Community Caretaking and Women Volunteer Teachers in Mumbai Slums

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Despite increasing emphasis on civic participation in governance, how and why people participate in civil society and what meanings they ascribe to their actions have received scarce attention. Addressing the gap, this paper ethnographically investigates women's roles as volunteer teachers in their slum localities in Mumbai. Examining the meanings of their community-based teaching roles, the paper illustrates that women interpreted their engagements as community caretaking, which was grounded in interpersonal relationships and a desire for social upliftment of the disadvantaged. Illuminating civic participation from the standpoint of disadvantaged women, it reveals women's citizenship action as a complex and negotiated process, intersected by class and gender constructs.

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In recent years, the Indian context has seen civil society gain recognition as an important participant in governance. A shift in the perception of the roles of state and civil society has contributed to this salience: good governance has come to be associated with the state playing a facilitative role, and markets and society working in collaboration toward the common goal of economic and social development [Archer 1994]. Neera Chandhoke notes that from India's Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-1990) on, there has been a "perceptible shift from government to civil society organisations and to the market in matters of service delivery" [Chandhoke 2005: p 1]. Estimates suggest that there are around 1.2 million non-profit organisations operating in the country, with the voluntary sector engaging 16 million people as part-time or full-time volunteers [Srivastava and Tandon 2005]. While India has had an history of active civic engagement [Sen 1998; Tandon and Mohanty 2002], undoubtedly, recent policy changes have helped in expanding the role of civil society in governance and creating spaces for citizens' participation. However, how citizens occupy and animate these newly created spaces [cf Cornwall 2002] and make sense of their participation has received scarce attention. Unarguably, understanding how and why people participate in such spaces for public action would shed light on the forms of citizenship action and render a nuanced reading of people's democratic engagement.

This paper, drawn from a larger ethnographic study, investigates women volunteers' teaching action in their slum communities in Mumbai. At the time of research, the women were participating with Pratham, a civil society organisation that is working in partnership with local governments and local slums and village communities across India toward universalising elementary education. The paper examines women's meaning making of their teaching engagement in their community space. It illustrates that the women interpret their teaching roles as community caretaking. Using a feminist reading of the construct of citizenship, the paper goes on to suggest that such community caretaking may be characterised as an expression of citizenship action. For the women in this study, teaching in their localities is interpreted as acts of care that are both grounded in interpersonal relationships, and a desire for social uplift of the disadvantaged. However, such acts of community caretaking are both multidimensional and negotiated and challenge simplistic and universalistic notions of citizenship. Far from being autonomous economic and social actors, the women's actions are multifaceted, rooted in the multiple collectivities of which they are part and the dynamics of the same.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first, I describe the study context. Second, I discuss the theoretical lens used and briefly discuss relevant literature. In the third and fourth sections, I examine women's community-based teaching-caretaking roles, one, as articulated through interpersonal relationships and relational discourses, and two, a desire for social uplift, respectively. In the fifth section, I conclude.

1 The Study Context

The study was located at Baiganwadi, a sprawling slum area located in north-east Mumbai that spills onto one of Mumbai's solid waste dumping grounds. The area is Muslim-dominated with a population of close to 3,00,000 (in two contiguous slum areas, one of which is Baiganwadi). Brutal crimes are commonplace here and the area is generally considered unsafe for women and children. The two government school buildings in the area are overcrowded and cater to the poorest of the population. At the time of data collection, the area had a high incidence of child labour[1] and one of the largest number of

out-of-school children of school-going age in the city.

The women in this study were working as teachers with Pratham and were part of its 24,000 largely female volunteer teaching workforce. Pratham was born in 1994,

Table: Profile of Teachers at Baiganwadi: Entire Teaching Group and Sample Group Teachers

	All Teachers	Sample Group Teachers
	[N=43]	[N=18]
Age:		
16-23 years	39	14
>24 years	4	4
Educational grade completed:[a]		
<10th	23	9
10th – 12th	17	8
>12th	1	1
Marital status:[b]		
Unmarried	38	13
Married	3	3
Separated/divorced	1	2
Religion:		
Muslim	41	16
Hindu	2	2

[a]Two respondents in the 'All teachers' group did not respond to the question.
[b]One respondent in the 'All teachers' group did not respond to the question.

in the wake of the Jomtein Conference on Education for All, where all represented nations pledged universalisation of primary education. Civil society participation was stated as an important strategy for achieving this goal. Pratham began in Mumbai with the initial seed money from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); today it has a presence in 14 states. Its approach focuses on "complete coverage" that aims to ensure that every child in the given geographical area has access to education, and is learning. At the time of research, Pratham had four programmes targeted toward the educational needs of children in the age-group 3-12 years. These included a pre-school programme, a programme to meet the literacy needs of underachieving school-going children, a programme for out-of-school children of school-going age and a library programme for all children in the locality. These programmes were implemented through local women whom Pratham recruited as teachers to run their programmes for children in their respective localities. Pratham trained the women and also paid them an honorarium; for some programmes, the teachers were also required to charge a fee from students that aimed at partial cost recovery.

For the purposes of this study, data was collected during the period between June 2004 and April 2005. A multi-method approach to data collection [Fontana and Frey 1998] was employed that included a combination of ethnographic methods: secondary data, participant observation and informal interviews, survey data, indepth interviews and visual methods. Grounded theory methods were used for analysis.

During the period of data collection, Pratham had recruited 64 teachers at Baiganwadi. While most teachers and staff were observed during unstructured observations and many were informally interviewed, 18 teachers were eventually selected through purposeful sampling [Patton 1990] to form the focus of the study. They were selected in order to create a heterogeneous sample group rather than a representative one. Given below is a table displaying the background characteristics of the sample group of teachers:

As indicated in the table, the typical teacher at this community was unmarried, Muslim, and below 23 years. There were a few older, married women, as well as divorced women who worked as teachers. Most of the teachers had an educational completion level that was 12th grade or below. Survey questionnaires administered to teachers in similar communities in Mumbai indicated that the teacher profile here was correspondingly similar. In the sample group, the characteristics of the most teachers fitted those of the majority in this area.

2 Women, Citizenship and Community Caretaking

In recent years, feminist scholarship has generated extensive literature on the gendered nature of citizenship in liberal democracies [see for example, Foster 1999; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988, 1989; Roy 2005; Walby 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997]. Citizenship, as this scholarship argues, is premised on the opposition of the public and private spheres. The underlying assumptions of citizenship are normatively masculine and associated with the public domain. Women, who are both materially and ideologically linked to the private domain, have thus effectively been excluded from attaining full political, civil, and

social status as citizens. Carole Pateman, for instance, argues that civil freedom is not universal as the abstract notion of citizenship would seem to suggest; women "have been incorporated into public life in a different manner from men" [Pateman 1989: p 4]. Their struggle for inclusion as citizens has been a contested process, one in which "women have been included as 'women';…as beings whose sexual embodiment prevents them from enjoying the same political standing as men" (ibid).

Nira Yuval-Davis (1999) critiques contemporary theorisations on citizenship as being "westocentric", in the sense of dealing almost exclusively with western modes of citizenship; further, she argues that this writing assumes a homogeneous notion of "women", "moulded in some idealised notion of a white, heterosexual, often middle class western woman" (p 120). In order to introduce new frames into the thinking on women and citizenship, she suggests broadening the meaning of citizenship through analytically separating it from the "nation state" and understanding it as a "multilayered construct". As she puts it:

[c]itizenship needs to be understood as a multilayered construct, in which one's citizenship in collectivities in the different layers – local ethnic, national, state, cross- or trans-state and supra-state – is affected and often at least partly constructed by the relationships and positionings of each layer in specific historic context [Yuval-Davis 1999: p 122].

Such collectivities could include "the family, social strata, ethnic and national groupings…as well as institutions like those of education, trade unions and means of communication" [Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989: p 5]. Each of these, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) note, produce their own ideologies and are subjected to those of the state as well.

Recent feminist scholarship has sought to explain working class women's community-based action as "acts of citizenship" [Mirza and Reay 2000; Naples 1998]. However, could such action be considered as a citizenship action? Ruth Lister (1998) addresses this question in her paper based on her research on women's community development activities in low income neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland. She

draws upon the civic republican tradition of citizenship that "would argue that citizens are supposed to come together to achieve common ends with those different from themselves and in so doing transcend their specific interests and identify with the wider collectivity than with any particular group perspective" [Lister 1998: p 230]. She points out though that the notion of common good is a problematic one. On the one hand, it serves to "reinforce the position of privileged groups" (ibid, pp 230-31), however, on the other, refusal to acknowledge the activism of disadvantaged groups as citizenship action "is to reinforce the very exclusion that they are fighting in the name of a common good which has subordinated the interests of these communities to those of more powerful groups (ibid, p 231).

In low income neighbourhoods, women's community-based action often takes the form of community caretaking. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), for instance, draws attention to the cultural institution of "othermothering" in African-American communities, where women own responsibility beyond their nuclear families for children in their kin group and for those beyond. This cultural institution provides, as she puts it, a "generalised ethic of caring and accountability among African-American women" (ibid, p 189), and women's experiences as othermothers "provide the foundation for black women's political activism" (ibid, p 189). In a similar vein, Nancy Naples (1998) characterises the community caretaking roles of Latina and black community workers in her study, as "activist mothering" that encompassed a broadened definition of actual mothering practices. As she notes: "The community workers defined 'good mothering' to comprise all actions, including social activism, that addressed the needs of their children and community – variously defined as their racial-ethnic group, low income people, or members of a particular neighbourhood" [Naples 1998: p 113]. Mirza and Reay (2000) suggest in their study on black supplementary school women educators in the UK context, that the educators' idea of community was a "pragmatic, conscious construction of a 'black home'… They [educators] were not simply a part of the community. They were also engaged

in actively constructing it through their work as radical black educators" (p 69). Such studies of women's community caretaking roles and actions have highlighted, in Naples' words, the women's "self-conscious struggles against racism, sexism, and poverty" [Naples 1998, p 114]. These struggles have often involved, as Gilkes' (1983) study of black women community organisers points out, an engagement characterised by "going up for the oppressed" as opposed to the work orientation and "career patterns associated with the dominant culture notions of professionalism" (p 136).

In the Indian research scenario, little attention has been paid to analytically examining women's lived experiences as community-based actors. This study therefore takes as its starting point understandings generated through research on low income women's community-based action located in the international contexts discussed above. The two sections that follow illustrate how Mumbai's volunteer teachers construct their acts of teaching in their own slum localities through notions of caretaking. In the final section, the paper suggests framing the women's community caretaking as a citizenship action.

3 Interpersonal Relationships and Discourses

One way in which this study's participants talked about their teaching engagements was through relational discourses which were characterised by the actual relationships they shared with their students. Their descriptions of their acts for children's educational inclusion, however, demonstrated a conflicted process, which stemmed from their identities as both women and teachers. As Walkerdine (1990) notes, being a teacher implies legitimacy in the domain of knowledge and power, and being a woman implies a lack thereof in the same domains. The teacher narratives discussed in this section reflect the conundrum of being women teachers. They demonstrate women's conflicted legitimacy and the status as "teacher" in the community space and its resolution which stemmed from their interpretation of their roles as grounded in the interpersonal relations, and relations of care they shared with their students.

Like an 'Older Sister': Afia consistently talked of her motivation for teaching the 'balwadi' (preschool class) as stemming from her "love" for young children and the satisfaction of playing a foundational role in children's education. In order to play this role, Afia spoke of constructing her image as one which was non-threatening to children. While this was a message conveyed to teachers at Pratham, Afia appeared to have reworked it and given it meaning in ways that made sense to her work and teaching role:

> I mingle with the children. I sit among the children, and have them sit around me…I tell them, 'ask me questions and I will answer'…Then I ask children questions and they answer – 'teacher I went here, I saw this, I did that.' Meaning I found it very easy to be with children…If we are strict with children, they will not be able to do [the task]. If one becomes a child with the children, doing things with children becomes easy. Children will do [the task]…if they know the teacher will not touch me, she will not beat me…. [as a result] children do not consider me a teacher, they think I'm their older sister.

Afia's drawing upon the image of "older sister" here may be understood as being both gendered and strategic. Older girls in low income families play the role of nurturing their siblings. Hence, conjuring this image frames her as a nurturer in the context of her teaching role. At the same time, her use of the image is strategic as it downplays the traditional image of teacher as a figure of authority: It portrays her as non-threatening to the children, which is helpful in creating a child-friendly environment conducive to children's attendance and learning.

Afia was also strategic in her negotiations with parents in order to get their participation as she knew the latter was a critical element in ensuring children's attendance. Thus she talked about using the balwadi fees to negotiate children's attendance with parents. Initially, she asked parents not to pay fees, hoping this would eliminate a stumbling block over children's attendance. However, after she began accepting fees, there were many non-paying parents with whom she did not insist on payment of fees. Rationalising her decision, she says: "because there are mostly Biharis here. Their families are large and they do not even have

food to eat. There are a lot of children from whom I do not charge fees."

While Afia viewed the issue here through the lens of parents' material necessity, she also added that if she were to insist, parents would stop sending their children. Furthermore, asking parents for fees was implicated in her understanding of her class position. When I probed her about whether she should not expect fees as a matter of her due as teacher, she said: "I cannot do it. My 'abbu' says – "[Even] if there is no food at home, my children are such that they will not go to anyone else's [home] to ask for it." Evidenced in this is the understanding of her social position and class. Being poor in her context did not command respectability. Asking or insisting on payment of fees would suggest that she, and by extension, her family needed the money for subsistence, that her father as the primary breadwinner, was unable to provide. This would bring disrepute to herself and her family.

When the 'Area ki ladki' Becomes a Teacher: When she became a teacher, Nazneen imagined that her "post" would bring her recognition and respect culturally associated with the teaching profession. However, her everyday interactions with parents highlighted for her a disconnection between perception and reality. Some of her major conflicts with parents had been over the issue of non-payment of fees. Such conflicts sometimes resulted in altercations, because of which she felt insulted: "I feel like it is a matter of 'jalalat' [insult]… [т]hat the teacher is fighting over Rs 20. And when they shout at you, you feel bad". Her conflict with neighbours (who were also parents of children she taught) sometimes become a matter of family dignity, no longer restricted to her. Nazneen's mother got involved in one altercation. After giving the parent a mouthful, Nazneen's mother turned on her and said, as she recounts: "You do not need to conduct the class, shut it. Do not your abbu and your brother give you money? Do you not get to eat at home?". Implied in her mother's comment was the issue of respectability: in a similar sense as Afia's, Nazneen's asking for fees tantamounted to her family needing her

to work for the money, and that would be a matter of family disgrace.

Nazneen diagnosed that the reason she did not have "value", or receive the respect of a teacher from the parents in the community was because she was an 'area ki ladki' (girl from the locality). She complained about the Pratham staff telling her to talk to the people to convince them of the importance of sending their child to her class, implying through this that they did not understand the dynamics at play in her social interactions. In a somewhat heated, long monologue, she explained:

> If they [parents] do not send their children, what is our fault? We cannot have authority over other's children. We can explain to them, but we cannot drag them to class… If I were a teacher who came from outside [the locality], had big glasses, wore a sari, I would have had a reputation, I would have had respect. Now I am only a 'ladki' [girl[2]] from the area [locality], so in their eyes, what am I? An area ki ladki. Even if I explain to them from the position of a teacher, from their point of view, I am only from their area, no? So there is no 'value'…Now if I live here, how will they respect me? Even if I have the 'post' of a teacher, the children are from this area.

Nazneen's reference to herself as ladki is telling. Age, gender and marital status intersect to produce authority, status and respect. A ladki commands the least status in this hierarchy. Thus, Nazneen's reference brings to the fore her lack of authority and status as a young, unmarried girl in her community. This is at odds with the idea of the authority and respect traditionally attributed to a teacher, and in Nazneen's perception an important reason for parental non-involvement in the educational programmes she conducted.

It appeared that it was because of these circumstances that Nazneen searched for creative ways of eliciting parental participation. For instance, she attempted to replace the Pratham test instrument (used during surveys to identify low-achieving children) with asking the child to read from her textbook, since she thought this would make a better impact on the parental awareness and consequently on their commitment to send the child to her class. However, she understood that parental awareness of a child's low literacy skills was not enough. She would thus

use economic and emotional arguments as well. She recounted her arguments to an unwilling parent:

> "Khala, tutoring costs a lot. But I'm tutoring at my own home, which will cost you only Rs 20 a month…Your child must be eating [buying snacks] for at least a rupee a day. That adds up to Rs 30 a month. So… if you give Rs 20 here, you are still saving Rs 10." Some parents understand this and quickly give their names during the survey. …But when the time comes, [sometimes] the child does not want to attend the class….So I say, 'khala,…This class that we conduct, is it for our benefit, or for yours? … If someone asks your child to read something and your child does so, how happy will you feel…And if the child is unable [to read], you will begin beating the child…[So] if the child comes to us and learns something, what's the harm?

The work of bringing children to class each day was a challenging one, and a reason for why she thought of quitting this work each year. Yet, she had been teaching for the past eight years, and when I asked her why she continued, she expressed her motivation in terms of the relationships she had developed with the children, and the sense of responsibility she felt toward them. This responsibility was with reference to and rooted in the context she taught. Knowing that she was perhaps the only community-based educational resource the children had, she could provide a worthwhile alternative to children, who otherwise would be "roam[ing] around". Her attachment to the children then appeared intertwined with her sense of responsibility toward them. As she put it:

> They [children] give me respect. They tell me, teacher, you teach. …Some say, "teacher, we will only study with you. We will not go anywhere else". When I see these children's hearts, their love, I do not feel like shutting down the class. Because they will also suffer…Just for a few children, why should I have the others suffer?

4 Teaching and Social Upliftment

Viewing their engagement through the lens of the setting within which they worked, women constructed their teaching in terms of working for the underprivileged living in their areas and positioned themselves as caretakers of children who lacked educational resources [Naples 1998]. However, their interpretation of their roles was embedded in the gender

relations and material circumstances of the population with whom they worked. As the following accounts demonstrate, these women strategically used their status as teachers to negotiate for educational change in their localities.

4.1 'Ilm Bantna' (Spreading Education)

In Islamic religious philosophy, 'ilm' roughly refers to true (religious) knowledge, the pursuit and spread of which occupies the highest status. As a teacher, Rubina constructed her role as one with social responsibility, particularly toward parents and children that were not literate. As she put it:

> Our children do not know anything. They are *kore* [blank], they do not know anything. If we do not teach children, if we do not pay attention to them – 'Live the way you live, eat the way you eat', so how will they remain? They will remain *jahil* [uncivilised]. Because they will not know anything. Just work, eat, and live. Alternately, if we know something, …we [can] work hard to [educate] our children, 'see this is how things are. This is good, this is bad. This is important to study.…We give the child as much *ilm* as we have…This is *ilm batna*. Today our children are studying. In the future, they will become somebody and educate others.

Rubina's words echo a modernity discourse, perceiving education as a means for "civilisation" of those that were illiterate, to achieve progress and "become somebody". She saw her own role as instrumental in this process, and sought to use her position as teacher to work toward the same.

While she viewed her role as such, establishing its legitimacy in order that she could pursue its goals was a constant act of negotiation, particularly with parents. This was evidenced in several incidents she described. One particular incident took place when the staff planned an awareness exercise through organising competitions among children in the community. The teachers were responsible for gathering the children and to act as liaison with parents. The parents were required to pay a small fee toward the costs. When prizes were awarded only to a few children (who had secured the first three places in every competition), there was an uproar in some localities, particularly that of Rubina's, where parents felt that

Pratham had cheated them and taken the money for no return. Clearly this was being said in a context, where the poor are regularly cheated, and there is a general mistrust against anyone in a position of authority. Rubina, as a representative of the organisation, received the flak. When she heard of this discontent, Rubina refused to visit her locality to distribute the library books, saying "They will beat me up". Slowly, though, she began sending one of her younger nieces, who only came back to report that the parents were demanding to see her. Rubina eventually picked up the courage to meet the parents because, as she put it, "this is my work".

As she recounted it, on meeting with parents she began questioning them as to why they had been refusing to let the children read, despite the fact that the children loved to do so. The parents, in turn, demanded an explanation regarding the whereabouts of their money. Rubina explained how the money had been used, adding:

> We are working for your benefit. We wanted to see from the paper I had [the children] do what the children know. What did they know before and after giving them the story, what have they come to know. Your children will progress in their studies because of this.

Interestingly, Rubina used her symbolic power as a teacher to convert the issue of money perceived as wrongly taken into an issue about the children's educational welfare. The subtext read that she, the teacher, was concerned and responsible for the children's "progress", and activities such as those organised would help the children do so and that parents should not stand in the way of the same. Her speaking from the position of a teacher was strategic in that it both legitimated her authority as a teacher and justified the action she took on behalf of the organisation. Had she positioned herself as an "area ki ladki", to use Nazneen's term, she would have most definitely faced the wrath of parents. The parents were convinced and agreed to participate the next time a programme of this nature was held. As a proof of this, when the programme was held twice thereafter, children from the same locality participated. And, as she told me with pride, she was able to gather the maximum number of children, as

compared to other teachers working in her part of the community.

4.2 The 'Mahol' and Teaching Engagement

For many women, their teaching engagement gained meaning through what they referred to as their mahol or environment, which, in their context suggested deprivation: material, educational, social, security, and so forth. Sometimes this meant creating opportunities for children's future; at others it meant a broader improvement of their localities.

Malika talked of engaging in teaching work because of her 'shauk' (liking or interest). Her shauk, however, appeared conflated with a sense of responsibility toward those that were underprivileged. Malika belonged to a relatively higher socio-economic stratum. She lived in an adjoining slum area and travelled from there to teach in a locality close to the dumping ground. Both she and her older sister taught in a single-room space that belonged to a private school in the vicinity. They rented this space for few hours each day, paying the rent from their own salaries; they did not receive any help from Pratham in this regard. She chose to come all the way to teach here since there was dire need for educational work in this area. The low monetary compensation was of little consequence to her as "[t]he main [thing is] if we begin educating the children from now on, in the future, that child will find the right path. This is why we teach". She went on:

> Because…we saw the children's mahol that parents just did not want to educate their children. They wanted to extract work out of the children until possible. But when we brought our understanding of education [and] sat with the children to teach them, then parents also began to feel that it is right to educate the children. We requested the parents and began calling the children. So the children began attending [the class].

Rooting her role in the social context in which she worked, Malika constructed the image of the parent is that of being poor, and perhaps, ignorant or unknowing – in that they engaged their children in work and not education. As a teacher, and therefore, educated and aware, she positioned herself as an advocate for children's education, one who made parents

realise the worth of educating their children. Like Rubina, she saw herself as an agent whose role was to help parents appreciate the worth of educating their child, which in turn, would help the child find the "right path".

This "right path" meant convincing parents not to send their children for garbage collection. She recounted her argument to them:

> See, you have such young children. If at this age you extract work from them, they are illiterate and they will remain illiterate. And they will also be engaged in [nefarious] activities. Then I explained to them the way in which Pratham had trained me.[3]

Perceiving her teaching engagement in terms of creating future opportunities for children, Malika went on to say that when arguments did not work with parents, she would try and coerce the children into attending class. Malika's action with parents and children suggests that she used her legitimacy as teacher to advocate on behalf of the children's education; her position as a teacher gave her legitimacy to seek a change in parental attitudes toward their children's education. Her efforts appeared to receive a fair amount of success, as evidenced by the high levels of children's regular attendance in her class.

Like Malika, Saira used her understanding of the mahol to situate her teaching engagement. Aside from perceiving her work as creating educational opportunities for children, Saira interpreted it as that of bringing 'sudhar', or improvement to her locality. As she explained:

> In this way something can be done about our 'area' [locality]. The condition of our area – that improves [sudharti hai]. The children that work in karkhanas [small-scale industrial units], …do not [have the opportunity to] study, …are able to study.

In speaking about the "condition of our area", Saira referred to the material and social problems associated with her locality. Her engagement in teaching work contributed to the collective improvement of her locality.

While Malika constructed the parents as ignorant and unknowing, whom she, as a teacher, guided along the "right path", Saira, in contrast, constructed parents as neglectful ("The parents here are 'lahparwah' (neglectful)") and thus

herself as one with the responsibility for their children's well-being. As an evidence, she pointed to children's irregular attendance, saying, "Mothers say, 'children do not want to go [to class] – what can we do?' I say, 'arre, at least (try to) send them. If you send them, only then will they come.'" She recounted explaining to them that if they sent their child with a snack, a bag, a slate, and if s/he got an opportunity to socialise with other children, then the child would be interested in attending. However, since parents were "neglectful", "What can one do? Children do not want to come. They attend arbi (madrassas), and that is enough." As a teacher, Saira saw herself as one responsibly looking after the children's education in a social environment detrimental to the children's educational welfare, as opposed to parents who did not give consideration to their children's education beyond their religious learning. In the face of this she spoke of continuing to persist with parents, exhorting them to understand their "responsibility" toward their children's education. She recounted telling them often: "The teacher puts in hard work to teach. She (even) comes (to the locality). It is your responsibility to send the children."

5 Conclusions

Feminist scholarship has long argued that women's collective action in working class or low income communities constitutes politics, and consequently, citizenship practice [Ackelsberg 1988; Lister 1998; Morgen and Bookman 1988 and Naples 1998]. Calling for broadening the notion of politics beyond the arena of formal politics, Morgen and Bookman (1988) define political activity as "activities that are carried on in the daily lives of ordinary people and are enmeshed in the social institutions and political-economic processes of their society. When there is an attempt to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic power relations in…society – that is politics" (p 4). The actions of the women participants in this study are political in this sense: they animate the spaces created by Pratham's entry in local communities as community-based teachers and work toward the collective agenda of educational inclusion

of marginalised children. Their citizenship action is expressed through notions of community caretaking, which in turn, gains meaning from the challenging socio-economic environment within which the women work and are grounded in both interpersonal relationships with children and work for social uplift of the disadvantaged.

However, the women's citizenship acts are multifaceted and negotiated, and challenge simplistic and universalistic notions of citizenship. For instance, Nazneen traverses her teaching engagement through her dual and contradictory identities as ladki and teacher, both of which are tied to her own social location. She is creative regarding her approach with parents and ultimately grounds her work in the relationships she has established with her students. Afia describes constructing relationships with children that would encourage them to attend regularly. In relation to parents, she appears to make strategic use of the issue of fees to ensure their participation. However, the notion of collecting fees goes beyond garnering parental support: As she describes it, it is tied to her own social location and meanings of class and respectability in her context. Rubina characterises her engagement as one stemming out of her desire to spread education to disadvantaged children. Parental trust is key to her goal and she ensures the same through strategically using her status as a teacher rather than positioning herself as belonging to any other collectivity (such as that of women or member of their community). Thus, far from being autonomous economic and social actors, the women's actions are multilayered, rooted in the dynamics of their multiple collectivities [cf Yuval-Davis 1999].

The women's action gains significance within the larger context of exclusion in which they live. While current discourses on governance have created new spaces for civil society participation and citizen action, the experiences of "public" (and "private") differ for different collectivities and for different members of these collectivities [cf Hill Collins 1994, cited in Mirza and Reay 2000: p 69]. Multitudes of those that live in poorer slums in Mumbai have little access to services like potable water,

sanitation, public health or educational facilities, and face a constant threat of eviction. The women in this study belong to such communities and face exclusions on several fronts on grounds of their class and gender backgrounds. Their relationship to their own collectivities and to other collectivities, as well as the nature of the relationship of their collectivity to the state determines the extent and nature of their participation. Belonging to materially deprived contexts and having been excluded from the domain of education, the women are paradoxically today engaged in educational change in their localities. For these women then, their community caretaking acts include their very "right to have rights" [Dagnino 1998: p 48] and reveals the contradictory nature of citizenship.

As the rhetoric of citizen participation grows louder in policy circles, this paper highlights the need to understand meanings of public action from the standpoint of those who are disadvantaged and working in similar contexts. Along these lines, this paper has illuminated how women's citizenship action is a complex and negotiated process, which is intersected by gender and class constructs. The study has implicitly emphasised that a view from the grassroots would help reveal the actual terms of people's inclusion and engagement, and the relations of power that structure the same [Jones 1997]. Any assessment of democratic engagement ought to consider this in order to illuminate the constraints and resources available to those that participate. An assessment of this nature would undoubtedly point to pathways to strengthen civil society and participatory action.

NOTES

1 Since the study, there have been several crackdowns on industrial units employing child labour in this geographic area.

2 Young, unmarried woman.

3 The Pratham rhetoric largely revolved around emphasising the importance of education to parents, and also the benefits they would have by getting their children educated.

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