local people impacted by the project are precisely positioned to be manipulated, their voices silenced and suspect especially when critical.

Refiloe’s activism is not confined to caretaking or oriented only towards survival as much literature on women’s activism might suggest, but is part of a strategic navigation of a complex web of economic and political actors that span local and transnational interests as they intersect in her life as a resettled person. Her deep understanding of the politics of place (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005) is revealed through the work that she does to challenge the extra-local and elite interests that intimately penetrate her world and reorganize the resources she once called her own, and as she strives to use her limited access to certain more privileged social locations and arenas of power as best she can. She fights the battle for her family, for herself, for her community, for her ancestors and for the generations to come – in Refiloe’s words, she “cannot be silent and die unheard... while others speak for me, they eat my food and drink my water, they will never tell but how can I stay silent? No, the world must know, I must speak for myself.” Since that period, Refiloe helped form and now leads a coalition of resettled people called the Survivors of Lesotho Dams (SOLD). With the help of the Maseru based Transformation Resource Centre (TRC) (TRC, 2007), Refiloe and SOLD have continued to work with local and transnational NGO’s to represent her family’s and community’s

interests, as well as those of all resettled people, to the local development authority and beyond (IRN), 2005).

### **Conclusion**

Refiloe's narrative of activism in the context of the LHWP bridges the institutional and extra-institutional. She navigates, often deftly, the layers of transnational development interests that organize the LHWP to directly impact her life and that directly incorporate her into these social relations of environmental injustice in the international political economic order. At times, Refiloe works very publicly, confronting power in professionalized spaces such as the World Commission on Dams conference and the Southern African hearings. At other times, Refiloe strategically sidesteps the politics of language embedded in this context by strategically disseminating her typed statement of dissatisfaction with the LHWP from the privacy of her home. At still other times, she is an active negotiator for building alliances, working directly with local and transnational non-governmental organizations to her advantage, and even actively organizing a coalition with other resettled people under the guidance of an established local NGO in Lesotho.

Refiloe's activism is inspired by the desire to protect her family – her father's interests as he continues to stay in Mohale, her family as they are resettled in Ha Matala, the nephews and nieces under her care, and, by extension, her community and other future resettlers that will endure the social impacts and trauma that she knows only too well. And yet, Refiloe's activism is not only about survival and caretaking; it is also about the right to determine one's own future, the right to be active agents in our own lives, about social justice and the recognition of women's and men's experiences at the sites of environmental injustice. As she continues her activism, and inspires others to organize, she challenges the bureaucratic constraints that circumscribe households, communities, and future resettlers away from accessing certain financial and environmental resources and creates new possibilities for de-centering the dominant discourse about international development projects such as the LHWP.

### **References**

- Basu, A. (Ed.). (1995). *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Beneria, L. (2003). *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered*. New York: Routledge.
- Bernard, H. R. (1995). *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: Altamira Press.
- Braun, Y.A. (Forthcoming). Gender, Development, and Sex Work in Lesotho. *Equal Opportunities International Journal*.
- Braun, Y. A. (2005). Selling the River: Gendered Experiences of Resource Extraction and Development in Lesotho. *Research in Rural Sociology and Development* 10:373-96.
- Braun, Y. A. (2006). Large Dams as Development: Restructuring Access to Natural Resources in Lesotho. In E. Kick & A. Jorgenson (Eds.), *Globalization and the Environment* (pp. 151-171): Brill Press.

- Braun, Y. A. (2007). *Implementing Development, Constructing Gender: Gendered Policies and Development in Rural Lesotho*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Campbell, D. T., and Stanley, J.C. (1963). *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Connell, R. W. (1993). The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History. *Theory and Society*, 22, 597-623.
- Connell, R. W. (2002). Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities. *Social Thought and Research*, 24(1/2), 13-31.
- Cook, T.D., and Campbell, D.T. (1979). *Quasi-Experimentation: Design & Analysis Issues for Field Settings*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- (EMG), E. M. G. (1999). *Water - Southern African hearings for communities affected by large dams, Nov.1999*. Retrieved July 15, 2007, from [http://www.emg.org.za/resources/water\\_sa\\_hearings\\_dams.htm](http://www.emg.org.za/resources/water_sa_hearings_dams.htm)
- Epprecht, M. (2000). *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad': Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Ferguson, J. (1990). *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Gordon, E. (1981). An Analysis of the Impact of Labour Migration on the Lives of Women in Lesotho. In N. Nelson (Ed.), *African Women in the Development Process*. London: Cass.
- Harcourt, W., & Escobar, A. (Eds.). (2005). *Women and the Politics of Place*. Bloomfield,CT: Kumarian Press.
- Hassan, F. M. A. (2002). *Lesotho -- Development in a Challenging Environment: A Joint World Bank-African Development Bank Evaluation*. Washington D.C.: African Development Bank and World Bank.
- (IRN), I. R. N. (2005). *Lesotho: Protests Against New Dam Project*. Retrieved July 27, 2007, from <http://quisana.antenna.nl/pipermail/source-weekly/2005/000108.html>
- Jorgensen, J.G. (1994). *Social Indicators Study of Alaskan Coastal Villages. V. Research Methodology for the Exxon Valdez Spill Area, 1988-1992*. U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Alaska OCS Region, Anchorage.
- Jorgensen, J.G. (1995). *Social Indicators Study of Alaskan Coastal Villages. VI. Analysis of the Exxon Valdez Spill Area, 1988-1992*. Social and Economics Study Program, Minerals Management Service, Alaska OCS Region, Anchorage.
- Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA). (1986). *LHDA Order of 1986* (No. v. XXXI, no. 54). Maseru, Lesotho: Lesotho Government Gazette Extraordinary.
- Letuka, P. (2002). *Violence Against Women: A Human Rights Issue*. Retrieved May 15, 2005, from <http://www.wlsa.co.zw/articles/Violence%20Against%20Women%20and%20Human%20Rights.doc>
- Letuka, P., Matashane, K., & Morolong, B. L. (1997). *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Lesotho*. Maseru, Lesotho: Southern African Research and Documentation Centre.
- Lind, A. (2005). *Gendered Paradoxes: Women's Movements, State Restructuring, and Global Development in Ecuador*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.



- Matela-Gwintsa, M. (2002). *Sexual Violence*. Retrieved May 14, 2005, from <http://www.wlsa.co.zw/articles/PRESENTATION%20SEXUAL%20VIOLENCE.doc>
- Melucci, A. (1989). *Nomads of the Present, Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Murray, C. (1981). *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Naples, N. A., & Desai, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Nnaemeka, O., & Ezeilo, J. N. (Eds.). (2005). *Engendering Human Rights: Cultural and Socioeconomic Realities in Africa*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Pala, A. O. (2005). Definitions of Women and Development: An African Perspective. In O. Oyewumi (Ed.), *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Parpart, J. L., Rai, S. M., & Staudt, K. (Eds.). (2002). *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World*. New York: Routledge.
- (POE), P. o. E. E. (1991). *Report to LHDA and the World Bank*.
- Reitan, R. (2007). *Global Activism*. London: Routledge.
- Scudder, T. (1997). Social Impacts of Large Dams. In T. Dorsey, A. Steiner, M. C. Acreman & B. Orlando (Eds.), *Large Dams: Learning From the Past*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.
- Scudder, T. (2006). *The Future of Large Dams: Dealing with Social, Environmental, Institutional and Political Costs*. London: Earthscan Publications, Ltd.
- Sechaba Consultants. (1994). *Poverty in Lesotho 1994: A Mapping Exercise*. Maseru, Lesotho: Government of Lesotho Working Document.
- Sen, G., & Grown, C. (1987). *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. New York: AltaMira Press.
- (TRC), T. R. C. (2007). *Water Project*. Retrieved July 27, 2007, from <http://www.trc.org.ls/water.htm>
- Tshabalala, M., & Turner, S. D. (1989). *1988 Socio-economic Census of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project Phase 1A Areas, Volume I, Main Report*. Maseru, Lesotho: LHDA.
- UNICEF. (1994). *The Situation of Children and Women in Lesotho*. Maseru, Lesotho: Government of Lesotho.
- UNICEF. (2003). *Girls' Education in Lesotho*. Retrieved May 14, 2005, from [http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/files/Lesotho\\_2003\\_\(w.corrections\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/files/Lesotho_2003_(w.corrections).doc)
- United Nations. (2003). *Investment Policy Review: Lesotho*. New York: United Nations.
- Visvanathan, N., Duggan, L., Nisonoff, L., & Wiegersma, N. (Eds.). (1997). *The Women, Gender & Development Reader*. London: Zed Books Ltd.