

NEW SPACES OF CITIZENSHIP? RETHINKING GENDERED PARTICIPATION  
AND EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on empirical research in South Africa to explore questions about the exclusionary nature of citizenship, the problems and possibilities of participatory citizenship and its potential reconceptualisation through the lens of gender. The paper examines some of the major debates and policies in South Africa around issues of citizenship, participation and gender and explores why the discursive accommodation of gender equity by the South African government is not fully realised in its attempts to construct substantive and participatory citizenship. It explores some of the emergent spaces of radical citizenship that marginalized groups and black women, in particular, are shaping in response. Findings suggest that whilst there are possibilities for creating alternative, more radical citizenship spaces, these can also be problematic and exclusionary. The paper draws on recent feminist writing to examine the possibilities for rethinking citizenship as an ethical, non-instrumental social status, distinct from both political participation and economic independence. This reframing of citizenship moves beyond notions of ‘impasse’ or ‘hollowness’, challenges the public/private distinction that still frames many debates about citizenship and considers the emancipatory potential of gendered subjectivity. The paper argues that citizenship is shaped by differing social, political and cultural contexts and this brings into sharp focus the problematic assumption of the universal applicability of western concepts and theories.

KEY WORDS

Citizenship, participation, gender, exclusion, empowerment, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of governance there is increasing interest in the nature and significance of citizenship and how this might inform the widening of political space and enhancing public involvement in decision-making (Otzen 1999; Fung and Wright 2001; Gaventa 2002a). This has resulted in some cases in new patterns of democratic practice, the positing of participatory alternatives to expert-driven processes (Fischer 2000) and a proliferation of actors and political spaces in which citizen participation takes place. In addition, recent years have witnessed the increasing coalescence of developmental concerns with human rights issues, particularly around rights-based approaches to development (Ferguson 1999; Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Munro 1996). In turn, this has brought citizenship into development thinking and refocuses attention on participation as a fundamental human and citizenship right (Hausermann 1998; Jones and Gaventa 2002; Meer and Sever 2004). New spaces of participation, formed through opening (sometimes through legislation) new political and policy spaces for citizen involvement in governance, have become the “new development blueprints” (Cornwall 2002a: 1; Botes and van Rensburg 2000). Global institutions, including the World Bank, have embraced citizen ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ as a panacea for addressing inequalities (Wolfensohn 1996) or, as some would argue, to foster ‘good’ governance and the spread of neo-liberalism (Duffield 2002).

Whilst governments, global institutions and development agencies are enthusiastically embracing citizenship, increasingly within western political and cultural theory questions are asked about the usefulness of citizenship: who owns, defines and confers it, who partakes of its status and agency and who should. At the

core of many of these debates is an apparently unresolved impasse: “the inevitable exclusiveness of citizenship, which distinguishes those who have it from those who don’t” (Patton and Caserio 2000:1). In addressing this issue, many theorists seek to rehabilitate the idea of citizenship, to extend, reshape and reclaim it (for example, Brown forthcoming; Nancy 1991; Castells 2000; Honig 1998; Miller 1998a 1998b; Rimke 2000; Shapiro 2000). However, others argue that these attempts continue to effect exclusions and question if citizenship can ever be properly rehabilitated, has any significance beyond symbolism and is, in effect, a “hollow” concept (Heater 1999). Paradoxically, while there is increasing scepticism about citizenship within western theory, its perceived centrality to ideas about development and social justice makes a critical understanding of how ideas of citizenship are produced and contested, and with what effects, of particular importance.

What is striking about many of these debates is that despite sustained feminist critiques from a variety of different perspectives (see, for example, de Beauvoir 1952; Honig 1992; Lister 1995 1997a 1997b; Pateman 1989; Phillips 1991; Young 1990; Yuval-Davis 1997), dominant conceptualisations of citizenship still rest largely on an abstract, universal and western-centric notion of the individual and are consequently unable to recognize either the political relevance of gender or of non-western perspectives and experiences. They reduce questions of citizenship to either political citizenship (in terms of an instrumental notion of political participation) or social citizenship (in terms of an instrumental notion of economic independence) (Prokhovnik 1998). This paper attempts to counter this western-centricity and the absence of gender, particularly from debates that seek to bring citizenship into

development, and to propose a non-instrumental feminist conception through a discussion of contemporary citizenship issues in South Africa. It attempts to theorize what citizenship means in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and to those most often marginalized, namely black<sup>1</sup> women, exploring questions about the exclusionary nature of citizenship and its potential rethinking through the lens of gender.

The paper draws on in-depth interviews conducted over a nine-month period with civil society organisations and in peri-urban and rural communities in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>2</sup> It is divided into three sections. First, it examines some of the major debates and policies in South Africa around issues of citizenship, participation and gender, focusing particularly on the failure to fully realise gender equity in substantive and participatory citizenship. Second, it explores emergent spaces of radical citizenship that marginalized groups and black women, in particular, are shaping in response to their exclusion from formal spaces of participation. Third, drawing on recent feminist writing, it examines the possibilities for rethinking citizenship as an ethical, non-instrumental social status, distinct from both political participation and economic independence. This feminist conceptualisation allows us to think beyond notions of 'impasse' or 'hollowness', to rethink the public/private distinction that still frames many debates about citizenship and to consider the emancipatory potential of gendered subjectivity as it relates to both men and women. Taking account of understandings and experiences of citizenship in the South African context reveals that citizenship is shaped by differing

social, political and cultural contexts and this brings into sharp focus the problematic assumption of the universal applicability of western concepts and theories.

GENDER AND CITIZENSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA: OFFICIALIZING  
STRATEGIES AND SPACES OF INVITATION

The transition to democracy in South Africa does not mark the endpoint of political struggle, of contestations over the meanings of citizenship, or the eradication of social and economic inequalities, including those of gender (Hassim, 1999). As with other post-independent states, the struggle for women lies in the (im)possibilities of translating de jure equality into de facto equality, and of translating state level commitment to gender equality into tangible outcomes at local and individual levels. International feminist debates suggest that citizenship must encompass more than formal political rights, acknowledging that universal inclusion does not exist because in reality citizenship is based on power exercised through social, economic and political structures that perpetuate the exclusion of certain social groups (such as women and poor people). Lister (1997) argues that civil and political rights are a necessary, if not sufficient, precondition for full and equal citizenship for women, which need to be buttressed by social rights to weaken the effect of inequalities of power in the private sphere. Similarly, Jones (1994) argues that definitions of citizenship need to be broadened beyond formal participation in voting to include actions practised by people of specific identities in particular locales. In other words, individuals have agency in the construction and contestation of their citizenship, rather than being passive recipients of a pre-determined concept. These

reformulations offer a valuable starting point from which to consider citizenship in South Africa.

South African activists recognized that processes of democratic transformation had the potential to create radically different relationships between the state and its citizens than those that had evolved in other post-independence/post-revolutionary countries (Seidman 1999). Converting this potential into actuality is essential in constructing a gender equitable democracy, but questions remain concerning the effectiveness of mainstreaming gender equity (Manicom 2001), how concepts of citizenship are being deployed and how people at grassroots level understand and experience citizenship. There seem to be both interconnections and disjunctures between state level definitions of participatory citizenship and local level understandings, experiences and contestations. Questions of how and where citizenship is articulated and women's political activities take place, and how the state has attempted to create spaces for participatory citizenship, are of significance.

#### Legislating for Citizen Participation

Discourses of citizenship in South Africa have drawn increasingly on notions of participation, focusing on "opening up", "widening", "broadening" and "extending" opportunities for citizens to participate and of "deepening" democratic practice. Rhetoric is replete with "policy spaces", "political spaces" or "arenas", "inclusion" and "exclusion" (Cornwall 2002a: 2). Central to these notions is an idea of empowerment, which involves:

moving out of constrained places and isolated spaces, widening the scope for action and multiplying potential sites for engagement, and about growing in an organic, self-realizing way – in confidence, in capacity, in wellbeing.

(*ibid.*: 2)

Notions of participation and empowerment, however, can be emptied of radical outcomes through appropriation and co-optation. Within mainstream development, for example, empowerment has come to mean the relocation of the poor within the prevailing order: “bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, empowering them, *inviting them to participate*” (*ibid.*: 3). Clearly, significant constraints limit empowerment in a context arising from decades of oppression and poor economic development for the majority of the population. Of concern is whether the South African government’s enthusiasm for empowerment is designed to bring about social and gender justice or as an instrument for managed intervention and ‘good governance’.

In practice, because power relations between people are not addressed, participation all too often involves only the voices of the vocal few and poor people and women, in particular, tend to lose out, being marginalized and overlooked in ‘participatory’ processes (Shah 1998; Guijt and Kaul Mosse 1995; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2003; McEwan 2003). Moreover, as has happened with mainstreaming gender in development (Goetz 1994), the adoption of participatory approaches by powerful international institutions and governments could submerge the more radical dimensions of participatory practice (Cornwall 2003). Radical definitions of participation as a platform for citizenship not only emphasize



community involvement in the processes of local development, but also demand that social development lead to substantive empowerment of community members in terms of rights, power, agency and voice. This perceived connection between citizenship, social development and substantive empowerment has been central to attempts to reshape citizenship in South Africa but, since prevailing power relations are left largely untouched, specific groups remain excluded from participation and thus disempowered.

Like many others, the South African government has attempted to create new spaces of participation within its broader vision for socio-economic development by devolving state power to localities through legislation that also requires citizen participation in local governance (McEwan 2003). This includes the Local Government Act (2000), which seeks to facilitate the role of local government in rectifying social and economic imbalances and community participation in local government matters. This creates what might be termed officialized spaces (Bourdieu 1977), or what Lefebvre (1991) has termed spaces of invitation, by requiring local governance structures to consult with local community structures through meetings and other forums at all stages of decision making in local development planning. It also includes legislation on integrated development planning (IDP), which states that principles of public participation have:

*[T]o be institutionalized* in order to ensure that all residents of the country have an *equal* right to participate. (Department of Provincial and Local Government 2001: 9, original emphasis).

The impossibility of direct participation of the majority of residents in developmental local governance processes is recognized; legislation demands that clear rules and procedures are established specifying who is to participate, on behalf of whom, on which issue, through which organizational mechanism and to what effect ('structured participation'). Particular emphasis is placed on the role of civil society organisations to facilitate effective structured participation and on accommodating diversity, in terms of participation styles and cultures, encouraging the involvement of "disadvantaged or marginalized groups" and "gender equity" (*ibid.*: 10).

The restructured state thus contains elements of direct democratic participation and elements of deliberative democratic processes. It still requires some delegation to elected officials, but also requires a narrowing of the gap between those officials and the people they are meant to represent and a more radical reconfiguration of relationships and responsibilities. In this sense, therefore, it has the potential to open up new possibilities for voice, influence and responsiveness, in addition to accountability. Of significance, however, is whether citizen participation is envisaged as occurring only within the spaces created by legislation, where citizens are invited to participate by agents and bodies within formal government. It could be argued that underlying the creation of these new spaces for citizen participation is the notion of 'good governance', purportedly brought about by decentralization and adding another layer of local institutions to already complex local institutional landscapes. Thus South African government's enthusiasm for participatory citizenship cannot be separated from external discourses, which are sometimes far from emancipatory in their intention. Is citizenship participation in South Africa,

therefore, at risk of becoming an “officializing strategy” (Bourdieu 1977) used to domesticate participation and deflect attention away from other forms of political action, and what might gendered effects of this be?

### Exclusions and Non-Participatory Spaces

Citizen participation requires increasing control over and access to resources and regulative institutions in society on the part of individuals and groups hitherto excluded from such control. Participation should be an end in itself in deepening South Africa’s democracy and empowering its citizens. However, evidence suggests that translating policy into meaningful and effective participation at the local level for all groups is proving difficult. Legislation is problematic because it is less concerned with the lot of the poor, per se, but with creating more inclusive democratic institutions and providing the preconditions for fair and inclusive governance, from which the poor are assumed to benefit (Kehler 2000; FCR 2000; McEwan 2003). As discussed, it also places emphasis on civil society, but South Africa is generally characterized by a lack of strong civil society structures that can represent the interests of the majority of community members as well as an apparent lack of capacity amongst citizens to respond meaningfully to complex matters of governance (CORE 1998; Liebenberg 1999). In addition, the conception of civil society is not necessarily radical since it is a terrain seen to include social movements, political parties and capital; it is thus a site of intense struggle encompassing both those who benefited from apartheid and those who would benefit from substantive

democratization. South African civil society is thus both dynamic and potentially creative but simultaneously deeply divided, with vested interests and exclusions.

Restructuring assumes that through civil society organizations citizens become part of the state and less decision-making is delegated to elected representatives, but it is unclear how this will actually enable the empowerment of poorer and more marginalized people. As Lefebvre (1991) has argued, simply creating these new spaces might not be enough to empower citizens or bring about greater participation in decision-making and resource distribution. One example is the Community Development Co-operative (CDC) in Gugulethu, Cape Town, a community-based organisation formed in 1997 to foster local development by involving local people and private businesses to generate employment and improved housing and infrastructure. Through their involvement in consultation with CDC, local women have helped prioritise some development projects, including improved housing and sanitation provision. However, locals do not have direct membership of CDC and the Board is made up of councillors and business people (interview with Ms Ndema, General Manager, 24.1.01). Thus already marginalised residents are at risk of exclusion from participation in CDC projects and development in Gugulethu; the extent to which residents are setting the agenda for development projects is negligible. Similar problems exist in other township initiatives around Cape Town with surveys revealing a lack of capacity within community leadership regarding rules and procedures of local governance, conflict within communities around participation, the continued exclusion of young people and women, and the failure of

community representatives to communicate with local residents (Solomon 2000; McEwan 2003).

Evidence from Durban is more positive. The Cato Manor Development Association, for example, consulted regularly with area committees to decide on projects and was based on concepts of ‘bottom-up’ participatory planning and inclusive governance (interview with Mxolisi, LED Officer, 20/6/01)<sup>3</sup>; the Warwick Avenue/Grey Street urban renewal project is based on notions of urban citizenship and attempts to involve representatives of all groups using the area, including women traders (interview with Richard Dobson, Project Leader, 5/5/01; see also Grest 2002; Maharaj 1999). However, these new spaces of participation are still situated within existing relations of power and patronage, with traditional lines of authority (mainly through male elders) still having pre-eminence within communities (Ballard *et al.* 2004). How people perceive these spaces and how rules of engagement within them shape the nature of participation are also important. One question concerns the extent that institutions modelled on social forms traditionally dominated by male, literate, older elites (as many are in South Africa) can be expected to work for people whose poverty and marginalization might have more to do with relations within households and communities than their position in wider society (McEwan 2000). In-depth interviews with Xhosa women in the Western Cape, for example, reveal that on the whole they remain excluded from community forums and local council meetings by cultural norms and that they perceive these spaces to be male-dominated. They lack the confidence to speak publicly and do not have conviction that their concerns will be taken seriously (Kehler 2000).<sup>4</sup> Similar perceptions are also found more broadly

amongst young people of both genders in black communities. There are particular limitations, therefore, on the kinds of participation that can be mobilized in these spaces.

Spaces of invitation made available by the powerful are often discursively bounded to permit limited citizen agency (Lefebvre 1991). It is apparent in South African communities that spaces purporting to amplify marginalized voices are often filled with gatekeepers, who speak for but not with those whom they represent. Government can use community-based institutions to shift provisioning burdens onto local people and dominant groups within communities can use them to reinforce existing power relations; devolving control to ‘the community’ can undermine existing rights of more marginal actors (Agarwal 1997). In South Africa the ways in which newly created structures connect with existing institutions, either ‘traditional’ governance structures or local associations, are significant in reproducing existing relations of exclusion that further marginalize groups such as women and young people (Friedman 1993; Roodt 1996). As one respondent put it:

Women are expected to keep quiet in meetings. We end up with football pitches instead of crèches (XM, Khayelitsha, 8.2.01)

In addition, community organizations might allow excluded minorities to mobilize around their rights but they also produce social forms that have little connection with how people organize or perceive themselves and their common interests (Cornwall 2000).

Participation and citizenship are mediated by existing power relations in households, communities and between groups and citizenship is structured, practised

and experienced at multiple scales and in diverse spaces. Despite efforts to construct inclusive citizenship, therefore, an impasse remains in the prevalence of exclusions within South African citizenship. Interviews reveal that entrenched gender relations ensure that black women remain amongst the most marginalized in terms of poverty, access to resources and participation in decision-making at all levels from formal governance to the household. One respondent argues:

We are never asked for our opinion on what should be done...we are not asked for the things that we think are important (ZM, Khayelitsha, 9.2.01)

Even the poorest women are aware of their Constitutional rights to equality, but questions of how to attain this are still met largely with responses ranging from not knowing to wry amusement at its apparent impossibility. Therefore, despite its symbolic importance in a post-liberation context, citizenship for many people in South Africa could be considered in practice a meaningless concept. This is of some concern because relations between citizens and the institutions affecting their lives are at risk of becoming shrouded in a crisis of legitimacy, with citizens expressing disillusionment with government and concern over a lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor (Narayan *et al.* 2000; McEwan 2003). The 48% turnout at only the second free local elections in South Africa in 2000 (*Local Government Transformer* 2001) suggests that alienation at this level is an issue of immediate concern.

#### Radicalizing Spaces of Invitation?

Despite exclusions in officialized spaces of citizenship, possibilities exist for a more substantive citizenship to emerge. Foucault's (1986) notion of the 'strategic

reversibility' of power relations suggests that these are always already sites of resistance and contain the productive possibilities for subversion, appropriation and reconstitution; spaces of invitation produced by the South African state are also inhabited by people with alternative ideas, with potential for expanding the agency of those invited to participate and a different kind of participation than that envisaged. Officialized spaces are often characterized by patterns of interaction becoming ingrained and unquestioned; hegemonic practices are literally embodied in particular places. Rules of the game can be reproduced within committees or through consultation, limiting the agency and involvement of people without status or confidence. The reluctance of black women to voice their concerns at public meetings is a clear example of how culturally-defined patterns of interaction go unchallenged and become embedded in social space, effectively silencing certain groups and denying them the possibilities of full participation. However, some approaches seek explicitly to disrupt this spatial ordering, creating new spaces in which old rules of the game can be challenged and marginalized voices might be heard.

There is evidence of this disruption of spatial ordering by activist groups, particularly women's groups, throughout South Africa. This sometimes involves holding meetings in alternative spaces outside of male-dominated and/or urban spaces. For example, in 2001 the Commission on Gender Equality hosted a National Gender Summit to evaluate and assess its progress in promoting gender equality. In preparation, each province conducted pre-summit consultation workshops through which specific provincial gender issues could be identified and fed into the national process. However, in response to demands from various women's organisations, the



Western Cape workshop<sup>5</sup> was relocated from Cape Town to a community hall in Zweletemba township outside the rural provincial town of Worcester. Members of various organisations, including Women on Farms Project, Treatment Action Campaign, Centre for Rural Legal Studies and South African Domestic Worker's Union, argued that this was a more enabling environment in which to discuss matters affecting their members.<sup>6</sup> Unsettling spatial ordering also involves disrupting patterns of interaction within those spaces. For example, several Council-community meetings in Cape Town's townships were interrupted by requests for inclusivity of language and translation from English into isiXhosa and Afrikaans. Community meetings in both Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal open with traditional African greetings, the singing of resistance or liberation songs, toyi-toyiing and prayers. In these ways, participants assert their presence within spaces of invitation.

Despite this more radical potential, on the whole it would seem that invited spaces of citizenship in South Africa remain problematic in effecting substantive participation and empowerment. Certainly, new spaces have been activated for participation of marginalized groups and disability rights, AIDS activism and women's groups have been very successful in organizing from the margins to affect mainstream policies and institutions (see, for example, Geffen 2001). In some metropolitan areas, such as eThekweni (which includes Durban), there has been a concerted effort by city officials to make IDP participatory and empowering within local communities. However, evidence in other cities suggests that citizen participation and empowerment have been largely recast within a market idiom, reflecting the impacts of broader processes within international development whereby

participatory citizenship has become an entirely functional and inherently political activity (Cornwall 2002a).

In Cape Town, for example, while the UniCity government is attempting to make community participation a meaningful process, many officials are critical of how the process of engaging communities is practised (FCR, 2000). Some believe that public participation is mostly implemented when local government is required to budget for the forthcoming financial year:

Last year with the IDP the whole year went by with no meeting, and all of a sudden when it came to the budgets there were meetings. (*ibid.*, 22)

Others question the commitment to community participation, as envisaged in IDP legislation:

Our participation is around particular projects. There is not yet a system – and there seems to be no intention of starting an IDP process – to get community organisation to start thinking on a broader basis. (*ibid.*, 22)

In one case, IDP sessions in 2000 were poorly attended because the community had been involved previously, but trust was lost through lack of feedback (*ibid.*, 25). It seems that the importance of facilitating community participation is recognised by officials, but is often only undertaken according to legal requirements relating to budgetary processes and accountability and not due to a true commitment to ensure participation (*ibid.*, 40).

How legislation concerning participatory citizenship is interpreted and implemented at local level is clearly important. Spaces of invitation can be radicalised

by those wishing to disrupt embedded rules and procedures within them. However, it seems that there is a danger in all cases that participation as it has been constructed in recent legislation might become a 'political technology' (Foucault 1991), used to manage and control projects and processes, framing the possibilities of popular engagement and disciplining subjects and having particular consequences for the participation of women. In conjunction with these political technologies is the danger of rendering illegitimate alternative spaces of citizenship. However, these spaces do appear and have some potency in terms of the claiming of citizenship by those who shape them.

#### EMERGENT SPACES OF ALTERNATIVE AND RADICAL CITIZENSHIP

There are distinctions between the spaces of invited or induced participation created by governments or government bodies, which might be more about passive participation and tokenism, and potentially radical spaces at the margins or those spaces that people carve out for themselves. There are also distinctions between people's own perceptions of participative spaces and mainstream versions that might simply be seen as maintaining dominance through incorporation (see Rahman 1995; White 1996). In response to the institutionalization of notions of empowerment and citizenship in South Africa, alternative spaces of participation are being shaped by groups, organisations and activists that have particular consequences for the nature of empowerment and practise of citizenship.

While post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed a radical reconfiguration of the spaces between citizens and institutions that affect their lives, countervailing

discourses continue to fuel more radical forms of empowerment and social action, mostly removed from the officializing strategies that might negate other forms of political action. In contrast to much writing on citizenship participation, one radical body of thought sees it as most effective as collective action within arenas *separate from or against* the state (Dryzek 1996; Schönwälder 1997), thus avoiding assimilation or co-optation, bureaucratic obstacles and politically motivated resistances from within civil society. Feminist theorists have also demonstrated how marginalized groups might occupy existing spaces, create new ones, or revalorize negatively conceived spaces (Price-Chalita 1994) and how marginality itself can be a site of “radical possibility” or “space of resistance” (hooks 1990 341 343). There is, of course, a long tradition of this in South Africa and, although the post-apartheid context has increased the need for civil society groups to work with the state, recent years have seen the emergence of alternative spaces for citizen action. As Lefebvre (1991) points out, however, officialized and alternative spaces are not separable. What happens in one impinges on what happens in the other. Thus, the apparent failure of the South African government to fashion enough spaces for substantive citizenship is creating possibilities for the emergence of spaces of more radical citizenship elsewhere.

Such spaces emerge organically out of common interests and concerns (Cornwall 2002a), coming into being as a result of popular mobilization, such as around identity-based issues, or individuals joining together in common aims, often articulated around citizenship rights. These are sites of radical possibility: spaces are constituted by the individuals themselves and are often transient, where durability is

dependent on people wanting to participate in them. Recent occupations of state- and privately-owned land by South Africa's homeless people are examples of this kind of citizenship space.<sup>7</sup> Water and electricity disconnections, evictions and the seizure of property have also met with spontaneous country-wide resistance. These struggles are becoming progressively more organized, with strong local, national, and international networks forming between communities, labour, women's, youth, environmentalist, and other social movements. These are potentially radical and enabling spaces because the people themselves have chosen to be part of them and are responsible for their existence.

Transient and organic citizenship spaces might also be spaces of resistance, bringing together diverse groups of people around particular issues and facilitating more radical kinds of participation. Women's activist groups are a particularly good example of this in South Africa, bringing together diverse groups of women from across the political, class and ethnic spectrum around specific issues such as employment and housing rights or domestic and sexual violence. These "spaces of appearance" (Arendt 1958) are often formed in opposition to existing institutions and within which the multiplicity of opinions, positions and interests might continually disrupt the possibility of consensus in a "field of agonistic engagement" (Amin 2004).<sup>8</sup> The radical possibilities of these spaces are created by there being enough space between people for them to argue different positions, thus generating political freedom and meaningful realisation of citizenship. They are also "action spaces" (Berberton, Blake and Kotze 1998) through which poor people resist, challenge conditions and create alternatives.

Paradoxically, alternative citizenship spaces are rarely inclusive and often rely on oppositional processes of identity formation for the creation of a common purpose. For example, South African women's activist groups have proliferated to articulate claims to full citizenship rights and to resist violence and oppression, but they exclude men by implication. As Attwood and May (1998) argue, many South African men, especially young blacks, are marginalized through unemployment, social institutions and the absence of alternative opportunities; their voices and their gender issues and concerns are often absent. Their participation as citizens is often equally as problematic as poor women and may be worse because they are not targeted in gender sensitive participatory schemes or by NGOs. Therefore, the creation of identity-based participatory spaces might allow marginalized people to organize, but they might also deepen the exclusion of other groups or minorities.

As spaces of appearance, alternative spaces of citizenship lend visibility to identities and interests that are given shape by collective political action; they are, therefore, important spaces for the exercise of citizenship and realization of rights. However, as Cornwall (2002a) argues, these spaces are increasingly being delegitimized by governments and development organizations because they do not fit with their preferred channels for citizen voice. They exist outside spaces of invitation and thus are deemed threatening and/or irrelevant. Furthermore, radical intervention might allow for short-term gains - the familiar 'weapons-of-the-weak' argument - but participation in a deliberative process requires longer term engagement. Citizens require sufficient knowledge to be able to play by the rules, to articulate a position and to define a view; participation depends upon the prospect of being listened to and

taken seriously. Without these prerequisites, alternative spaces of citizen participation and action are limited in what they can achieve. The duration of participation is important and there are marked contrasts between continuous participation and the fleeting democratic moments of elections and social movements that mobilize citizens for a particular purpose and then recede or disappear (Fung and Wright 2001).

#### REFRAMING CITIZENSHIP: IDENTITY AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ARENAS

What is missing from the reconfiguration of state and citizen relations in South Africa is an understanding of citizenship as an identity and both citizenship and participation as situated practices. How people see themselves as citizens and act upon this and how this relates to their understanding of themselves in other aspects of their lives is particularly significant (Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999; Isin and Wood 1999; Voet 1998). Thinking about citizenship in this way allows a shift from western-centric discourses that frame understandings around very particular forms of participation in very specific spaces to considering what citizenship might mean for people in places like South Africa.

As Mouffe (1992 1995 1996) has consistently argued, an individual's sense of identity and sense of citizenship mutually shape each other. This is borne out clearly in South Africa, where interviews reveal that different senses of citizenship are often produced by gendered cultural identities. Dominant discourses around maleness in isiXhosa- and isiZulu-speaking communities emphasize formal political capabilities

and obligations; dominant discourses around femaleness promote the idea that formal political engagement is neither socially acceptable nor within female capabilities. The public silencing of women such that they are largely passive observers in formal spaces of citizen participation is a spatialized construction of identity since the same women are often very active participants in less formal political spaces, such as street and area committees, savings and housing associations and other community groups.

Identity is clearly important in radical articulations of citizenship, but equally people's sense of citizenship can also work to shape their understanding and practice of their identity. For example, a woman who understands citizenship as an active form of practice and a status that entitles her to advocate for her understanding of her rights might work to assert her needs and priorities *as a woman* in the political sphere (Voet 1998; Lister 1997a). In South Africa, positionalities such as domestic worker, sex worker, farm worker make the entangled nature of citizenship and identity most clear. They are political identities that signify consciousness and group and individual action for change around particular conditions. Though some people may understand themselves as citizens but choose not to be active or hold subject positions that inhibit an active sense of citizenship, others are conscious of the exclusions produced by the social construction of their identity and may promote citizenship action for change (Jackson 1999; Seidman 1999; McEwan 2000). As a member of the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce argues:

The decision to become a sex worker is an economic one, but women who have no other choice and do this to feed their families are criminalised by law



and society. This is unfair. I fight to have this seen as a labour and family issue, not a crime (MF, Ceres 5.7.01).

Interviews with many black women reveal that their idea of citizenship does not derive primarily from a localized sense of community but from communities of interest. Significant issues identified by respondents include rights to housing and employment, and freedom from violence for them and their children. They mobilize within their communities around these issues, particularly through public protest, grassroots organisations and self-help groups. Citizenship for these women is also culturally defined by familial and communal attachments. Interviews reveal that very often their understandings of citizenship are about community and familial roles and obligations and it is seen not as simply a relationship with the state, but as a relationship with other people. Although many women are aware of their individual rights, they articulate their obligations to their children and the rights of their family as more important. The need for access to paid employment, for example, is articulated in terms of both an obligation to provide for children and grandchildren and the rights of the family to access basic provisions. As one respondent put it:

Giving women the right to work. This is what we must have. If a woman cannot work then how can she be a mother? I have a child and three grandchildren here. I am over 60 but I must be able to work. Who will feed the family otherwise? (AM, Durban 19.6.01)

One might question, then, whether western conceptions of individual rights are always appropriate in South Africa where, for many people:

community ties and relationships are a better way of expressing their position in the world than individual identity. (Meer and Sever 2004: 19; see also Bulbeck 1998)

*Ubuntu*, the spiritual foundation of African societies, embodies a worldview in which “a person is a person through other persons” (Shutte 1993: 46). Interviews reveal that this notion of selfhood gives rise to a relational understanding of claims and obligations as generated through, and embedded within, significant social relationships of the acknowledged community.

There is a tension, therefore, between formal constructions of citizenship, often based on group and individual rights, and indigenous notions of self-hood. However, the construction of the connective self is often intimately linked to patriarchal social relations; connectiveness is gender-asymmetrical:

Men, as much as women, are defined by the roles, relationships and ‘ideologies of belonging’ of their acknowledged communities and reproduce them in their aspirations and behaviour in the public domain. (Kabeer 2002: 28).

In practice, respondents define their citizenship through activism in community and women’s groups, explaining their activities in terms of the failure of men to provide for them and of local government to provide adequate resources. Thus they perceive a requirement to take their needs into more formal political arenas. In addition, they have culturally inscribed roles within communities and households, which shape their citizenship practice. Men in the same communities, on the other hand, tend to explain citizenship action in terms of engagement with local government over community

needs and state government via traditional leaders. For some feminist theorists (e.g. Jones, 1994), participation in community politics can be a locus for women's empowerment. Indeed, involvement in community politics in some Latin American countries led to women's engagement with more formal political activity (Alvarez, 1990; Jaquette, 1989; Jelin, 1990). However, confining women's political activity to community politics can also be disempowering if this lacks involvement with the state.

The current problem for poorer women in South Africa is that while they are active in community-based structures, they still appear largely divorced from structures of governance at the local level. This is partly because of the patriarchal nature of both structures of governance and community politics (Robinson 1995; GAP/FCR 1998; Cole and Parnell 2000; McEwan 2003). Women are still unable to access power over resources and decision-making that would make their citizenship substantive and meaningful. However, this is not uncontested and women continue to mobilize in opposition to patriarchal power relations at both national and local levels, articulating their demands and empowering themselves around community and youth issues, most notably in basic-needs, anti-crime and peace organizations. Moreover, as Butler (1990) argues, everyday social and cultural practices transform and re-create gender relations. Private patriarchies (residing beyond formal law in households, in particular) might prove a hindrance to women's citizenship but homes and communities are also places where contestations over citizenship might be more effective than state policies in transforming patriarchies. This raises the possibilities

of reframing citizenship through gendered subjectivity to incorporate new spaces of citizenship practice.

### Gendered Subjectivity and Social Justice

A significant aspect of inclusions and exclusions of citizenship in South Africa is the legacy of colonialism and apartheid and the multiple oppressions that marginalized groups face. While race is no longer the principal line of exclusion defining relations between individuals and the state, the value systems upon which societies were structured during colonial and apartheid periods remain, to some extent, institutionalized. Fraser (1997) uses the phrase 'bivalent collectivity' to refer to the economic and cultural forms of injustice and disadvantage that interlock, legitimize and maintain each other. Despite being interrelated:

different forms of disadvantage have their own distinct logics and strategic responses. (Kabeer 2000: 86).

Where disadvantage is largely economic, people are likely to mobilize around their interests and formulate demands in terms of redistribution. Where disadvantage is largely based on value systems, mobilization is more likely to be around questions of identity and demands formulated in terms of recognition.

In South Africa, this produces a further tension: the logic of addressing economic disadvantage and of calls for redistribution is egalitarian, while the logic of addressing identity-based disadvantage and of demands for recognition is diversity. This tension is particularly problematic for those bivalent collectivities, like black women, disadvantaged by the interlocking dynamics of both resources and valuation. In the light of this, Young's (1990) notion of social justice has particular pertinence

in South African citizenship, especially within gender activism. Social justice is understood in terms of freedom from oppression (constraints on self-development) and domination (constraints of self-determination) and enables a conceptualization of justice that refers to both redistribution and the development of individual capacities and group rights. It requires not only the eradication of differences that construct relations of power, but the creation of institutions that promote and respect group differences without oppression. Significantly, a great deal of citizenship action in South Africa, especially by black women, is motivated by the pursuit of social justice.

Linked to this notion of citizenship as social justice is a requirement to rethink the public/private distinction to accommodate the idea of citizenship as also practised in the private realm. Citizenship should be a “multi-tier concept” that breaks apart the association of the domestic with the private and the political with the public and is relevant to all aspects of life from the home to the state and international agency (Yuval-Davis 1997: 13; see also Fraser 1992). This is, of course, not a new argument; central to feminist writing about citizenship in the private domain are the exclusions produced through the application of a restrictive notion of ‘the political’, built on a rigid separation of public and private spheres. Of significance to this is the long-debated problem that defining citizenship through political participation in formal public spaces serves to occlude other forms of participation (such as community work, traditional meetings and street and area committees) as legitimate expressions of citizenship. In essence it excludes people who cannot participate in public affairs from the accolade of citizenship (Lister 1997a). Drawing a boundary around the public sphere in defining citizenship also raises the problem of how people can

legitimately define and demand rights related to issues and actions that take place within private spaces, such as the home, where citizens may act upon personal ideas and notions of morality (McEwan 2000).

Lister (1997a: 28) distinguishes “political citizenship” from “personal politics” (see also Narayan, 1997), arguing that although the two are dialectically interrelated, “not all politics necessarily counts as citizenship”. She refers to Phillips’s (1993) distinction between campaigning in public for men to do their share of housework and simply sorting out the division of labour in one’s own home:

In the case of the former we are acting as citizens, in the case of the latter, which is nevertheless significant for citizenship, we are not...(Lister 1997a: 28)

Prokhovnik (1998) states another side of the argument - that citizenship and public politics should not be conflated, nor should political agency be considered a requirement for full citizenship. She suggests that:

It is *not* that women need to be liberated from the *private* realm, in order to take part in the public realm as equal citizens, but that women – and men – already undertake responsibilities of citizenship in both the public and the private realms. (*ibid.*: 84)

Evidence from both township and rural communities in South Africa suggests that many women who do not, or are unable to participate in formal structures do participate in informal networks and forms of decision-making. This also suggests a widening of the spaces in which citizenship can take place since it embraces households and communities. Thus, citizenship ‘in practice’ means more than

advocacy, lobbying, campaigning and awareness-raising in civil society organisations. Collective struggles can allow women to influence institutions such as the household, market and state and these struggles take place through women's organising in both formal and informal spaces. In the light of this, there is a need to take account of the diverse ways in which South Africans engage in ethically-grounded activities on the basis of their different genders, ethnic and cultural backgrounds in both public and private spheres that characterize their citizenship. Of utmost importance is how people themselves view their position and their contribution to the groups to which they belong. As discussed, many black women understand their citizenship not simply as culturally-prescribed but as ethically-grounded in their perceived household and community roles and their responsibilities towards other community members, women and children. They mobilize to claim their rights and practise their citizenship around these understandings.

This feminist conception aims not to make citizenship gender-neutral, but to take account of what citizenship might mean to differently situated women (and men). Citizenship is not simply about political participation but involves ethically-grounded activities undertaken by women, in the private as well as public realms, that are relevant to their lives. There is clearly a need to overcome the suppression of women's gendered subjectivity in the public realm and to allow for a notion of citizenship that recognizes more fully that women make different choices, but this involves a broader concept of citizenship than just the 'political'. Citizens are made through both status and practice (Prokhovnik 1998); in other words, a social status

(which black women in South Africa have yet fully to be accorded), and one based on the recognition of the practices in which women as well as men engage.

Emphasis on participation and citizenship also necessitates the broadening out of what constitutes the ‘political’; politics become as much about what is struggled over and by whom as about the conduct of local politics (Amin 2004). As Squires (1999) argues, to concentrate on formal political participation alone as evidence of active citizenship is to reproduce masculine assumptions that have worked to erase the significance of women’s informal political participation. Women *are* political actors if ‘political’ is held to include all power-structured relations from the interpersonal to the international. Adopting this broader notion makes it evident that women have long been political actors and as such are critical in the construction and maintenance of participatory democracy and meaningful citizenship in South Africa. This also addresses gendered subjectivity for men as well as women; it necessarily advocates a reconstructed public/private distinction that is not dualistic and is a notion of citizenship that is “at once intimate and political” (Prokhovnik 1998: 97). Moreover, it should encourage institutions (including those involved in governance and development) to see marginalized women as valuable sources of information with the potential for agency in policy-making. Such a reframing, I suggest, is critical in South Africa, where discursive emphasis is placed on participation and substantive citizenship and where there is a particular urgency in making this real.

## CONCLUSIONS



Conventional perspectives on social and political participation see it as defined by external agencies; citizens in this sense are simply voters or beneficiaries of development projects. This paper has argued that shifting emphasis to citizen practices extends participation to autonomous forms of action through which citizens create their own opportunities and terms of engagement. As Cornwall (2002a) argues, this not only bridges the gap between social and political participation but offers new ways of configuring the space between and what it means to be a citizen. Enhancing participation creates new kinds of spaces between, within and beyond the realms of state and civil society and has potential to enhance equality. Discerning what happens in these spaces requires knowledge of what happens in practice, who participates, on what basis, on behalf of whom, with what resources and to what effect.

This kind of approach is useful in understanding the disjuncture in South Africa and elsewhere between *de jure* and *de facto*, public and private citizenship. It helps explain why women's citizenship, despite legislative and constitutional guarantees, is mediated and diminished by entrenched power relations. It also refocuses attention on the "actual spaces" in which citizenship is expressed, which the abstract nature of citizenship leads many writers to neglect (Brown 1995 cited in Isin and Wood 1999: 88). This paper has argued that citizenship is a status and practice that is likely to differ across the spaces in which people's lives are played out (see also Jones and Gaventa 2002); households and communities are as much part of the realm of citizenship as more formal political spaces and women see their participation in these spaces as a realisation of their citizenship status. Enhancing participative citizenship requires more than inviting or inducing people to participate or simply

collecting voices. It requires that people have access to information around which to mobilize to claim or assert their rights, creating spaces for involvement and building capacities for political engagement. Thus, understanding how citizenship is played out in practice, for different people, in different contexts, in the different areas of their lives, requires learning from citizens themselves and their own understandings, experiences and strategies for change (Jones and Gaventa 2002). Moreover, citizenship is shaped by differing social, political and cultural contexts, which bring into sharp focus the universal applicability of western concepts and theories.

A feminist conceptualisation of citizenship as ethically-grounded action in all spheres of life, not simply as public participation, perhaps has broader relevance in allowing us to think beyond notions of ‘impasse’ or ‘hollowness’ that inflect much of contemporary western theory (which rarely, if ever, takes account of understandings or experiences of citizenship in post-colonial or post-liberation contexts, where it is hard won, valued and continually reshaped in ways that are perhaps more meaningful and innovative than in the west). It also rethinks the public/private distinction that still frames many debates about citizenship and considers the emancipatory potential of gendered subjectivity as it relates to both men and women. This has the potential to bring the voices of people marginalized by relations of power to often abstract debates about citizenship, both in terms of understanding meanings of citizenship and its spatiality. Finally, evidence from South Africa suggests that the impasse in citizenship is not simply articulated around the citizen/non-citizen binary. While prevailing power relations ensure that certain groups, including many black women, remain excluded from certain types of participation and thus remain disempowered

(Staeheli 1994; McEwan 2003), recognition of gendered subjectivity opens the way to an acknowledgment of the diversity of citizenship practices (Prokhovnik 1998) and a more inclusive, non-instrumental and non-dualistic conception of citizenship.

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘black’ as inclusive of all women of colour, whilst being mindful of the sensitivities associated with such terminology.

<sup>2</sup> This research was concerned with gendered spaces of democracy in South Africa and was conducted January-September 2001. 98 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups were conducted with women in Khayelitsha/Ceres (Western Cape) and Durban/Cato Manor (KwaZulu-Natal). 13 interviews were conducted with representatives of community-based partnerships, NGOs, CBOs and women’s organisations.

<sup>3</sup> See Hemson (2000) and Popke (2000) on the redevelopment of Cato Manor. The Development Association was wound up in 2003 with the restructuring of local governance and transfer of functions to eThekweni Municipality.

<sup>4</sup> These interviews are discussed in greater depth in McEwan 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Held on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2001, Unobuntu Multi-Purpose Centre.

<sup>6</sup> Empowering of black delegates was demonstrated when another [white] delegate requested a shortened meeting because of no heating (Worcester is a mountain town and this was a cold winter’s day). One activist angrily responded: “This is luxury. We have to live in conditions worse than this. At least we have walls. We meet to discuss serious issues and you should put up with it”.

<sup>7</sup> From July 2001 into 2002, for example, thousands of homeless people from the informal settlements of Khayelitsha occupied vacant council lots in response to flooding and Council threats of eviction and severing water supplies for non-payment of rates. Housing constitutes a priority need in Khayelitsha but there has been no real

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strategy and little co-ordination of activities. The ‘land grabs’ were precipitated by people who had waited 15 years for housing provision.

<sup>8</sup> Agonistic democracy is culturally specific and might be undesirable in post-conflict contexts like South Africa. From my experience in women’s meetings it works well in facilitating participation and agency.