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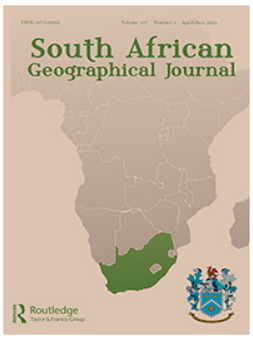

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A Feminist Political Ecology of household waste management in an urban township, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In the Global South, women disproportionately shoulder the burden of household waste management. Development Studies suggest that this persistent feminization of waste-related activities is rooted in cultural, social, and economic factors that confine women to private domestic spaces. Examining these gendered disparities within the intimate sphere of the home highlights issues of patriarchal power and female oppression. However, the intersections of multiple oppressions, particularly those tied to women's interactions with household waste, remain underexplored. This paper critically investigates the relationship between gender and household waste management in Lamontville Township, South Africa. Drawing on household surveys and in-depth interviews, the study contributes to Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) scholarship, focusing on gendered knowledge and oppression. The intersectional analysis reveals how patriarchal cultural norms, socio-economic status, marital status, and proximity to waste collectively (re)produce gendered power relations and unequal exposure to household waste. FPE thus emerges as a valuable framework for exposing entrenched disparities tied to new forms of discrimination from the (neo)apartheid era, which have constrained women's autonomy in South Africa's urban areas. By understanding these intersecting inequalities, this research offers insights for policies aimed at dismantling gendered oppression in household waste management practices.

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Gender; household waste; feminist political ecology; intersectionality; South Africa

Introduction

Household waste is one of the most urgent environmental challenges affecting the growing urban populations of the Global South. Significantly, South Africa, experiencing the formalized demise of apartheid in the early 1990s, underwent rapid urbanization and an upsurge in economic activities that widely increased consumption and improved the standard of living for many previously marginalized communities (Serge et al., 2020). Although the advent of the new democratic era after 1994 brought about positive changes, such as the removal of mobility restrictions and improved

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basic service provision in low-income areas, a significant side-effect of urban development proved to be an increase in household waste which has recently been widely problematized as a threat to public health and hygiene (Tsheleza et al., 2019). Currently, within South Africa's urban settlements, 90% of municipal waste, mostly consisting of domestic household waste, building waste and garden refuse, is disposed of in open dumps and landfills (Haywood et al., 2021; Rasmeni & Madyira, 2019). The management of such waste is addressed by policies that call for equal and universal access to waste services by all communities. However, scholars have established that race, socio-economic status, and the political economy are significant factors in the continued inadequacies of service provision in black townships and other low-income areas (Maharaj, 2020).

The legacies of spatial planning emanating from the apartheid era, in conjunction with the substandard socio-economic conditions arising from the extreme inequalities that continue to prevail in the above-mentioned areas, have created further inequities in the provision of waste services (Maharaj, 2020). McDonald and Laila (2004) refer to these as a component of the neo-apartheid regime which continues even decades after the formal dismantling of apartheid. Currently, the often-visible prevalence of litter and illegal waste dumps in townships, contributing to sub-standard environmental quality, has been widely framed as a failure on the part of local government to generate inclusive growth and to effectively modernize and manage effective waste management systems (Kalina, 2020; Oelofse et al., 2016).

The transition to a democratic South Africa following the 1994 elections marked a significant shift in governance, policy making and human rights protection. The adoption of the South Africa Constitution in 1996 provided a legal framework to address systematic inequalities including those related to service delivery, environmental justice and gender-based rights. The constitution guarantees all citizens the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health and wellbeing (section 24) and mandates for the equitable access to basic services such as sanitation and waste management. Furthermore, the Constitution enshrines the principles of gender equality (section 9), which is particularly relevant in addressing disparities in waste management services that disproportionally affect women in marginalized communities (Heywood, 2021)

The sites where waste is handled and disposed of and the methods employed in doing so are manifestations of the decisions taken by empowered actors in the community. These decisions are crucial to townships' marginalized communities that are widely diverse regarding their social characteristics (Moore, 2009). The differentiated access to household waste services, which is deeply embedded in the structures of power, has been well researched across the Global South (Cornea et al., 2017; Gutberlet & Uddin, 2017; Parizeau, 2015) but household waste management has not yet been subject to a gender analysis rooted in intersecting identities.

Feminist Political Ecology has long stressed the need to explain how women's knowledge and divisions of labour based on gender are critical in understanding environmental degradation and change (Jarosz, 2011). The conceptual approach of intersectionality centres around how gender intersects with race, class, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social and cultural practices, institutional arrangements, and the multiple outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008). This theorization acknowledges that an analysis of gender does not

simply point to the inequalities between men and women, but rather to the fact that gender is a factor in the systemic processes whereby differences based on a person's presumed biological sex are defined, analysed, and become significant in specific contexts (Butler, 2013; Lamb et al., 2017; Nightingale, 2006).

Establishing that gender is a component of a systemic process, the multifaceted relationships between, gender, household waste, and other aspects of social life can thus be brought under the spotlight. Therefore, this paper investigates the gendered nature of household waste management. This is achieved by employing a critical gendered lens to clarify and frame the challenges of household waste management in poor under-serviced urban locales in the Global South, through a case study of a South African township.

The paper begins with discussion of research on household waste management, emphasizing various approaches to understanding the complexities of delivering waste services in the Global South. This is followed by a brief review of the scholarship on Feminist Political Ecology which focuses on the relationships between gender and household waste management. Lamontville Township, an urban resource-deprived settlement in eThekwini, South Africa is then introduced, followed by an elaboration of the case study methodology. The main body of the paper examines the interrelationships between place, gender, political economy, life stage, and marginalization. It further demonstrates how waste spaces and practices are gendered, shaped by local politics, and imbued with meaning. This analysis highlights the paper's key conceptual contribution: an understanding of the complex nature of household waste management in the context of gender, shaped by the intersecting factors of marriage, life stage, socio-economic class, and political affiliation.

Household waste management research in the global south

The persistence of inadequate waste management at the household level is a key feature of many settlements in the Global South. Urban areas are often characterized by accumulating waste heaps, illegal waste dumps, and poor environmental sanitation. These are compounded by weak legal frameworks and ineffectual institutional structures (Ferronato & Torretta, 2019; Haywood et al., 2021). This situation in the Global South, in the context of the emergent neo-liberalism philosophy of the late twentieth century, led to a growing number of local government authorities turning to the private sector for waste management services (Godfrey & Oelofse, 2017). Within this context, local government creates fertile ground for differentiated access to household waste services which are deeply embedded in broader power structures. As such, the more privileged actors within the waste management hierarchy generally reinforce their priorities while excluding those who are powerless and unable to change their current marginalized position in the socio-economic domain (Bjerkli, 2015; Cornea et al., 2017).

Due to its harmful impacts on public health, research on household waste in the Global South has largely focused on optimizing waste management in urban areas (Adeleke et al., 2021). This burgeoning field has sought to draw out the complex interrelations between the physical, financial, and institutional barriers that hinder sustainable waste collection and disposal practices (Parrot et al., 2009; Pollans, 2017). More recently, a growing number of urban political researchers have criticized this

perspective, arguing that it fails to account for the social, political, and economic processes that are relevant in waste management, and as such, results in continuing waste challenges in the ever-expanding urban areas (Binion & Gutberlet, 2012; Gandy, 2022; Reed & George, 2011; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Responding to this criticism, researchers have applied the more critical lens of Urban Political Ecology to explore different aspects of waste management, with particular emphasis being placed on social justice (especially for waste pickers) and environmental justice (in terms of the spatial distribution of pollution) (Gutberlet & Uddin, 2017; Parizeau, 2015). Unpacking the politics of reforming municipal waste management systems, these studies (e.g. those by Cornea et al., 2017; Sasaki et al., 2014; Schenck et al., 2019) reveal the many injustices waste pickers and low-income communities face. From this perspective, powerful actors, such as municipal authorities, frequently attempt to ignore waste pickers because they do not fit into the waste collection systems of a modernized Western world (Hartmann, 2018). Furthermore, this type of scholarship has highlighted the centrality of political and economic processes when addressing the intricacies of inequalities in marginalized communities (Baabereyir et al., 2012; Leonard, 2014).

Gender and household waste management

Scholarship on gender and development has demonstrated wide disparities in the experiences of men and women regarding household waste. Additionally, Moser (2012) highlights that in the Global South, patriarchal norms confine women to domestic roles, burdening them with reproductive, productive, and community responsibilities. Gender is identified as a key factor shaping differences in how people experience household waste at both the household and community level (Momsen, 2019; Nepal et al., 2022). Previously studies adopting a Feminist Political Ecology perspective argue that simply by carrying out specific domestic tasks, such as waste disposal, with women being the main participants, gendered inequalities are reproduced and traditional gendered roles are reinforced (Buckingham et al., 2005; Organo et al., 2013). Domestic work in numerous geographical and cultural contexts is considered by feminist scholars as an overt 'performance of femininity'. Alternatively, men often 'demonstrate' their masculinity by avoiding domestic work such as household waste disposal (Yucel and Chung, 2021). Moreover, those men who do engage in household chores (including the handling of domestic waste) find themselves distanced from the masculine domain and face negative consequences from deviating from strongly embedded social norms of gender roles (Rose & Johnson, 2017).

An important framework for examining the gendered divisions in household chores was established by Mary Douglas's classic anthropological work on dirt. She classified dirt as matter that is 'out of place' and the construct of a 'dirty' place as inhabited by unclean people (Douglas, 1966). Organo et al. (2013) argue that focusing on who does the 'dirty' work in the context of waste reveals the everyday power negotiations and struggles that are taking place among individuals within the household. Drawing on this type of thinking, contemporary research has emphasized the linkages between the normalized gendered divisions of labour and the work around household waste, pointing out that the dirtiest and most demeaning tasks are universally reserved for women (See Doron &

Raja, 2015; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). Scholars must more deeply explore the significance of social power, and the identities intertwined with household waste management.

Gender inequalities encompass not only intra-household divisions of domestic work and their links to power and oppression but also the broader dynamics of economic transformation. In South Africa, the politics around the transition to democracy and the subsequent post-apartheid decades have changed the patterns of resource use and institutional arrangements that have accompanied the incorporation of previously disadvantaged groups into the newly democratic society (Leonard, 2014). Feminist scholars contend that these processes are impacted by the power relations around gender that lead to unequal life opportunities and at times the (un)intended outcome of limiting women's mobility (Elmhirst & Resurreccion, 2012). Yet, despite their longstanding contributions to understanding such localized disparities, the social relations and complex identities that lie at the base of these persisting inequalities in the division of household waste responsibilities, are seldom considered in post-apartheid South Africa. To address this gap, this article draws on insights from feminist political ecology to frame the issue of household waste in a resource-deprived community.

Study site

Lamontville Township lies within 12 kilometres of the city centre of eThekwini in KwaZulu Natal province (See Figure 1). The total population of Lamontville Township

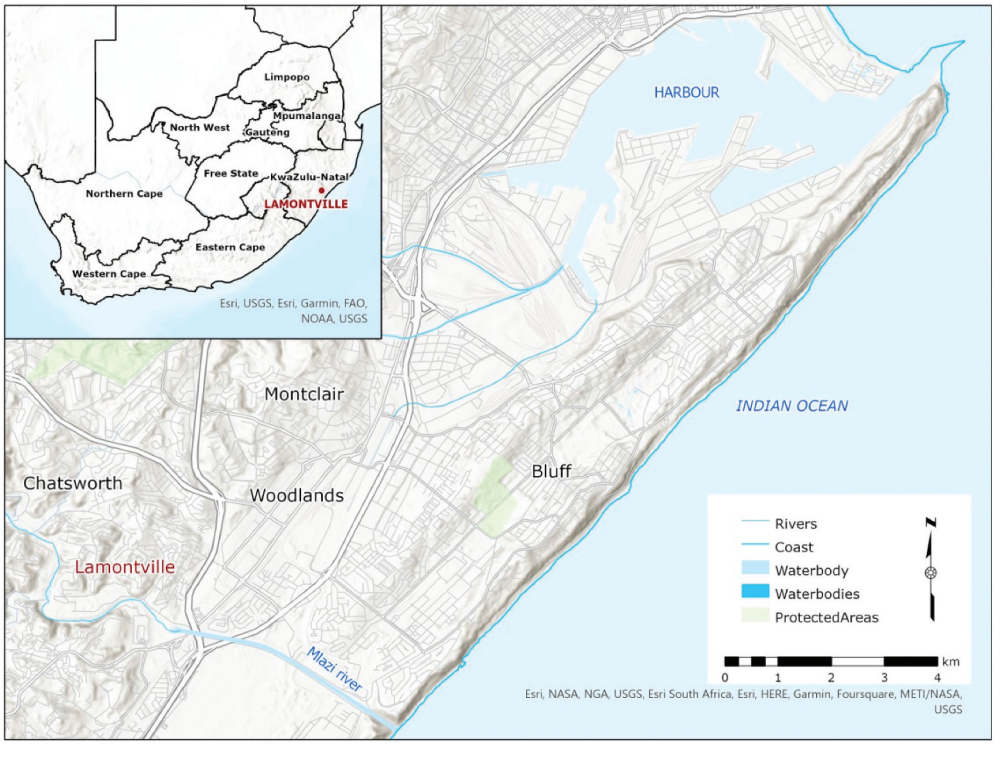

Figure 1. Map of the study site.

in 2011 was 32,421, with blacks constituting 99.6% of the population. While the township's population is predominately African, it is ethnically diverse, composed mainly of indigenous Zulu people (83%) and some Xhosa people (11%), the latter having migrated from Eastern Cape province (StatsSA, 2014). Lamontville faces significant social challenges, particularly poverty and unemployment. Moreover, women face unique challenges related to deeply entrenched gender inequalities. Lamontville was chosen for this investigation due to its rapid population growth and prevalent deficiencies in waste collection and disposal practices. Open dumping is the prevalent method of disposing waste within the township, where approximately 31% of the township lacks basic refuse removal services (Rodseth et al., 2020).

The role of local government, particularly within Lamontville Township in eThekwini Municipality, is to provide essential services, infrastructure, and socio-economic development to address key challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate waste management. The local government operates within the broader South African governance framework, where municipalities are responsible for service delivery, urban planning, and local economic development (Ndevu & Muller, 2017). Given Lamontville's rapid population growth and deficiencies in refuse removal services, the municipality is tasked with improving waste management, housing, and social welfare programmes to enhance residents' quality of life. The African National Congress (ANC), as the dominant political party in local governance, plays a crucial role in shaping policies and allocating resources within the municipality. The township has been the site of extensive state-led housing development projects, whereby residents from informal houses (uMjondolo) are relocated into temporary transit accommodation while their modern formal houses are being constructed (Hunter & Posel, 2012).

Methods

This paper draws from previous research that examined the gendered differences of experiences of household waste. Fieldwork was conducted in South Africa between 2017 and 2019 in Lamontville Township, in the eThekwini[1] Municipality. The research conducted in this township focused on understanding the gendered implications of household waste and experiences that lead to further marginalization. The research focused on real-life experiences of men and women living in the township, with a particular focus on how gender, race, ethnicity, age, and other social differences influence the experiences of individuals in terms of waste management issues. This research posits that a singular focus on women's narratives may prove insufficient. It suggests that dialogues with male participants can shed light on how traditional gender roles influence women's opportunities and engagement with societal activities. Involving participants from both genders facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, economic, and social determinants that shape the gendered consequences of household waste.

A mixed-method approach to data collection was adopted, acknowledging that certain truths could be revealed through certain modes of inquiry, while other realities would be better observed through alternative methods (Nightingale 2006). Following ethical approval, the fieldwork was conducted in three phases. In the initial phase (September 2016 – February 2017), qualitative data was collected by the first author.

Local research assistants (two women and one man) were recruited to aid thereafter in quantitative data collection from households (March 2017 – June 2017). Lastly, following preliminary analysis, the study area was visited again in January 2019 to obtain additional qualitative data from the community. The first step in collecting qualitative data was through the analysis of documents. Further data were gathered through interviews and focus group discussions. Seventy-five (75) men and women participated in gender-segregated focus group discussions to compare differences in daily household waste activities. Nyumba et al. (2018) argue that in the global south, women may be less likely to speak in mixed-gender focus group discussions due to social norms, thus this research separated groups to encourage fuller participation from all members.

Men were readily available and easier to gather than women who were often engaged in domestic activities. Moreover, the participants were from the same local geographic areas within Lamontville which was sufficient commonality to maintain productive conversations and to circumvent unnecessary conflicts. Depending on the preference of the individuals in the group, the focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in either Zulu and/or Xhosa languages. The first author, who conducted the fieldwork, is conversant in both languages, as they grew up in the region. The first researcher is a Black South African female, belonging to the same ethnic background as the predominant demographic of the research subjects in Lamontville. This cultivated an environment conducive to open dialogue among the participants, as they perceived a greater sense of representation. Consequently, a significant number of the female participants exhibited a readiness to disclose sensitive information, including instances of domestic violence. Subsequently, the qualitative data were coded thematically using Nvivo, and the diverse viewpoints concerning social realities were placed in the contexts of the local political, cultural, historical, and economic systems to better understand the basis for the gender differences that lead to marginalization and inequalities.

In the second phase, a household survey of 210 households yielded quantitative data on household waste management practices using a stratified sample. Based on housing type and socio-economic levels, Lamontville was divided spatially into seven sections to create a stratified sample of the households to be interviewed. The rationale for the division was to compare responses based on socio-economic levels associated with the different waste collection methods. In each of the seven sections, every third household was chosen for the administration of the questionnaire. The following section includes an analysis of the ways in which socio-cultural conditions keep women in the private space. Utilizing an intersectional analysis, we provide a more nuanced picture of the gendered relationships between society and household waste.

Results

Yimina Intombaza' – ('I am a woman'): intersections of household waste, gender, and socioeconomic status

The predominant gendered division of household chores reflects the social and cultural expectations of the work related to household waste. 'Yimina Intombazane' ('I am a woman'), proved to be a common response by women when the field researcher posed the following question: 'Who is responsible for the handling of waste in your

household?'. It is a responsibility that women automatically assume because culturally in South Africa certain duties are almost always allocated to women. Similar attitudes were expressed by other women who were interviewed. They had accepted their socially prescribed gender roles and expectations of them within the household. Managing household waste requires considerable manual effort, with women primarily responsible for its disposal. Women often have to walk long distances to reach communal waste collection points, carrying heavy bags of household waste by hand. This process exposes them to unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and in some cases, they resort to illegal dumping, which creates both environmental and health hazards.

Most women openly expressed that it was 'normal' for men not to assist with household waste and other chores. Furthermore, the social arrangements at the household level generally determined the inequities in assuming household duties (Neumann, 2013). The fact that these gendered inequalities were never expressed as a burden by the women engaged in this study largely explains why women remain close to the issue of domestic waste. This subservient position of women is consistent with the findings of other studies on household waste responsibilities elsewhere in the Global South, confirming widespread societal expectations that men should not engage in stereotypical female household chores (e.g. handling waste closely linked to tasks such as child care and food preparation) since such activities are perceived to be demeaning to men (Iheanacho et al., 2018; Mwangi et al., 2021).

The allocation of household waste chores, aligning with prevailing normative gender roles, was evident within all the focus group discussions with men and women. The household survey data strongly reflected that women and girls were most often identified as responsible for the disposal of waste and maintaining cleanliness (82% of survey responses). Generally, only in households where no women were available, was evidence found of a man or domestic worker having been assigned to waste-related activities.

Not all men conform to these predominant patterns and social expectations about masculine roles concerning household waste. Unemployed men expressed interacting with household waste in ways that 'humiliate' them. Moreover, their unemployment status negatively impacts their ideas of self-worth. This subservient position was extensively discussed in the male-only focus group discussions and summarized by a statement from Khalad (31 years):

> Every morning at 06:45 AM, I must be awake to take the waste out. I am the one responsible for disposing of waste. The challenge is, I am the son at home and I do not have a wife. I don't have a job and depend on my sisters to feed me. I do not like the way my life is going.

Khalad's concerns point to an intersection of gender, age, culture, and the construct of masculinity that brings him into the domestic sphere. Although in his 30s, Khalad still lives at home in Lamontville Township. His weekly activities entail waking up early to 'put out' his household waste because the waste collection truck might arrive before 7 AM. He makes an explicit link between his unemployment status and the gendered power relations preventing him from fulfilling his desire to fully embody his masculinity. The lack of employment opportunities has delayed his goal of 'attaining adulthood'. Therefore, he remains a young man who is expected to handle waste like a child. Men such as Khalad are stuck in the prolonged transition phase from youth to adulthood and

cannot afford *lobola* for a bride who would then be responsible for handling the waste in the household.

Other men in a similar position to Khalad spoke of being 'useless' and teased by their peers due to their 'failure' to achieve economic independence. These men are 'transgressing' the local social norms in that they are being forced to touch waste. For some men, these feelings of failure and uselessness extend to their intimate relationships, exacerbating pressure on their female partners. It was evident from this research that the intra-household dynamics and power relations within heterosexual couples impact the distribution of household chores, including household waste management. A Feminist Political Ecology approach is useful for confirming that comparisons between men's and women's intra-household responsibilities concerning household waste are limited and that the continued oppression in the context of gender and the confinement of women to private spaces is related to broader social and cultural changes in society.

Angikwazi ukusebenza' ('I cannot work'): intersections of waste, political economy, and neo-apartheid policy

Analysis of the data collected in Lamontville Township reveals that rigid social structures and the specifics of the local political economy preclude opportunities and progressive social change. Many adult female respondents in the study were unmarried, had children, and were living with their parents or partners because they could not afford to buy their own homes. The lack of a home evokes high stress and anxiety levels concerning the challenges of gaining access to employment opportunities. Thus, while many of the women participants are highly motivated to find a job, they experience major obstacles in terms of their marital, socioeconomic, and home ownership status. It is critical to understand how employment opportunities are biased by gender and made even worse within the context of wider cultural, social, and political change. Formal employment requires employees to have a bank account. Women who are unmarried, poor, and residing in informal areas face difficulties obtaining a bank account, which requires proof of address in their own name. 'I am not working because I don't have a bank account'('angikwazi ukusebenza ngoba anginayo ibank account') was a common theme amongst women in deprived areas within Lamontville Township such as the temporary transit housing areas. During a focus group discussion, one self-employed woman (32 years) detailed her frustrations in seeking employment while still living at her family's home:

> The bank requires proof of residence in a form of a valid document reflecting your name and physical residential address before an account is opened. A utility bill or municipal councillor letter are accepted by the bank. However, should the utility bill not reflect your name, then a municipal councillor letter is deemed sufficient. For this reason, many of us approach the local female ANC councillor to write the letter that serves as proof of address. However, when requesting the letter, the councillor asks us: 'Why are you not married?'. According to her (the councillor), married women should be represented by their male partners. We can't escape household chores because we cannot attain economic freedom.

The ability to enter the labour market is intertwined with many issues that directly affect women's continued responsibility for waste disposal. Local government policies, therefore, seem to affirm women's position in the household as domestic caretakers. These findings are consistent with other studies that associate cultural and social

beliefs with gendered patterns of formal employment (Goebel, 2011; L. Harris et al., 2017). Moreover, exploring the relations between the township women and the local female councillor exposes the intricacies of inequalities and social relations among women. It is important to emphasize that engagements between the female residents of Lamontville and their local councillor were uncovered during the research as a source of distress for some women, as other women noted that receiving a proof-of-address letter is intricately linked to their political affiliation. Shlobo (39 years old) lives with her parents in Lamontville. They have electricity and water connections so can provide a utility bill. However, the utility bill has a surname that differs from Shlobo's:

> I do not know her (the councillor). I need an ANC card with our [councillor's name] indicated on it; even for proof of address, I need a membership card. We have the water and electricity letter but [the councilor] still wants a membership card. She will ask you 30 questions.

Shlobo's complaints about the councillor during the focus group discussion begin to hint at political influences that control the access of many township women to employment. Shlobo's experience of hindrances from the local ANC structures, which use the ploy of a membership card and 'other questions' to deter her from attaining economic empowerment via employment, further confine Shlobo to her private family space. Shlobo, who is of working age, is aware of the intentions of the ANC agents. However, she is powerless and unable to overcome the current situation. The requirement of an ANC membership card is also evident in employment practices in the township that are conducted through the private waste services contractor who employs only ANC-card-carrying members. It was observed during the fieldwork that not a single man who participated in this study encountered challenges with obtaining a proof-of-address letter from a local councillor. Thus, men are able to participate in seasonal formal employment (requiring a bank account) in the surrounding factories in the eThekwini municipal area. Through a process called 'ukufesa', which means walking around factories searching for employment, men can obtain seasonal work. In the household survey, some men reported that they engage in seasonal employment. However, there were no reports of women working in seasonal jobs since those who seek factory employment are considered to have 'loose' morals. In many ways, this is representative of the deeper marginalization of women as their mobility in urban areas is constrained through patriarchal norms and practices. Therefore, it can be concluded that the local political economy intersects with gender, marital status, and life stage to marginalize women from accessing employment. This, in turn, might hinder their opportunities to distance themselves from their interactions with household waste.

The gendered burden of household waste management has a spatial dimension. When seeking employment, women living in temporary transit areas of the township face greater discrimination as a result of the apartheid-era permit system.[2] This is exemplified below by the narrative of how Zinyo, who has recently moved into Lamontville from the Eastern Cape province, negotiates her position within a temporary household: Zinyo's story (Box 1) not only bears out the centrality of marriage in the formation of women's social position in South African society; it also highlights the creation of a neo-apartheid system through the implementation of the democratic-era housing policy.

Box 1: Zinyo Living in Transit Accommodation

Zinyo lives with her male partner and their two children aged four and nine years. She is not married and is undocumented in Lamontville as she is living in a transit area under her partner's permit. Since they are not married, only her partner's name appears on the permit. Zinyo faces many challenges with accessing government services since she is an 'immigrant' in Lamontville. During the period of fieldwork, she wanted to open a bank account for employment purposes but encountered several challenges with obtaining the required proof-of-address letter from the local municipal councillor. In order for Zinyo to get a proof-of-address letter from the councillor, she would need to produce a permit allowing her to stay in transit housing. The system of obtaining a proof-of-address letter is different for residents in transit housing as opposed to residents in other areas of Lamontville, who are required to provide only a water and electricity bill to obtain a proof-of-address letter. The transit area arrangement operates in the same way as the former apartheid pass system that required so-called 'natives' to produce a pass document to permit them to be in urban areas. Zinyo's partner does not want her to get employment; hence, he does not give her his permit. Her partner attempts to control Zinyo by preventing her from obtaining an income by gaining a bank account to enable formal employment.

As an 'illegal' resident in Lamontville township, Zinyo requires a permit from the local housing department to live in an urban area. From an intersectional perspective, the current ANC government policy response to the challenge of housing a growing urban population is perpetuating apartheid's urban hierarchies, which remain deeply gendered. Similar to Zinyo's experience, other women in the transit areas spoke despairingly of their experiences of exclusion from economic opportunities – based on their 'illegal status' and control from their partners. Although women in South Africa are now more economically active than during the apartheid era (Majola et al., 2021), men's attitudes are still influenced by both cultural practices and the former colonial migrant labour system which positioned them as economically active household breadwinners residing and working 'away from the home'. It is also important to highlight (although not common, but significant) that some women encountered during fieldwork in Lamontville township are not permitted by their male partners to leave their homes and/or communicate with strangers. This constraint made it difficult for many women to participate in this study. Thompson (2016) states that opportunities and rewards are explicitly and implicitly available to some, while, based on social identities, they are held back from others. From an intersectional perspective, social differences with respect to gender, marital status, culture, and age, as well as the differentiated social system emanating from apartheid spatial planning, are constructed in specific interlocking ways and deeply implicated in proximity to the burden of household waste management.

Discussion: gender disparities in household waste management

Adopting a Feminist Political Ecology approach reveals how household waste management is embedded in multiple power structures. In the context of the South African township presented in this paper, exploring 'proximity to waste' brings to the fore the social complexities faced by women and men engaging with household waste within the neoliberal and neo-apartheid era. Feminist Political Ecology offers a lens to critically analyse the gendered division of labour inside the household, emphasizing the intersection of gender, household waste, and power relations.

Central to this approach is the understanding that patriarchal structures, particularly in the Global South, deeply shape women's roles within the domestic sphere, as seen in their association with household tasks like waste management, cooking, and childcare. Moser (2012) argues that in the Global South, the domestic sphere is highly patriarchal. Women are caught up in traditional expectations about gender roles and, therefore, largely remain in the private domestic space as a consequence of the triple burden they exhibit of reproductive, productive, and the community work they perform. The Feminist Political Ecology approach identifies this burden as a manifestation of unequal power dynamics that disproportionately assign labour-intensive domestic tasks to women.

The sociocultural 'norm' regarding gender roles was perpetuated by both males and females, as certain women expressed disapproval towards men who participated in household waste management, demonstrating how both genders contribute to sustaining these inequitable structures. This finding agrees with other studies suggesting that by engaging in household waste, men distance themselves from the masculine domain and face negative consequences because of defying strongly embedded gender norms (Rose & Johnson, 2017). This is not to say that all women upheld this position, some women in Lamontville Township were found to be balancing multiple roles inside and outside the home. While Chant (2013) notes an increase in paid work among women in the Global South, this is not accompanied by a decline in domestic work. Thus, the proximity to waste and subsequent inequalities which often cause uneven allocations in the burden of household waste handling are an outcome of cultural dynamics and socio-economic factors. By framing these practices within the Feminist Political Ecology approach, one can recognize how household waste management intersects with broader socio-economic and cultural systems, entrenching gendered labour divisions in private spaces. It can be argued that the struggles that result from patriarchal systems and institutional arrangements have important consequences which impede women from interacting with economic and social institutions.

This research affirmed that institutional actors such as local councillors and housing officials act as gatekeepers through the implementation of systems that prohibit women from obtaining employment and enjoying the benefits of urban prosperity. Findings suggest that local political councillors apply discriminatory practices to prevent women from obtaining a bank account, which is crucial for formal employment. This contradicts constitutional guarantees of equality and freedom of economic activity (Section 22). More specifically, women who are unmarried, poor and of working age face significant barriers to entering the formal labour market. This aligns with Feminist Political Ecology's principle that power relations embedded in institutions intersect with gender, class, and marital status to shape access to economic opportunities. Therefore, the dynamics of obtaining a bank account re-configure gender inequalities: because of their partner's surname appearing on council bill letters, unmarried women encounter resistance from local political structures when proof of residency is required. These barriers restrict women's mobility in both physical and economic spaces, undermining their ability to benefit from urban development. These differences emerged during focus group discussions on aspirations to enter formal employment and to move beyond the confinement of the domestic sphere. As documented elsewhere (Sultana, 2009), development has been

criticized for sometimes reinforcing gender-based inequalities in households rather than reducing them. Gender inequalities are not only about the intra-household divisions of domestic work and its outcomes in relation to power and oppression but also about the function of development.

Women's willingness to escape domestic waste versus their continued engagement with the domestic sphere can be analysed from a neo-apartheid perspective. During apartheid, Black people required a permit to be present in the urban areas (Klaaren, 2018). Our findings show that the current permit system in South African townships has deep historical roots, highlighting new forms of control that still aim to restrict the presence of women in urban areas. As observed, women living in temporary housing do not possess a permit allowing them to live there. By granting permits only to men in households, institutions reinforce patriarchal norms that associate men with the public sphere and economic activity while confining women to reproductive and domestic labour. The permit's dual role as a tool for employment access and spatial control not only marginalizes women economically, but also entrenches power imbalances within households, forcing women to depend on male partners to access urban opportunities. Women expressed their frustration regarding the necessity to beg their partners for permits. These dynamics in a democratic South Africa should be seen as the emergence of a neo-apartheid regime that is currently shaping urban spaces, institutions, and the population. The neo-apartheid city that we see unfolding today has a long historical background. Therefore, the decisions of men and women on waste-related tasks and the specific practices that they employ in this respect are not only influenced by the interplay between intra-household gender policies and patriarchy but also politicized institutional arrangements.

Conclusion

Drawing theoretical insight from Feminist Political Ecology theory, this paper examined the gendered nature of household waste management in a resource-deprived South African township. In particular, we asked how engagements with household waste create spaces of inequalities based on gender and identity. We conclude that gendered inequalities occur in two ways, firstly through normalized gendered norms and the entrenched socially constructed difference between men and women that (re)produce gendered power relations and unequal exposure to household waste. Therefore, cultural dynamics, combined with socio-economic factors, are significantly influencing gender norms, resulting in uneven allocations in the burden of household waste handling.

Secondly, we argue that gender differences are enacted in employment practices in the Global South through discriminatory processes by institutional actors that restrict women from leaving the domestic space. Furthermore, opportunities for women to engage in these emerging institutional arrangements proved to be limited, thus further highlighting that gender-based inequalities endure and are often compounded by experiences of oppression from multiple sources. The housing permit system, deeply rooted in the apartheid era, reflects new forms of control aimed at restricting the presence of women in urban areas. The emergence of the neo-apartheid city in democratic South Africa is a stark reminder of the long historical background that continues to shape urban space, institutions, and the

population. Therefore, we argue that gender-based inequalities in the management of household waste are an outcome of the intersection of marital status, life stage, socio-economic status, and the political economy that constrains women to the household.

These findings have important implications for addressing social inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. For women to gain greater autonomy and improve their social status, policies should be designed to address the differences among the respective social categories. To challenge this regime and move towards gender equality in South African urban spaces, it is essential to reform policies, and overhaul institutional arrangements related to household waste management. By taking such steps South Africans can begin to overcome the neo-apartheid legacy and create inclusive and equitable urban spaces for all its residents. Future research should focus on the physical and psychological effects of household waste work on women, particularly in environments with inadequate waste disposal infrastructure. This research could uncover further critical insights into the challenges faces by women in these settings, leading to more effective policies and interventions aimed at improving their health and wellbeing.

Notes

1. eThekwini was formerly known as Durban and is situated in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal.
2. In 1952, the Native Laws Amendment Act meant that Black people were prohibited from leaving rural areas for an urban area without a permit from a specific local authority. Those black people travelling to urban areas had to obtain a permit within 72 hours to seek work (Klaaren, 2018).

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