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‘The way we define citizenship is intimately linked to the kind of society and political community we want.’

(Mouffe 1992a, 25, quoted in Lister 1997, 103)

Citizenship is a famously slippery concept – different people use it in a range of different ways. But a very basic definition is that a citizen is ‘a legally recognised national of a state, either native or naturalised’ (New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998). Focusing on citizenship means thinking about the relationships between individuals and the states in which they live. Are individual women and men considered as equal citizens? What about people from minority groups, or recent migrants? What difference does having citizenship rights make to people’s lives?

On one side of the citizenship ‘coin’, citizenship equals entitlement to a range of rights. To what extent do different states guarantee the civil, political, economic, and social rights of women and men, established in national constitutions or international agreements? How relevant are these rights to particular economic and cultural groupings? Whose rights are not acknowledged or upheld, and why?

On the other side of the citizenship coin is the issue of participation in governance. Is the government democratic? Are structures of governance efficient, and responsive to people’s needs? (Governance structures are not only national, but run all the way up through society, from village councils to international institutions.) How much room for manoeuvre does the government allow for social action by people in poverty and by particular interest groups? How can women or men from specific social groups shape the agenda and the decisions? If they can do so at community level, what happens to this participation at national and international levels? Finally, how would more and better participation improve outcomes for people in poverty? Researching these and other related questions has the potential to lead to action which improves the quality of human lives, by strengthening the accountability of public institutions to the individuals, families, and communities whom they serve.

Articles here consider the denial of citizenship rights from a gender perspective, and examine the relationship between gender inequality and political participation (not only in formal politics, but via activism in non-government organisations and community groups). Writers come from a range of backgrounds, including development funding organisations and community-based organisations in the global South, such as women’s organisations, and teaching and training institutions. All are committed to the idea of active citizenship, in which individuals are at liberty to contribute their skills and knowledge to society through participating in public decision making which is relevant to their lives.
This short introduction looks at three key ways in which citizenship has been understood, before considering how citizenship fits into development. The introduction then highlights some ways in which citizenship fails women and men from minority or migrant groups. Finally, some strategies for securing full citizenship rights are considered.

**Understandings of citizenship**

Both rights and obligations are implicit in the concept of citizenship. The emphasis on citizens having obligations to their state can be traced back to ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy. The cities of Greece were governed by participatory democracies. Men were citizens, and were required to participate directly in governance. However, women were not citizens; they were excluded from the system, together with children and slaves.

A different view of citizenship came from Europe and the USA in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This emphasised citizens’ right to make a range of claims on the state in which they lived. All citizens were guaranteed equal rights to make such claims, and impartial treatment before the law. Rights included civil rights, which were concerned with the freedom to speak, think, and worship as one wished, to be in control of one’s own body, and to own property. Civil rights were also concerned with the right to enforce and defend all these principles through the legal system. Political rights were concerned with the right to participate in politics. There was no acknowledgement of the possibility that social inequalities between particular groups of people – for example, between women and men – might compromise or contradict the ideal of equal rights before the law.

A third view of citizenship, which is particularly relevant to our concerns in this collection of articles, comes from an influential twentieth-century theorist, T.H. Marshall. Marshall considered that equal rights and duties as citizens are what make people ‘full members of a community’ (Marshall 1950, 14, quoted in Yuval-Davis 1997, 69). Marshall also stressed the importance of social rights, as well as civil and political rights. He defined social rights as: ‘the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share... in ... social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards [of] society’ (Marshall 1950, 10). This view of citizenship takes our focus beyond the concerns of politics, national government, and legal systems, to consider individual people’s interactions with collective groupings at all levels of society. These range from village councils allocating land and resolving marital disputes, to the international bodies which shape macro-economic policy and prosecute war crimes.

**Where does citizenship fit into development?**

Why is citizenship currently attracting so much attention from development policy makers and planners? For many, citizenship is a new ‘lens’ through which to see a very familiar set of concerns. Marshall’s vision of citizenship is strikingly similar to the vision of empowerment through awareness raising and popular participation that has been promoted since the 1970s by development organisations. A focus on citizenship from the point of view of people in poverty invites us to consider the extent to which poor people are able to participate in the decision-making structures which shape events and outcomes in their own lives.

While this development model used to be seen as an alternative to dominant models of economic development, elements of it appear now to have been absorbed into the mainstream. Since the start of the new century, the atmosphere in international
financial institutions and international development agencies seems to have changed. The international development establishment is pinning its faith on the power of elected governments, and the committed citizens whom they serve, to deliver development. The emphasis is no longer on the technical economic ‘fixes’ of the past 20 years. Structural adjustment programmes demanded that countries deregulated their markets and ‘rolled back’ state services. In contrast, lenders and development donors are now stressing the role of good governance in economic growth with poverty alleviation. Development programmes focusing on good governance include various measures to reform government structures to make them more efficient and more accountable, and consulting elements of civil society as part of national-level planning procedures. How genuine is this new commitment to accountability and participation? And what difference will it actually make in the lives of women and men in poverty? There is as yet no clear consensus on these questions.

The limits of citizenship

If governance is to be genuinely ‘good’, its institutions need to serve, and be accountable to, everyone who lives within a particular state. The idea of citizenship is that it is universal, encompassing everyone, regardless of sex, race, class, age, or creed (Lister 1997). In reality, however, citizenship fails to live up to the ideal. Researchers are currently engaged in charting the impact of this failure on the rights of women and minority groups, and policy makers and planners are developing programmes to bring about positive change.

Citizenship rights are not universal

Obviously, people living in countries with non-democratic systems of government do not have full citizenship rights. But even countries whose systems of government are democratic face serious challenges in putting the vision of universal citizenship rights into practice. If everyone is to be able to claim his or her rights, laws and administrative institutions need to aim for equality of outcome, rather than assuming – wrongly – that everyone is starting from a position of equality. This means reforming the law, and the systems of governance.

In global terms, women are the biggest group of people who are denied full citizenship rights. In some countries, women are denied citizenship outright. In others, women are declared in the constitution to be full and equal citizens, but the laws – in particular those dealing with issues of family and inheritance – often contradict and undermine national and international commitments to equality. Feminist studies of human rights, the law, and institutions have shown us that these are the products of decades or centuries of debate and decision making. They are founded on the age-old stereotype of men as actors in public life and governance, representing the interests of all family members. The corresponding stereotype of women is that they are dependent on a (benevolent) male household head. This means that women have no independent status enabling them to make claims on resources, or to appeal to the state for protection or support. Such laws, and the governance systems which enact them, reflect the world visions of the elite groups of men in middle life who first brought them into being.

Modernising these laws and systems is an enormous challenge – in particular, because women are still marginalised from participation in politics and governance. Many countries (both developing and post-industrialised) have now succeeded in passing progressive constitutions which honour women as full citizens, yet laws remain on the statute books which prevent women from exercising this equal status.

In her article, Lina Abou-Habib shows how the assumption that the man represents the entire family, and passes citizenship on
to his children, has resulted in citizenship (and its associated rights) being denied to children born to national mothers and foreign fathers, in seven Arab countries. In turn, Mona Laczo discusses the experience of women in Nepal, including refugees and trafficked women. In her article, Kanchan Sinha discusses instances in which women from particular groups in India cannot use national laws to uphold the equal citizenship that they enjoy according to the Constitution. Women from marginalised groups with distinct cultural identities may be prevented from using the law by arguments that the state is wrong to impose universal notions of justice and legal rights, but should instead respect the rights of minority groups to dispense justice as they see fit.

Some groups of men, too, lack citizenship rights. One such group is migrants, who may be explicitly denied citizenship, or have only a diminished set of citizenship rights. Throughout history, millions of migrants have left their countries of origin in search of temporary or permanent work, or as a result of war and persecution. Now, however, rich countries are tightening their controls on migration across their borders, by preventing the citizens of poor countries from travelling there to visit family or seek employment in today’s globalised economy. Illegal immigrants live in constant insecurity in many countries, unable to make basic claims for food, shelter, or health care from the state. Legal immigrants must usually wait for years to earn the right to apply for naturalisation as a citizen. In the meantime, as Lina Abou-Habib illustrates in her article, they contribute to the surrounding society but do not have the right to claim essential support and services from the state.

**Barriers prevent some from ‘active citizenship’**

In theory, every citizen has an equal right to participate in decision making. For example, in a representative democracy, all citizens have the right to vote. However, if this right to participate is to be realised for all – women as well as men, people from minority groups as well as those from the dominant one – formal and informal measures are needed to cut through a complex mesh of economic, social, and cultural factors which entangle women, and people from marginalised groups, preventing them from entering public office.

For women, this means recognising that everyday life already presents women – and particularly women in poverty – with a heavy (and usually unequal) workload of income generation, food provision, child care, and household work. This in itself prevents many women from adopting a public role. In addition, it means challenging the spoken and unspoken prejudices that keep women out of public life. Many men, and some women, believe that women are unsuited for leadership and political participation. Deb Johnson, Hope Kabuchu, and Santa Vusiya Kayonga assessed the use of affirmative action in Uganda’s Local Councils. They found that after women reached office, action was needed to equip them for the new roles, and to begin to break down the prejudices against them that were prevalent among their fellow councillors and the wider community.

The fact that formal political participation carries a heavy price for women means that they may choose a different form of active citizenship, outside formal politics. As Ruth Lister notes, ‘for many women, involvement in community organisations or social movements can be more potentially fruitful than engagement in formal politics, which is often more alienating than empowering’ (Lister 1997, 31). In any case, the line between politics and community involvement may well be blurred. In her article, Angela Coyle points out that both governments and international donors now increasingly recognise women’s organisations as key actors in the promotion of women’s rights, democracy, and citizenship. This is in line with the vision (outlined
earlier) of good governance and a strong civil society as key elements in successful national development. However, Coyle argues that the experience of women’s organisations in many different contexts belies donor commitment to civil society: sustained financial support and capacity building is needed. She describes a capacity-building project with four Polish women’s organisations working to advance the interests of women in this former communist state.

**Citizenship cannot alleviate poverty or inequality**

A final criticism of the concept of citizenship is that it cannot guarantee a life of dignity, because dignity depends on freedom from economic want. Citizenship is of limited use in the fight against poverty caused by current national and international economic policies.

First, this is because citizenship focuses on civil and political rights, at the expense of economic rights. Over the past 20 years, women – and in particular women from developing countries – have pointed out that the range of rights recognised as legitimate by governments and international decision-making bodies needs to be joined by economic rights, if inequality, poverty, and suffering are to be addressed and eradicated (Sen and Grown 1987). Yet the issue of economic rights remains off the agenda; the maximum that seems to be envisaged is that civil society is involved in consultation exercises on poverty, as in the PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) process, led by the World Bank (Zuckerman 2002).

Second, citizenship focuses on the state. Historically, states in developing countries have not been able to respond to people’s need for stable and sustainable livelihoods, because of the unfair terms on which their economies are incorporated into the global system. Currently, economic globalisation is further limiting the power of individual states to protect the livelihoods and human rights of their inhabitants. Many states are ‘caught in a pincer movement between the forces of “globalisation” and localism/regionalism’ (Lister 1997, 42). In her article on citizenship in Rio de Janeiro, Joanna Wheeler argues that people have developed a ‘privatised citizenship’ in response to economic crisis and neo-liberal policies which have no popular support. Growing poverty has led to an accompanying informalisation of political activity, as drug-related violence has further eroded the link between poor communities and formal democratic mechanisms’ (Wheeler, this issue). Wheeler found that ideas of citizenship have shifted from a focus on formal political participation to an emphasis on family and community survival through self-help initiatives.

The idea of global citizenship leads us to focus on the responsibilities of rich countries towards countries which are impoverished enough not to be able to translate international principles of human rights into citizenship rights (Lister 1997). It also leads to a focus on the action of global civil society to ensure equal rights for citizens worldwide. Social movements, including the women’s movement, and non-government organisations, are instrumental in this.

In their article, Jayashree Inbaraj, Subbalakshmi Kumar, Hellen Sambili, and Alison Scott-Baumann discuss the idea of global citizenship, from their perspectives as educationalists on three continents. Education for global citizenship is a radical approach to education which will potentially create widespread demand for international democratic decision making. It aims to develop moral sensibility in children through educating them about the wider world, and their own roles as world citizens (Oxfam GB 2003). The idea is to encourage the next generation to behave with a sense of responsibility, not only to themselves and their nation, but to the wider global community, and render children aware of their ability to challenge social, economic, and political injustice.
Conclusion

Citizenship is a contract between an individual and the society in which he or she lives. But in order to make use of that contract, individuals must be able to take part in shaping the society in which they live. This means that they need awareness of their political, economic, and social rights, and the rights of others. Further, they need to be confident that there are efficient ways of securing their rights, and that they can hold institutions and organisations accountable.

Throughout the world, until very recently, the sense of entitlement that is a key element of citizenship has tended to be restricted to men and dominant social groups. The impact of this fact on women and marginalised categories of people has been enormous. Deprived of a direct claim on the governments of the states in which they live, they have been unable to assert their right to equal treatment, and the state has been able to ignore its obligations to them.

Citizenship potentially provides a framework which enables all people to participate in political life at all levels: from the village to the state parliament, and beyond that to the global community. Its potential for liberation is enormous. Citizenship is about the relationship of an individual to the state in which he or she lives, and to wider society. Possessing rights as a citizen, and being aware of this, is an essential prerequisite to mounting a challenge to community, national, and international institutions which determine access to resources.

References