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Citizenship Narratives in the Absence of Good Governance: Voices of the Working Poor in Bangladesh

Naila Kabeer with Ariful Haq Kabir
July 2009



Citizenship DRC



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Summary

The complex nature of the challenge posed by state–society relations to the realisation of citizenship rights in the poorer countries of the world reflects the incapacity or unwillingness on the part of the state to guarantee basic security of life and livelihoods to its citizens and its proneness to capture by powerful elites that perpetuate this state of affairs. Consequently, access to resources continue to be defined by position within an unequal social order that is largely constituted by the ascribed relationships of family, kinship, caste and so on. These relationships pervade all spheres of society, rendering irrelevant the idea of an impersonal public sphere which individuals enter as bearers of rights, equal in the eyes of the law. Indeed, given their reliance on patron client relations for their basic survival and security, the idea of individual rights is unlikely to have much meaning or relevance in the lives of most poor people.

This paper explores the hypothesis that the possibility of belonging to alternative associations whose membership is not ‘given’ by position in the social order holds out the greatest promise for democratising the social order. Bangladesh offers an interesting context in which to explore this hypothesis because while it embodies most the problems of bad governance outlined above, it also has a large number of civil society organisations, many of whom work primarily with the poorer sections of society. The research focused on the working poor who are most likely to belong to these associations. Analysis of their narratives about their lives and livelihood and their views about rights and social justice suggests, not surprisingly, that there is nothing inherently democratic about civil society organisations in Bangladesh, even those ostensibly oriented to the interests of poor people. What appeared to explain the extent to which organisations were able to achieve democratic outcomes appeared to depend, first of all, on the extent of their commitment to the promotion of citizenship rights among poor people and secondly, on the extent to which they were able to carry out their commitments without interference from the state. In the context of Bangladesh, the state appeared to be far more pro-poor in rural than in urban areas.

Keywords: citizenship; working poor; economic rights; civil society.

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Acronyms

ASA	Association for Social Advancement
ASK	Ain o Salish Kendro
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufactures and Exporters Association
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CUSO	Canadian University Service Overseas
MFOS	microfinance organisations
MSS	Shakti, Manobik, Shahajjo Shangsht
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NK	Nijera Kori
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development

1 Introduction

1.1 Citizenship, collective action and the ‘capacity to aspire’

The complex nature of the challenge posed by state–society relations to the realisation of citizenship rights in the poorer countries of the world constitutes a distinct strand of analysis in the literature on citizenship (see review in Kabeer 2002). It points out that the constitutions of these countries recognise the formal rights of citizenship, but their limited success with industrialisation, the uneven spread of market relations, the continued gulf between urban and rural life, the incapacity or unwillingness on the part of the state to guarantee basic security of life and livelihoods to its citizens and its proneness to capture by powerful elites have meant that democracy has very shallow roots in many of these contexts. Identity, affiliations and access to resources are defined by one’s place within a social order that is largely constituted by the ascribed relationships of family, kinship, caste and so on, ‘the communities of birth’. These relationships pervade all spheres of society and render irrelevant the idea of an impersonal public sphere which individuals enter as bearers of rights, equal in the eyes of the law. Indeed, given the persistence of deeply entrenched social inequalities, ‘individuality as a way of social being is extremely precarious’ (Khilnani 1997: 26).

I would argue that the problem of citizenship in these societies is not so much the absence of individualism in the *ontological* sense, the claim that a society is made up of atomised individuals and is no more than the sum of these individuals, as it is the absence of *ethical* individualism, the idea of the equal moral worth of all individuals and hence their equality in relation to certain basic rights and responsibilities. As Robeyns (2005) points out, a commitment to the equal rights of individuals is perfectly compatible with an ontological worldview that recognises the connections between people and the socially embedded nature of their values and experiences. The challenge that such societies face therefore is not greater individualism *per se* but the democratisation of state–society relations to allow recognition of the basic rights of all individuals, regardless of their place in society.

The democratisation of the state and the democratisation of society must clearly go hand in hand. The problem is that the capacity to bring about these changes is generally weakest among those who have the greatest stake in achieving them: people who are poor, vulnerable and socially excluded. Living close to the margins of survival, uncertain of their ability to meet their basic daily needs, these groups are often forced to bind themselves into highly asymmetrical patron–client relationships through which they secure the resources they need for their subsistence in return for labour and loyalty to their patrons (Smith 1997; Wood 2003). Fear of the loss of such patronage, and the modicum of security it offers, has profound implications on the capacity of subordinate groups to express voice on their own behalf and to exercise political agency in pursuit of their rights.

Material dependency is thus one way in which systems of domination reproduce themselves over time. In addition, they reproduce themselves through hegemonic ideologies which explain and justify their existence, securing compliance on the part of subordinate groups to their place in the social order. As Scott (1990) points

out, this may be a merely 'surface compliance' which conceals hidden dissent waiting for the opportunity to express itself. Or it may be 'real compliance' based on the internationalisation of inferiority and the hopelessness of change. Hegemonic power of this 'thicker' kind does not merely deny subordinate groups the capacity to exercise voice and agency on their own behalf, it also closes off their capacity to imagine an alternative way of life, the 'capacity to aspire' (Appudarai 2004). Future life chances are largely determined by identity at birth, transforming 'communities of birth' into 'communities of fate'.

To become a citizen in such contexts is to transcend the constraints of birth and ascribed status, to acquire the capacity to question, to challenge and to aspire – as well as the capacity to make changes that reflect these aspirations. As Lister (1997) puts it, 'to act as a citizen requires: first a sense of agency, the belief that one can act; acting as a citizen, especially collectively, in turn fosters that sense of agency. Thus agency is not simply about the capacity to choose and act but also about a *conscious* capacity which is important to the individual's self-identity'. This is a notion of citizenship that fuses consciousness, capacity and collective action. While all three elements are critical, the emphasis on the collective has a particular resonance for the contexts we are interested in.

While the idea of citizenship is premised on the principle of ethical individualism, viz. the equal worth of all individuals irrespective of their circumstances at birth and their station in life, it draws its legitimacy from the collective participation of all citizens in drawing up the shared framework of principles and values that define their vision of society. If we cannot take for granted the willingness or capacity on the part of members of subordinate groups to exercise independent forms of agency in pursuit of their own individual goals, we certainly cannot take for granted their willingness or capacity to contest hegemonic beliefs and values and construct alternative visions of society. The capacity to think and act as part of a larger collective is thus an essential part of the processes by which subordinate groups are empowered to act – as individuals and as citizens. It is critical to the processes of personal transformation through which subordinate groups move from accepting their place in the social order as fate, misfortune or divine to 'naming' it as the product of unjust social arrangements. And it is critical to the social processes through which they gain the sense of solidarity and strength of purpose necessary to engage in the struggle for their rights. As history has shown, it is not political protest by single individuals but the 'collective struggles of the dispossessed' that have won the 'rights of citizenship' (Bowles and Gintis 1987: x, cited in Foweraker and Landman 2000: 1).

This view of the importance of the collective dimensions of personal transformation clearly resonates with an ontological perspective in which one's sense of identity and self does not exist prior to, or outside of, social relationships but is constituted inter-subjectively: '... it is the kinds of associations which we inhabit that define the kind of individuals we will become' (Benhabib 1992: 71). It is through their associations with others that individuals learn to speak, think and act; to understand themselves and their place in the world. This perspective implies that one's sense of self and identity is not predetermined or fixed but open and subject to challenge and change. In particular, it suggests that subjectivities can be transformed through participation in forms of associational life which

provide a reflexive distance from what has hitherto appeared a 'given' or pre-ordained place in the social order and which therefore open up the possibility for questioning, criticizing and challenging the justice of this order (Benhabib 1992).

The general identification of civil society with the sphere of voluntary associations, or 'communities of choice', explains its importance in the theoretical literature on democratic practice (see review in Elliot 2006; Foweraker and Landman 1997; Betteille 2000). However, not all civil society associations necessarily promote the kinds of critical transformations we are interested in: there are many associations that serve, and indeed exist, to reinforce inequality and exclusion. Associations are more likely to promote critical consciousness and democratic practice when they are inclusive rather than exclusionary in their membership; when they draw on horizontal solidarities rather than vertical loyalties; when they embody democratic rather than autocratic principles in their own operations; and when they seek to challenge the arbitrary exercise of power rather than to bolster the status quo.

Such associations need not necessarily operate in formal political spaces. Indeed, in the absence of a democratic state, formal political processes become merely another route through which inequalities of power are reproduced. Instead, struggles to democratise those relations of everyday life that impinge most directly on the livelihood struggles of marginalised groups may provide a more effective route into the larger collective struggle to democratise state and society. As Gould (1996) suggests, we need to extend our understanding of politics to encompass collective struggles to deal with power relations in the different spheres of life in which people come together to engage in shared practical activities. Such struggles have democratic relevance in that they help to train people in the practice of democracy.

1.2. Objectives of the paper: exploring citizenship and collective action in the Bangladesh context

The aim of this paper is to explore some of these theoretical ideas about citizenship, collective action and the 'capacity to aspire' in the specific context of Bangladesh. It is interested in the meanings and expressions of citizenship among the working poor in one of the poorer countries of the world. It is also interested in the extent to which participation in 'chosen' forms of associational life makes a difference in these meanings and expressions; the extent to which it promotes the capacity to aspire to an alternative vision of society among those who have little reason to be satisfied with the current arrangements.

Bangladesh provides an interesting context in which to explore these ideas for a number of reasons. First of all, it appears to exemplify many of the barriers to citizenship discussed in the previous section. The country has been under military rule of one kind or another for much of its history, first as part of Pakistan (1947–1971) and since then, as the independent nation of Bangladesh, between 1976 and 1991. Democracy was restored in 1991 and a number of elections held at both national and local levels until military rule in civilian disguise was re-imposed in 2007. Elections are now due to be held at the end of 2008.

However, it is not simply the presence or absence of formal multi-party democracy that constitutes the problem of citizenship in Bangladesh but the pervasiveness of 'bad governance' in all aspects of life.

Bangladesh has had the dubious honour of being declared most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International for five years consecutively (1997–2001). Of recent attempts to explain the problem of governance in Bangladesh, the most pessimistic perhaps is to be found in Wood (2000). He traces it to the 'deep structures' of the society which effectively 'imprison' its inhabitants within relationships of dependence from which there are few avenues of escape. As Wood points out, the state in Bangladesh has never been equally accessible to all citizens, either in the days when the country was part of Pakistan or since it gained its independence in 1971. Its resources have been allocated through pervasive patron client networks which stretch down to the village level, allowing the family and kinship groups that dominate these networks, both locally and nationally, to monopolise public sector distribution. The 'moral logic' of kinship at stake in these relationships requires that the priorities of family, kin and close social networks take precedence over the large public good. Forms of behaviour that may appear opportunistic, manipulative, corrupt or nepotistic by Weberian standards of bureaucratic practice are considered legitimate if they serve these priorities. Not only does this disadvantage those sections of the population who do not have access to influential social networks (often members of religious and ethnic minorities), or occupy an inferior status within them (women and poorer relatives), it also undermines the likelihood that public institutions will produce equitable and predictable outcomes on the basis of transparent and impersonal criteria. This is the realm of personal favours and discretionary outcomes.

Wood uses the metaphor of the prison to convey the idea of Bangladesh society as a 'total institution' which prescribes all aspects of its inmates' lives. Survival within the system dictates that social actors have little choice but to follow the dysfunctional forms of behaviour generated by these systemic institutional forces. He suggests that this has given rise to inequalities that are so deep-rooted in the 'psychology of Bengali society' that they translate into 'natural' deference-authority dyads making it impossible for the inmates of this prison to either reform its institutions or free themselves through their own efforts. Those who seek escape must therefore look for assistance to those outside the system: 'donor and other external well-wishers have a duty to provide that assistance' (p. 237).

While there is widespread consensus within Bangladesh that the problem of bad governance are indeed deep-seated, not all the 'inmates' subscribe to Wood's explanation of the problem nor to the benign role ascribed to 'donors and other external well-wishers'. Sobhan (2000), for instance, suggests that donors are as culpable for the current state of affairs in Bangladesh as the privileged national elites who benefit from it. They have shown little concern with problems of democracy, good governance or human rights for much of the history of their involvement with developing countries: 'even poverty alleviation was seen as the inevitable by-product of economic growth'. Few questions were raised about the legitimacy of the succession of military leaders that have ruled Bangladesh, both prior to, and after, its independence. When they did turn their attention to questions of governance in the late 1970s, it was confined to public sector reforms

along neoliberal lines, correcting for excessive state intervention in the economy and opening it up to global competition. It was only with the demise of the Cold War and the 'depreciation in the value of Third World regimes as strategic assets' (p. 78), that donors began to take particular regimes to task for the abuse of human rights and malfeasance in the use of aid.

Nor does Sobhan appear to regard problems of bad governance in Bangladesh as inherent in the country's institutions. He sees it rather as the hardening of what was an 'essentially regulatory problem at the beginning of the 1980s' into systemic malfunctioning because it was left unattended. And while he notes that social stratification – and economic inequality – has grown in recent years, he suggests that it is not as deeply embedded within the structures of society in the way that feudal relationships and caste inequalities are embedded in the social structures in India, Pakistan or Nepal: 'Bangladesh society remains more fluid with considerable scope for upward mobility. Few if any people in Bangladesh can claim to power through an inherited social legitimacy ... Bangladesh's prevailing social hierarchies remain exposed to challenge from below as well as from competing aspirants because the legitimacy of these differences is not widely accepted' (p. 82).

The idea of the 'challenge from below' takes us to the second reason that makes Bangladesh a particularly interesting context in which to explore the democratic potential of collective action outlined earlier. The static and unchanging picture conveyed by Wood's metaphor of a prison is partly belied by what can be termed the Bangladesh paradox: remarkable social progress in recent decades in a context of persistent and pervasive governance failure. As a World Bank report puts it, compared with the calamitous conditions that prevailed in the aftermath of its devastating war of independence in 1971, it has come a long way, 'defying the prophets of doom and faring better than most had hoped' (2003: i). It has had rising levels of economic growth, and, since the 1990s, a slow but steady decline in poverty. It has also increased life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, dramatically lowered its fertility rates, spread immunisation, promoted women's labour force participation through microfinance and export manufacturing and closed the gender gap in education with overall increases in primary and secondary education.

These changes provide some support for the fluidity of social relationships in Bangladesh remarked on by Sobhan. Credited with an important role in bringing about these changes (World Bank 2003 and 2006) and of particular pertinence for the concerns of this paper, are the country's civil society organisations. It is estimated that there are around 22,000 of these organisations registered with various divisions of the government (eg. Social Welfare, Women, Youth and the NGO Bureau). Most are voluntary organisations of various kinds and include trade unions and labour organisations, welfare associations, religious groups, legal advocacy groups, human rights activists and various feminist, women's rights organisations and development NGOs. While the vast majority of civil society organisations are small and highly localised, drawing on voluntary efforts to engage in cultural, professional or philanthropic activities, development NGOs today are among some of the largest in the world and dominate the civil society landscape in Bangladesh.

These organisations have undergone a number of changes since they came into existence in the aftermath of the war of liberation in 1971 and the famine that followed shortly after. While the need to provide relief and rehabilitation to a devastated population provided the initial impulse, they subsequently evolved into development organisations. A large number of them operated with a structural analysis of poverty as the product of unequal power relations and were committed to mobilising poor people to fight for their basic entitlements. They were largely funded on a solidarity basis by international NGOs, private foundations and a few progressive donors (eg. OXFAM, War on Want, CUSO, Swallows, NORAD, Ford Foundation).

After a short-lived period of democracy, the country came under extended military rule in 1976. The resulting contraction of political space led a number of NGOs to move away from their earlier radical analysis towards a service delivery role, with an emphasis on group-based microfinance services led by the Grameen Bank. These changes accelerated in the 1990s when the official donor community began to provide large-scale funding to NGOs as a preferred 'private' sector alternative to the state in the delivery of social services to low income households. The NGO share of total aid disbursed to Bangladesh rose from 6 per cent in 1990 to 17 per cent five years later where it remained for the rest of the decade. The effects of this were considerable (Devine 2003).

First of all, it led to a rapid expansion in the NGO sector: the number of indigenous NGOs grew from 395 in 1990 to 1223 in 2000. They now dominate the civil society landscape in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas. Secondly, donor concerns with transaction costs and the need to disburse large amounts of money led to the concentration of funding on the largest NGOs, moving them into 'in a league of their own' (Devine 2003). Of the approximately 1,250 indigenous and international NGOs that received donor funds in 1999–2000,¹ the 11 largest received 85 per cent of all donor assistance to NGOs while the three largest (ASA, BRAC and Proshika) received 72 per cent of this assistance.

Secondly, the growing preoccupation on the part of donors with financial sustainability led to a remarkable homogenisation across the NGO sector: the provision of microfinance became the dominant model. A survey of 300 development NGOs in 2004 found that 92 per cent of them offered some form of microcredit (World Bank 2006). Around half confined themselves to financial services alone, but others combined it with service provision in health, water and sanitation and education. Many included awareness-raising on issues such as health, sanitation and nutrition and a few also engaged in lobbying or advocacy with the state. Only a very small minority of NGOs continue to give priority to social mobilisation of the poor. This shift in NGO activity is reflected in the expenditure patterns of the 11 largest NGOs: social services and social mobilisation activities made up around 43 per cent of their combined expenditures in 1989 and had fallen to 28 per cent in 1998. Within this category, social mobilisation activities declined from 11 per cent to 6 per cent (Devine 2003).

1 2004 estimates suggest 2000 development NGOs operate in the country of whom around 1200 of them rely on external funding sources (World Bank 2006).

As a result, Bangladesh has a somewhat bifurcated civil society. While the majority of trade unions, feminist organisations, professional associations, human rights groups, student platforms and cultural groups operate in urban areas, development NGOs, with a few exceptions, are focused on the rural poor. They are estimated to operate in more than 78 per cent of rural villages in Bangladesh (World Bank 1996) and to reach around 35 per cent of the entire population (Thornton *et al.* 2000). The findings of the present study, which was designed to analyse the implications of 'chosen' forms of associational life for the identity and practices of their membership, reflects the bifurcated character of civil society in Bangladesh.

1.3 Methodological approach: narratives about citizenship, rights and social justice

The aim of the study was to use the narratives of poor people in rural and urban areas in Bangladesh to explore how they understood the inter-related concepts of citizenship, rights and social justice and their capacity to aspire to alternative visions of society. There has been very little research on these questions in the context of Bangladesh and semi-structured, in-depth discussions appeared to be an appropriate way into everyday understandings of these concepts. The main focus of the study is on sections of the working poor who were most likely to be affiliated to 'chosen' forms of association. The decision to use economic criteria to select the study sample reflected our belief that in a poor country like Bangladesh, where there are no guaranteed safety nets, the struggle to earn a livelihood occupies a central place in the daily experiences of the poor. It is therefore in the context of their livelihood struggles that we are likely to find the main possibilities for poor people's participation in associational life beyond the given circles of family and kinship.

It was evident to us from the outset that livelihood struggles and associated possibilities for poor people to participate in chosen forms of association varied considerably between urban and rural locations. The urban population has been growing steadily largely as the result of waves of rural to urban migration by men, women and children, due to loss of land through river erosion, fraud, debt and so on and to the overall dearth of employment opportunities in the countryside. Most of them set up their homes in slum neighbourhoods in urban areas. It is estimated that around 35 per cent of Dhaka's population live in slum neighbourhoods (Banks 2006). Although rates of poverty reduction have been faster in urban areas than in rural, the urban poor face other kinds of disadvantage. Most do not own residential land and must rent accommodation from private landlords or occupy public land illegally. Most do not have legal access to public utilities, such as electricity and gas, and rely on illegal connections provided by slum leaders at exorbitant prices. Successive governments have concentrated their poverty reduction efforts in rural areas at the expense of urban in order to discourage further migration. As a result, the urban poor have poorer access to basic services leading to lower enrolment rates, higher rates of drop outs and more severe rates of malnutrition.

Several slum communities have been evicted by the government in recent years

and have either failed to be rehabilitated, as stipulated by the law, or been rehabilitated to peripheral areas of the city where they are cut off from their livelihoods.

The most prominent associations of the working poor in urban areas were trade unions and development NGOs. Trade unions are largely concentrated among workers in formal employment while development NGOs, mainly offering micro-finance, focus their activities on the self-employed. Consequently, we decided to draw our respondents in urban areas from the following categories:

- Male retrenched workers from Adamjee jute mills who had trade union connections.
- Male and female wage workers from the export garment industry who had connections with trade unions, development NGOs and legal rights organisations.
- Male and female self-employed workers in the urban informal economy, the group most likely to have links with development NGOs.

The jute mills and garment factories are, in principle, covered by the country's labour laws, including the right to organise and engage in collective bargaining. We therefore expected to find trade unions to be the most important associations in the lives of these workers. In practice, trade union membership was high among the male jute mill workers and extremely uneven among the largely female garment workers. Given the absence of trade unions in the informal economy, we selected our informal workers on the basis of their association with development NGOs. The main associations in the lives of the urban self-employed were the minimalist microfinance organisations (MFOS), including Association for Social Advancement (ASA) and Shakti, Manobik Shahajjo Shangshht, (MSS), World Vision. However, they also included a number who had interacted with the few socially-oriented NGOs active in the urban slums.

Our rural sample was purposively drawn from the membership of three socially-oriented NGOs: BRAC, Nijera Kori and Samata. BRAC has been active since 1972 but has gone through a number of incarnations. Its initial strategy was to combine social mobilisation and community development. It then moved into the delivery of group-based microfinance to poor women, using the model pioneered by Grameen Bank, combining it with education, environmental awareness, social forestry and health related services, weakened the focus on social mobilisation in the 1980s, partly in response to the backlash from successive military governments and partly to the drive for financial sustainability demanded by the donor community, but re-established a focus on social development in the late 1990s. Microfinance remains the core of BRAC's activities. It is present in all the districts of Bangladesh and, as of 2007, had over 6 million members in its Rural Development Programme, all of them women.

Nijera Kori (NK) and Samata are smaller and more geographically concentrated. NK was begun in 1980 by a group of activists who had split from BRAC when it abandoned its focus on social mobilisation and had taken over what had been a defunct welfare organisation for destitute women. Samata was set up as a youth club for young men in a particular village in northern Bangladesh but, through

interactions with Oxfam, evolved into a social mobilisation organisation in the mid-seventies. The two organisations have a great deal in common, eschewing delivery of service and focusing on organising groups of landless women and men to claim their rights. Both had over 200,000 members in 2007, around 60 per cent of them women. NK is active in around 17 districts of the country while Samata is more geographically concentrated around 7 districts.

There are therefore very different kinds of ‘chosen’ associations represented in our sample. The older trade unions are membership-based organisations with members paying fees towards the organisational expenses. The newer unions, mainly active in the garment industry, also stress membership fees but have been less successful in building membership-based organisations. They are prevented from operating within factories and seek to recruit members through the advice and support they provide to workers in conflict with employers. Relationships with microfinance organisations are generally group-based, with members of groups guaranteeing each others’ loans. There is frequently no relationship between group members other than the financial one. Organisations like BRAC and Proshika are different from the more minimalist microfinance organisations because they seek to combine provision of microfinance with a range of other services, including education and legal training, while Proshika has retained a focus on social mobilisation. Nijera Kori and Samata seek to build membership-based organisations. Their groups operate independently of the NGOs and have their own democratically elected structures. The forms of associational life we will be describing therefore vary from thin affiliations to active membership.

Table 1.1 Breakdown of respondents by gender, economic category and residential location

Urban categories	Female	Male
Jute mill workers	0	5
Garment factory workers	8	3
Microfinance clients	15	0
Rural categories		
BRAC	5	0
Nijera Kori	9	10
Samata	7	10
Total	44	28

72 women and men were chosen from these predetermined economic categories on the basis of informal contacts and ‘cold-calling’ in different rural and urban locations (Table 1.1). The interviews used a loose life history framework to explore the lives and livelihoods of the workers and the significance of different kinds of relationships to their wellbeing and agency. It also sought information on how these workers understood concepts such as rights, citizenship and justice and what their understanding reflected about their lives.

The main hypothesis that this paper set out to explore was the extent to which chosen forms of associations open to different sections of the working poor shaped their capacity to think and act like citizens. We expected this capacity to vary by location because of obvious rural urban differences in these associational possibilities. However, it became evident that differences in associational possibilities in turn reflected underlying differences in economic opportunities, structures of power and the role of the state in the two contexts. Our study therefore helps to uncover some of the deeper structural barriers to citizenship and collective action in rural and urban areas in Bangladesh. Since sample selection was purposive rather than random, the study cannot make statistically representative generalisations about the implications of associational life for the identity and practice of citizenship. However, as one of the first attempts to explore grassroots narratives about citizenship and collective action in the context of Bangladesh, it can provide preliminary analytical insights into these issues and provide the basis for a more systematic research design at a later stage.

The rest of the paper has the following structure. Section 2 discusses the narratives of working poor men and women in urban areas while Section 3 does the same for our rural sample. They highlight the difference in the underlying contexts for the kinds of livelihoods they pursued, the terms on which they engaged with the state and their capacity for collective action. Section 4 explores how these differences might also influence their views of the just society and hence their 'capacity to aspire'. Finally Section 5 draws together the different threads of the narrative in order to address the main propositions that the research set out to explore.

2 'On not being a citizen': associational life and collective action in the urban context

2.1 Jute mills workers and the 'old' trade unions

The Bangladesh jute industry was, till the 1980s, the country's largest industry and its primary foreign exchange earner. It was dominated by the Adamjee jute mills which were set up in the early 1950s by a wealthy industrial family and nationalised in the early seventies after Bangladesh's independence. Regarded as the largest jute mills in the world, its overwhelmingly male workforce numbered many thousands. They were housed in their own township outside Dhaka, Adamjee Nagar, which was built around the mills and contained all the facilities needed by the workers, including schools for their children. As part of the formal economy, they were covered by the labour laws and social security benefits. The five main trade unions in the country were all registered in the industry (along with some unregistered ones) and it was widely regarded as a hotbed of trade unionism (BBC News, 30 June 2002).

As in other parts of South Asia, the main unions were all affiliated to political

parties and union activities were largely driven by partisan politics. Moreover, as in the rest of South Asia, trade unions confined their activities to workers in the formal economy, in large-scale public and private enterprises. This meant that, within the jute mills, they focused their attention on the permanent section of the workforce, ignoring the large pool of casual or badli workers who were given employment on a daily basis. Although by law, casual workers should have been given permanent appointments within two month of joining, the speed with which a badli worker actually attained this coveted position depended on his connections within the union hierarchy. Some obtained permanent contracts shortly after joining, others after 15 or 20 years and the payment of hefty bribes. Consequently, the protections and privileges associated with formal employment were very unevenly distributed among the Adamjee workforce. Nevertheless, casual workers lived in the constant hope of transition to permanent status at some stage in their working lives.

The steady decline in international demand for jute and the huge losses incurred by the industry since its nationalisation finally led to the closure of the mills in 2002 amidst vociferous allegations of management incompetence, trade union irresponsibility and pervasive corruption. Although closure had been on the cards for a number of years, when it finally happened, it was done swiftly with no protest from the union leaders. Not only did the closure lead to the redundancy of 25,000 permanent workers and 5000 temporary workers, but, as one of our respondents pointed out, it also led to loss of employment for a further 25,000 or so others who provided goods and services to the jute mill workers. A bustling community was turned overnight into a ghost town and workers who thought that they had a guaranteed job for life found themselves among the ranks of the newly poor, their meagre redundancy payments rapidly used up as they searched for alternative work.

We interviewed a number of these workers very soon after the closure of the mills. It was evident from the interviews that trade unions had featured actively in the lives of the mill workers, directly in the case of the permanent workforce and indirectly for the rest. It was also clear that they had done little to promote awareness of labour laws or to fight for the rights of their membership. Instead, our respondents were unanimous in their belief that blame for the closure of the mills should be shared equally between the management, the trade union leadership and those 'self-interested individuals in the political parties' who had backed the unions. The system that these groups had worked between themselves was well known to the rank and file. Managers earned hefty bribes through their relationships with contracting companies who supplied them with low cost and poor quality equipment at inflated prices, needing replacing every two or three years, and through over-invoicing for the purchase of raw jute.

In return for turning a blind eye to management corruption, the trade union leadership was allowed its own rent-seeking opportunities. Fees were charged on the thousands of bales of jute delivered to the mills over the year, with each production sector under the control of a particular union and hence a particular political party. The money, ostensibly for the Collective Bargaining Agreement fund, largely went into pockets of the union leadership. Union leaders earned bribes for arranging the transition from casual to permanent contracts. They also

earned loyalty from their supporters through the daily distribution of *haziras* which allowed workers to collect their wages without reporting for work, on grounds that they were engaged in union work.

Makbul had been one of the beneficiaries of the system within the jute mills. His cousin had been a vice president of a union and he was rapidly transferred from casual to permanent status. He soon became a section leader, elected unopposed because potential candidates were afraid that 'if defeated I might create various problems for them out of grudge'. For Moqbul, the closure of the jute mills was more than just a loss of employment, it was the end of his way of life:

In all my life, Adamjee's closure is the most painful incident I have experienced. I had been working there for 22 long years ... I come back to Adamjee-nagar sometimes when I am unable to stand the pain. I stay there for few days. All meetings and processions have been prohibited here. Almost everyone has become jobless. I myself cannot find any work. How will I maintain the expenses of my family? I cannot even support for my children's education any more.

Despite his own privileged position in the unions, he was forthright about the role they had played in the downfall of the industry:

Labour leaders could do anything they wanted in Adamjee ... They were elected to look after the interests of the ordinary worker, but in reality, they did not bother ... The ordinary worker would tell their leaders about their problems on various occasions and the leaders would say that they would ring the authorities on their behalf. But the only time they ever rang the authority was on their own behalf. The reality is that the authorities and the union leaders had a mutual interest relationship based on corruption.

Altaf had not had the benefit of Maqbul's networks. He had paid a bribe of 800 takas to join the mills as a daily labourer over 20 years ago. Without the right connections, he could only hope for 3 or 4 days of work in the week, pulling a rickshaw for the rest of the week in order to make up his earnings. His overriding goal was to acquire permanent status and the benefits that went with it and he focused on working hard and avoiding politics in order to achieve it. However, it took him 14 years to accumulate the 2500 takas he needed to bribe his way into the ranks of *ad hoc* labourer and another 3 years before he was finally given permanent status. Within two years of achieving his goal, the mills closed down. He had worked in the mills for 20 years and left with a redundancy payment of 4,000 takas. He told us why rank and file workers had never protested union corruption:

All the labourers knew what was going on in the mills, but their mouths were shut, everyone was concerned about their jobs. If anyone had spoken out ... they would not have been allowed to enter the premises of Adamjee ... There used to be five trade unions here. If even one of the unions had called for a movement against the closures, thousands would have joined. Instead the leadership had meetings with the government, looked after their own interests and encouraged the government to close down the mill.

Ghiyas had worked in Adamjee since 1972. He testified to the partisan conflicts which underpinned trade union activism in the mills:

The political parties organisations used the ordinary labourers in their processions and meetings. Whenever the time for a procession would come, they would send a truck to Adamjee. The labour organisation most closely involved with the political party would instruct thousands of workers to stop their production and to go and join the procession. Those labourers who went on these processions could collect their wages even without working.

The fact that rank and file workers had so little interaction with the trade union leadership meant that most had not fully comprehended the degree to which the unions had been co-opted until they observed their acquiescence to the closure of the unions.

It would appear from these accounts that workers in the Adamjee jute mills had no option but to play by the rules of a highly corrupt system based on collusion between management and the trade union leadership. These rules also governed the terms on which they engaged in collective action. Not surprisingly, they had few illusions about their status as citizens: in fact, for Mokbul, the system within the factories appeared to be a microcosm of the larger collusion between the country's government and its elites at the expense of the poor:

The government never pays any attention to poor people. Its relationship is with millionaires. It is the rich who are responsible for the closure of the Adamjee today. They stole the profits while the poor paid the liabilities.

A similar bitterness towards the rich was expressed by Altaf:

No one helps us because we are poor. Only the poor can understand the pain of the poor but they do not have the money to help each other. The rich have become rich by exploiting the poor. We have given them our labour but at the end of our working lives, they gave us just 4,000 takas. The rich get lakhs of money without doing anything. If I had a gun, I would kill all the rich people.

2.2 Export garment workers and the new trade unions

The strength of the old trade unions in the Adamjee jute mills had been derived from the protection provided to the industry since its inception in the 1950s by barriers to international competition. The industry proved unable to compete once these barriers were removed. Exposure to global competition also eroded the power of the unions over a workforce that was no longer guaranteed jobs for life if it played by union rules. The export garment sector represented the reverse side of the globalisation coin.² It had emerged in response to opportunities thrown up by economic liberalisation and established its ability to compete globally through the employment of a 'flexible', non-unionised and largely female labour force –

² As an ironical footnote to its history, Adamjee Nagar was re-opened as the country's seventh export processing zone in 2006.

although more men have joined the industry in recent years as it has expanded from woven garments to more capital intensive knitwear.

All garment factories over a certain size are covered by the country's labour laws although these are very unevenly observed. While wages are low compared to international standards, they are higher than those prevailing in most other jobs available to poorer women. The international publicity given by coalitions of northern trade unions, student activists and concerned consumer groups to working conditions in the export garment sector has led to some improvement in labour standards in the larger factories. In addition, the combined pressure of international media and local trade unions has forced the BGMEA to set up its own arbitration cell to respond to workers' grievances while the government recently reformed its labour code to bring it in line with current conditions.

Protests about wages and working conditions within the industry have tended to be sporadic and highly localised in nature. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand. A sizeable majority of workers in the industry are relatively recent migrants from the countryside (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004) and inexperienced in relation to both factory work and industrial action. There is generally a high level of demand for these jobs but also a high level of turnover, given the harsh discipline enforced on the factory floor. Fluctuations in the international market for garments also leads to frequent layoffs. Consequently, none of the garment workers we interviewed had stayed in any particular factory for any extended period of time. Few women stayed in the industry for very long. Most dropped out after marriage or after their first child, many joining the ranks of informal workers who make up our third category of urban respondents. There was thus little scope for developing forms of solidarity with fellow workers that could lead to sustained forms of collective action. In addition, the constant threat of dismissal hangs over all workers in an industry in which there is a large pool of unemployed workers willing to step into their shoes.

The absence of protest also reflects the very low levels of trade union membership in the industry (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004). Trade unions are (or were till very recently) officially banned from the EPZs and actively resisted in the rest of the export sector ... Employers frequently resort to hired musclemen in order to intimidate anyone attempting to organise. In any case, trade unions themselves do not exercise the clout that they had exercised in the context of protected domestic industry. In the current era of footloose capital, the threat of strikes, walkouts and downing of tools carries with it the danger of factory closure as buyers relocate their orders to other factories or other countries. The disruptive tactics associated with traditional trade unions, their partisan politics and extortionate behaviour, has little appeal for workers who do not wish to lose their jobs.

However, a number of newer unions have emerged which are more closely focused on the particular needs and constraints of garment workers. They tend to organise on a neighbourhood rather than a workplace basis and to opt for negotiation rather than confrontation. Many work in collaboration with legal rights NGOs to provide legal training to appraise workers of their labour rights and of the possibility of redress for their grievances through the labour courts or through the tripartite adjudication mechanism set up by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

While garment workers were unanimous about the unfavourable conditions which prevailed in their industry, there were variations in their views about their rights as workers and the possibility and effectiveness of protest. These appeared to reflect some combination of past history and current experience. In the case of Rafiq, a male garment worker, a lifetime of injustice had left him with the conviction that protest was futile. He had begun working from a very young age, first as an agricultural labourer in the countryside and then, after migrating into the city, as a rickshaw puller. He told us how people would often refuse to pay the proper fare and how some had slapped him when he protested. The garment industry had offered some relief from such behaviour but it had its own problems. What the workers resented most was the practice of employers delaying payment of their salaries or cutting them arbitrarily but few dared to protest. According to Rafiq, it was because they knew they could be easily replaced and were therefore regarded as dispensable labour:

Only the manager, the production manager, the supervisors and floor in charge staff are paid on time because only they are difficult to replace.

In any case, he considered protest on the part of the poor to be futile:

Who listens to the poor person on the street? ... If someone like you makes a complaint, everyone will believe you. If you go to the police station, the Officer in Charge will offer you a seat, particularly if you are a related to some minister. But if I go, he will not accept my case, he will not even ask me to sit. He would only have to glance at my clothes to know I was a poor man. The police only listen to those who have money ... When I pulled a rickshaw, the police would ask me for bribes. If I could not pay, he would ask to see my licence, sometimes he would slap me. The police are supposed to provide protection against oppression but they do not hear the words of the poor.

Jhorna, like Rafiq, had learnt about injustice early in her life. Her family had lost all their village land because of a disputed claim and their inability to pay the necessary bribe to the police. She had also been aware of the discrimination she suffered as a daughter. She saw little reason to expect justice from others when she had not got justice from her own father:

There is no use by talking about rights in this country. All my needs and complaints, I place it only before all mighty God. He will be the judge of all this. What else can a poor person do other than praying to God? If I had money then I surely would have gotten justice. I try to forget about rights. As a child the rights that I was suppose to get from my father, did I get them? I could not claim any rights that I had from my father, what rights will the government give me?

She described the oppressive conditions which prevailed in her factory:

Every morning we start at 8. If you are a minute late, salary is cut. I have to complete 120 items an hour. If I fail to do so, I must work overtime to make up. There is no system of bonuses or increments so I earn now what I earned 3 years ago.

Her explanation for the lack of protest by workers was that they were mainly women and had few alternative options in the labour market:

Most of the labourers here are women. They are also uneducated. So they do not know how to get organised and how to identify the causes of discrimination. Most of them are poor and there are no alternative options for work. Even for me, it is not possible to take part in any type of protests or movement. With my low level of education, it is not possible to find a good job. When I tried for a job as a service worker for a government office, I was asked to pay a bribe of forty thousand (40,000) taka. Where will I get such an amount?

Salma's account of the conditions in her factory was far more informed by the language of labour laws than Jhorna's, possibly because she had a higher level of education. She spoke of her employers' failure to pay proper overtime, restrictions on the use of the toilet, the surveillance of workers through cameras all over the factory, including the toilet area, the absence of primary health care facilities, prohibition of any kind of political discussion within the factory and a ban on trade unions. Like Rafiq, she explained the absence of protest in terms of the dispensability of a work force with easily acquired skills:

These are jobs that anyone could do with a few weeks training. No worker is given a permanent appointment. Any one who makes any kind of protest can be sacked immediately because the country has more than enough unskilled workers looking for unskilled work.

These workers tended to deal with injustices on an individual basis, some leaving to find other jobs, others carrying out their own negotiations with management. However, we found some exceptions to this pattern in the case of workers who had made contact with trade unions and legal rights NGOs. For instance, when her employer had held back workers' wages, Halima and some of her fellow workers had taken advice from a local trade union and organised a strike. The police were called in to throw them out but they continued their protest outside: 'we arranged press conferences, processions and meetings, informed the BGMEA about our grievances and took the factory authorities to the labour court'. The movement petered out when the employer persuaded some of the workers to come back to work. Halima was not taken back as she was regarded as one of the ringleaders. She believed that the problem for workers lay in their lack of consciousness:

After working so long in the garment industry, I have realised this much: that those who do wrong and those who allow it to happen are equally liable for the wrongdoing. But the workers have somehow accepted the whole unfair system in the industry. Those are new to the industry are following in the footsteps of those who joined before them. They are forbidden any kind of political activity. If the workers were conscious, how could such injustices continue without protest?

Other workers in our sample believed that some change in consciousness was taking place, albeit very gradually. Growing international publicity about their conditions of work and rising levels of education across the country have meant that recent cohorts of garment workers are more aware of their rights and the value of unity than earlier ones. As one female garment leader told us

Earlier it used to be much more difficult to make the workers understand about different issues. They would ask many questions. But now they understand the importance of organisations, when a worker loses their job but eventually gets it by filing a case through the labour court they stand to gain much ... Now they understand about the ILO convention and the law, and they ask for information.

Another woman reported informal forms of solidarity among the workers in her factory:

If we have any problems we try to talk it through and solve it. We take whatever decision seems like the best. Workers on each floor takes a decision, all the workers can't get together. All of us on our floor who were getting low salaries, we made an agreement that we would not work any longer. Our hard work had no value, this is what we told all the girls. They were scared because they could lose their jobs. If we could all do this together then our salaries will certainly go up.

Still others had taken part in confrontational forms of collective action:

When I first joined I was told I would not have night duty, but afterwards I found I had to. When I first started night duty I would get Tk50 daily, later that became Tk40. We were not paid regularly for the night work. The manager tried to pacify us by saying we would get our night duty payment today or tomorrow, but the boys didn't listen. The manager then went to the MD for the night bill but the MD called him unfit, at which the manager came back and told the boys off. The boys then came to the second floor with the knitting instruments and brought out the 'finishing' girls, and went and beat up the MD. As a result we got our attendance fees.

It is evident from this account that the confrontation was led by male workers in the factory. In general, male workers were more likely to report such confrontations than female. They were also more likely to report sustained trade union activism. This is partly because they had greater freedom of movement in the public domain and could participate in union activities after work and partly because unions remain male-dominated with very little interest in gender issues (Dannecker 2002).

Sakhawat was one of the male workers in our sample who was an active union member. He had become involved in trade union work very soon after he joined the industry. He had been involved in a number of protests against unfair practices at work, taken his employers to the BGMEA arbitration cell and later to the labour court, was subsequently beaten up by the employers' goons and filed a case against the employer in question, with the support of his trade union. When the labour court found against him, he took his appeal to the High Court and won, this time with the backing of BLAST, a legal rights organisation. He believed that greater respect for workers' rights in the industry needed combined action on a number of fronts:

Through government pressure on employers' associations to respect these rights; through building up workers' knowledge of their rights; through the greater neutrality of BGMEA as the first resort of appeal when disputes rose;

and finally, through labour organisations that worked in the interests of labour. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, most labour organisations have become subordinates of the employers' associations.

2.3 Self employed workers and microfinance organisations

Most of the women who work in the garment industry had migrated from the countryside in search of work. They lived in the slum neighbourhoods of Dhaka alongside other migrants from various districts of the country who had been 'pushed' from their villages by loss of land and dearth of employment or drawn by the possibility of casual work in the urban informal economy. As we noted earlier, urban slum dwellers have been victims of deliberate policy neglect by successive governments, reluctant to target any efforts to reduce poverty or provide services to urban areas for fear of giving the inhabitants a sense of permanency and security that would encourage further migration (Banks 2006). Periodic evictions by government on grounds of illegal occupation has discouraged investments in these areas by individuals and NGOs. In addition, urban slum dwellers are exposed to a wide range of hazards which typify the environment in which they live. Along with fires, theft, traffic accidents and so on, slum dwellers also find themselves at the mercy of the musclemen, criminals and gangs that terrorise the local population, often acting on behalf of powerful land owners and politicians (Wood and Salway 2000).

Working women in urban slums were generally confined to a restricted range of activities: waged work in garment factories or small workshops, domestic service, petty trade and home-based work. Men pulled rickshaws or engaged in petty trade. We interviewed 15 women who reported some association with the development NGOs active in the urban slums. Most were associated with less well known minimalist MFOs, although a number of women also reported contacts with the more socially oriented NGOs, including Nijera Kori, Proshika and ActionAid. Women borrowers tended to use their loans in one of two ways. One was the purchase of rickshaws, either to be pulled by their husbands or sons or to be rented out. The other was the construction of additional 'room(s)' – mainly makeshift shelters – to rent out. Only a small minority of women in our sample used their loans to start up or expand a trade or enterprise. Our interviews were carried soon after a ban had been imposed by the BNP government on the plying of rickshaws in the major ('VIP') streets of Dhaka. This had dealt a severe blow to those households who relied in pulling, renting in or renting out rickshaws for their livelihoods and featured frequently in their accounts.

Although NGOs are considered to provide better services than government by slum dwellers, the failure of most NGOs to address the basic need for security of shelter among urban slum-dwellers together with negative experiences with some of the microfinance organisations, including unregistered ones, has led to a high level of mistrust towards NGOs in general (Banks 2006). The women we spoke to had mixed views about the benefits of microfinance. As might be expected, those who had benefited were more favourably disposed. They told us that they were too poor to save for investment purposes and their only option in times of crisis in the past had been to borrow on usurious terms. They considered microfinance a

boon because it charged lower rates of interest than moneylenders. Aside from coping with crisis, it also allowed them to purchase productive assets. For others, however, it had proved to be a double-edged sword, increasing their assets but trapping them in debt when their assets were stolen, burnt or lost through any one of the other hazards of life in the urban slums.

None of the women considered their association with minimalist MFOs as anything other than a business relationship. The MFOs in question also saw themselves as purely financial intermediaries. They restricted themselves to the disbursement of loans and collection of repayments, making instrumental use of the group-based approach to guarantee loan repayments rather than to create the basis of new social networks among the poor. Their clients had little contact with the organisations beyond weekly meeting to repay their loans and learnt little from them beyond basic financial skills.

It was evident that their tenuous affiliation with these organisations had done little to promote awareness of rights. Najma Begum had borrowed money from several of these organisations, but had never received any advice from them. She said she knew nothing about rights. She only knew what she needed but she had no reason to believe that the government would ever listen to someone like her:

I do not know what sort of right I can claim from the country and government. But if the government would gives us good business and adequate gas for cooking, then it will be helpful for us. But how can we approach the government to make these demands. The government will not listen to a person like me. It will only listen to rich people only. I will never be able to meet Khaleda Zia, and also I cannot even speak properly. People in our area are scared of the government; they are worried about the government sending army to capture our local people... The people of government will not listen to us either. If anyone complains about anything then police will arrest us. We do not know much about the law and order of the country. Police will only ask for the bribe. That is why everybody just want to stay far away from all these difficulties.

A similar ignorance about rights was expressed by Shathi:

I do not know about the rights that I can claim from the government but there are many problems in our daily life which could be solved if the government paid attention. The price of all sorts of goods has become very high yet the government is not taking any step to address this. The government has also banned rickshaws from Dhaka city when our family expense is mainly run by the income from rickshaws. Please tell the government not to ban the rickshaw. Government will not listen to us ... If they had heard our voices, they could have never done this.

Women borrowers who had also come into contact with socially oriented NGOs were in a position to compare these different sets of affiliations. One example of this was provided by Ayesha Akhter. She had borrowed money from a number of microfinance organisations and believed that it had benefited her economically:

It is true that the NGOs do business by giving loans, but I have profited from them. I had no capital with which I could have done any type of savings

oriented work. But as I received a good sum of money at a time, from the NGOs, I was able to earn a good amount too. Currently I have borrowed only from ASA.

However, she expressed her anger at the reactions of most of the MFOs to the anti-eviction struggles of slum dwellers in the late 1990s. Many had suspended their lending operations for fear of defaults. Some had remained only because they had been persuaded by the argument that default rates on loans would be much higher if the evictions took place.³ A few had participated in the anti-eviction struggles but had attempted to take over the platform that slum dwellers had set up by themselves for their own political purposes. The movement had died out in 2001: the election of the BNP government, its use of the army and the police, purportedly to round up criminals, and its prosecution of a number of NGOs on grounds of political partisanship, all served to intimidate the slum dwellers, leaving them 'with no language with which to protest'.

Ayesha had also come into contact with a number of socially active NGOs like Nijera Kori, Proshika and ActionAid. She singled out Nijera Kori in particular as having taken the side of the slum dwellers in their struggles against eviction rather than seeking to make political capital out of it.⁴ She considered the slum evictions to be part of a strategy on the part of the government to redistribute land from the poor to the rich, another symptom of the ongoing disenfranchisement of the poor:

During the time of election, we told the leaders of different political parties that we want a permanent solution for this slum. They all gave us promises that if they could go to the power then they would give us the land of this slum permanently and would make more development of this area. However, when the BNP government came to power, they did not give us our land. They evicted many of us and let their people build home there. The development of slum is going on but it is not for our benefit. It is for the benefit of the rich ... The government will build plots in these slums and sell them off to rich people. Why should all the plots go to the rich, are we not also citizens of this country? Let them give us some of the plots too. We will slowly and gradually pay the money to the government in instalments. If we can pay our loans to NGOs on time, then why can't we do this as well?

Her contact with the socially oriented NGOs had alerted her to the importance of consciousness and unity among the poor if their struggles were to be effective, but she did not hold out much hope that this would happen and she saw no point in talk about rights:

Society could be changed if all the poor could protest on a united basis. But the poor do not understand this, they lack consciousness. I have understood it by mixing with many people and by becoming a member of different NGOs.

3 In Sultan's study of anti-eviction struggles in a squatter settlement in Dhaka (1999), women respondents reported that it was only after they threatened to stop paying off their loans that NGO workers began to pay attention to their concerns.

4 The women interviewed in Sultan's study also singled out Nijera Kori as the only NGO they had encountered that provided political support in their anti-eviction struggles rather than behaving like businesses (p. 220; Fn.2)

Nilu Begum also believed that her understanding of the world had changed as a result of her interactions with Nijera Kori. She told us that she had grown up accepting her fate without question:

Ever since my childhood, I saw that when a girl grew up and became 12 or 13, she marries and her world revolves around managing the household ... I have seen my grandmother, my mother and my aunts, they all did the same.

But she found herself changing: 'I am an illiterate woman, so was my mother. But I have dreams for my children which my mother never had for us'. She had not been able to send her older son and daughter to school but was determined to educate her youngest daughter till college level. She believed that these changes had come about as a result of her association with Nijera Kori. She had cut off her relationships with other NGOs:

Because with other NGOs, I only have a relationship of borrowing money, but with Nijera Kori, it is a different story because they have made me aware of so many things.

This growing awareness did not translate into optimism about changes in the wider domain:

I am somewhat aware of my rights but I do not enjoy them. How are we going to protest? The army arrests innocent people. No one can make a procession or meeting for fear. The government leaders use our vote to get into power but they are the ones who impoverish us.

What was striking about the narratives of these self-employed women, both those who had become knowledgeable about their rights and those who remained ignorant, was their pervasive sense of alienation, the sense that no-one was listening to them. Equally striking was that the extent to which their expressions of despair, disenfranchisement and injustice revolved around the equation between money and power: *all talk about rights is useless, only money has a voice.*

A number of them referred to the vast gulf that separated rich and poor. According to Shathi, the rich appeared to inhabit a different universe:

We live with dirt and garbage the whole day. If they come into contact with us, they get sick. Whenever they are passing by the slum area they put handkerchief to their nose ...

According to Jhorna:

Rich people think of the poor as the shoes of their feet. Just as they never clean their shoes unless it is needed and throw them away in the dustbin once their need is over, rich people also use the poor in the same manner.

The belief that 'only money has a voice' was widespread. It appeared to many that money could buy anything of value in society, from the most trivial to the most significant:

- Shahida observed that it could buy a place at the head of the queue in the doctor's clinic: *'When it comes to medical treatment, poor people have to buy a ticket in order to stand in a queue to see the doctor. Rich people can just*

get out of their cars and see the doctor, without even buying a ticket. In fact, I may not even get to see the doctor after having bought my ticket but the rich see him any time they want'.

- Mossamet maintained that it could buy justice: *'You have to pay a bribe to get anything done. If I have a problem and I seek justice, then I will have to pay a bribe. I am a citizen of this country, my vote has helped to elect the ward commissioner but if I go to him to get a certificate, I will be told that he is busy, he is out of the office. If I go to his office for any reason at all, the gatekeeper will send me away because I do not have a car, yet I have seen how the same guard will salute those who have a car. However, if I were to offer a hundred rupee bribe, I would get my certificate straightaway'.*
- Some believed it had bought off the leadership of the poor. According to Rohimonn: *'No one will protest the ban on rickshaws because our leaders are nothing but a bunch of thieves. If they are given a bribe, they will tell us that there is no need to go for movements'.*
- Rabeya Khatun believed that it could buy the poor themselves: *'No one protest against any injustice. It takes money even to mount a protest. If there is no money, no one will be with you. The poor are the hostages of money. You can make a poor person do any wrong by paying him just a 10 taka'.*
- Shahida described the traps that kept poor people in poverty and undermined their unity: *'I do understand this much that there is no unity among the people of the slum. They all are scattered. Dr Kamal Hossain organised a movement for the slums and that made our force stronger but we did not elect him when the time came. Instead we elected someone who is the biggest thief in the country. The poor have only themselves to blame for remaining poor. We do not understand our own welfare and we get caught in different traps ... the need of money keeps us trapped'.*
- And in Rizia's view, poverty turned the poor into criminals: *'People are flooding into the city in search of work, some live in the slums, some sleep in the streets. Acute poverty has given rise to increase in theft, robbery, extortion and terrorism. People may not have work but they still have hunger. This hunger has turned them into criminals. You can make a street tokai do any thing for ten takas'.*

There was widespread disillusionment with the government. According to Ayesha, the government's decision to ban rickshaws was evidence that it was in the pocket of the rich:

The government has taken the decision to ban rickshaws because of rich people. So this is the government of the rich ... My daughter used to study in Gonobhaban school but since they have banned rickshaw, she cannot go there as I do not have money to pay for baby taxi.

Shahida held the same view:

Rickshaws have been banned from the VIP roads in Dhaka City. I don't know what VIP is but no rickshaw can move on the VIP road, only cars can. I believe that was done for the rich people because it is rich who ride the cars.

Few had faith in the political system and in the power of the vote to change anything. As Rohimon put it:

Every election we cast our votes. Every election, the political leaders and their workers come to beg for our votes and when it is over, they are gone as well. How are they going to look out for us? They are too busy managing their own fortunes.

In Jahanara's view, the rot in the system began with the country's leaders and radiated downwards to all aspects of social life:

In a country where the government is constantly lying, why shouldn't the police take bribes and the mastaan (hired musclemen) terrorise people? ... There is no need for any political party in this country because they are the ones that are creating terrorist groups ... With one signature, crores of takas can be stolen, with one signature and the stroke of a pen, crores of money belonging to the country can be 'lost'. My husband is learning to drive but even to get a driving licence he will need to pay a bribe of 5,000 takas. The rich steal everything and exploit everyone in this country. If they could be destroyed before they destroy us, the country might develop. They hate us, they call our children names like 'basteer polapan' [slum children]. Just because we live in the slum, does it mean that we are not human beings?

However, a somewhat less pessimistic view of the democratic process was provided by Fatema. She was a long-standing member of Proshika and it was clear that her experience in an organisation with a firm social agenda had given her a more hopeful view of the future:

Our vote is the right through which we can express what you think. We are citizens. The vote helps us to elect a competent person for the development of the country. The present situation of our country makes me realise that unless people from our own class can go to the power, there will be no development of our class ... Now we realise we need to elect somebody from among us. Honest and genuine people cannot win the elections at present. The election is run by black money to earn more black money. Competent people stand for the election but it is the incompetent candidates who win the election now. Now that we are realising this, we will elect people from the same situation as us in the future.

2.4 The limits to collective action in the urban context

This section has sought to examine how different categories of poor people in urban areas talked about themselves and their place in society as well as the implications of their association with various forms of civil society organisations for their consciousness and capacity for collective action. We restricted our attention to categories of the urban workforce who were in contact with 'chosen' forms of association which could provide them with the critical distance from the taken-for-granted inequalities of their 'communities of birth'. It is evident from our analysis that most of the associations that featured in our study did little to challenge these inequalities.

While trade unions are regarded within some of the labour studies literature as the primary means through which workers can express and fight for their interests, in Bangladesh, they are primarily regarded as vehicles of party politics (Dannecker 2002; Khan 2001). All the major trade unions are affiliated to the main political parties in the country and act along partisan lines rather than in the interests of their membership. They use their political clout when their parties are in power to engage in the bribery, corruption and extortion practices that were endemic in the political system while using their associational clout at other time to extract gains for the union leadership.

This rent seeking behaviour was most obviously in evidence in the older nationalised jute industry which had grown up behind tariff barriers which protected the industry from global competition. Unions in this sector had been able to exercise considerable power, knowing that employers had little choice but to deal with them. The largely male-dominated permanent workforce were the primary beneficiaries of unions in this sector. They had either actively colluded with the union leadership or remained silent in the face of its corruption through fear of losing what were relatively privileged jobs, the hope of moving from casual to permanent status or the possibility of rising within the union hierarchy. With the closure of the Adamjee jute mills as part of a broader programme of privatisation, these older style unions have lost a great deal of their economic power.

The new export oriented industries represents a very different environment for union activity. Because their global competitiveness depends on keeping wages low and production flexible, employers in this sector sought out a 'docile', largely female workforce from the countryside with no prior experience of union organisation. They also actively resisted union activity on their premises. At the same time, we did find evidence that a number of the conventional trade unions were beginning to turn their attention to challenges of organising female workers. We also found evidence of the emergence of new kinds of labour organisations, some women only, that were evolving new strategies for protecting workers' rights. These unions organised on a neighbourhood rather than workplace basis and placed a lot of emphasis on training workers in their legal rights. However, while consciousness about their rights may have been increasing among garment workers, willingness to act appeared to be confined to a minority of garment workers. The rest were too afraid of jeopardising their jobs to protest their working conditions.

The other major form of civil society association in the lives of the urban working poor in our sample were the development NGOs, of which it was mainly the minimalist MFOs that were active in the slums. As we saw, these limited themselves to financial transactions with their membership, concentrating on disbursing and recovering loans. They offered little by way of education or training and even less by way of support to their clients in the face of government actions which directly harmed the poor. It was only the few of the women in our sample who were in contact with the more socially-oriented NGOs who reported being treated as citizens rather than simply as borrowers. These belonged to Proshika, Action Aid and Nijera Kori. We also found some evidence from our sample interviews of sporadic support provided by legal organisations like BLAST and ASK, providing them with advice in disputes with employers or husbands and helping them to go to court, if necessary.

To sum up, therefore, we did not find much evidence that the ‘chosen’ associations that we set out to explore had given rise to an awareness of shared interests among their members and the willingness to take collective action, except on a sporadic basis. On the other hand, neither did we find evidence of the ‘natural deference-authority dyads’ that Wood describes as a pervasive feature of Bangladesh society. What we found instead was an active awareness of the injustices of the system among different sections of the working poor and vociferous condemnation of those who perpetrated them. The language of rights did not come naturally to all our respondents, the language of citizenship even less so. It was against the benchmark of justice that they expressed their anger at the treatment meted out to them by those in power. If they were ‘prisoners’ of this system, they were prisoners with a well-developed analysis of the nature of their prison. Their views had a great deal in common with the general academic literature on ‘bad governance’ in Bangladesh but revolved around the power of the cash nexus to a much greater extent than the power of patronage. It was consequently suffused with a much greater sense of ‘class-like’ antagonism towards the rich than is generally to be found in this academic literature.

Our analysis of the situation of the working poor in urban areas strongly suggests that formal multi-party democracy and the right to vote on its own cannot deliver substantive citizenship rights in a context where the political system is itself a part of the problem, where partisan politics divides trade union membership and where votes, justice and the leadership of the poor can all be purchased by those who have the money. Aside from a few scattered socially-oriented NGOs and some of the newer unions, there is little evidence of any organisational effort to build a countervailing force for change among the poor.

The likelihood that such organisations will emerge in the near future also seems remote. On the one hand, the lives and livelihoods of the urban poor are marked by too many interruptions and discontinuities to allow the emergence of a stable sense of collective identity and interests. The majority of those we interviewed were migrants who had left behind their communities of birth but had failed to develop alternative communities of choice: they seldom lived in any place to develop ties of neighbourhood and earned their living through a variety of short-term, casual and irregular forms of work which offered little possibility for building up longer term relationships of solidarity.

On the one hand, the state appears to be engaged in a war of attrition with urban slum-dwellers, using the coercive tactics at its disposal to drive through a variety of policies which threaten their shelter and undermine their livelihoods. This has made it very difficult for organisations interested in social mobilisation to operate in urban areas. Nijera Kori, for instance, who had been working in Dhaka slums from 1983 withdrew from urban areas after the slum evictions in 1999. Despite court orders defending slum dwellers’ right, the political party in power used its thugs to terrorise slum dwellers and ‘accidentally’ set their house on fire till they finally managed to clear the last slum in which NK had been work.⁵ Their group members were dispersed all over the city, making it hard for them to maintain their ties with each other.

3 ‘On becoming a citizen’: associational life and collective action in the rural context

3.1 Socially-oriented NGOs and ‘citizenship by design’

The picture that emerged from our rural narratives was far more positive. This partly relates to the nature of the rural sample. We purposively focused on three NGOs that had an explicit social orientation, unlike the minimalist microfinance organisations that dominated in the urban areas. However, there are reasons why the social mobilisation efforts of NGOs have been more successfully sustained in rural areas compared to urban. The lives of our rural respondents were relatively more stable than those of our urban respondents. The majority of them had been living in their present locations for most of their lives, many had been born there. Even those who had migrated to their current location because they had lost their ancestral land through debt, fraud, crisis or river erosion had done so several years ago. Most saw themselves as continuing to live in the same place for the foreseeable future. As a result, membership of the three NGOs from which we drew our rural sample extended, in many cases, over several years. Their members knew each other well and had become known as group members to the wider community. It was on the basis of this far more stable membership that the three organisations sought to pursue their goals.

There were some similarities but important differences between BRAC, on the one hand, and Nijera Kori and Samata on the other. All three organised their members into groups which met on a weekly basis. All three put a great deal of emphasis on training in practical matters and legal rights. However, while BRAC focused on a combination of microfinance and other forms of service provision, both NK and Samata had eschewed a service provision role and concentrated on social mobilisation.

BRAC’s groups, called Village Organisations, are open to women only. They consist of around 45 to 55 members and are organised around the provision of microfinance services and livelihoods training. For borrowing and lending purposes, however, the Village Organisations are divided into smaller groups of around 5 members who are responsible for monitoring loans and ensuring repayments. BRAC draws its membership from landless or land-poor families who earn their living from smallholder or tenancy farming, petty trade, rickshaw pulling and the variety of other occupations which allowed those in rural areas with little or no skills or land to earn a living. The focus on microfinance provision has meant that BRAC recruits its members largely from the moderate, rather than extreme poor. The VOs hold *gram sabhas* on monthly basis to raise awareness about specific issues, build the confidence of members and develop their

5 The land was later developed for various government and donor offices, including those of the ADB and World Bank.

leadership skills. Members of the Village Organisations within a single ward formed a *Polli Samaj* which met on a bi-monthly basis and acted as a forum for the discussion of various forms of injustice and how to deal with them. BRAC has had a legal rights and legal support programme in place since 1986.

There were greater similarities between Samata and Nijera Kori. Both recruit their membership from the ranks of landless and near-landless who must earn a living by selling their labour. These tend to come from poorer households than members of BRAC. Both work with women as well as men, organising them into separate groups. Neither engages in any form of service delivery. They tend to regard NGO provision of microcredit with some hostility on the grounds that it detracts from their capacity to engage in advocacy for better public provision of basic services for the poor. Both promote regular saving activities by group members. Members are encouraged to use their funds to finance individual emergency or investment needs as well as collective productive and political activities. Groups are organised into federated structures so that associational affiliation extends beyond the boundaries of their villages. A great deal of emphasis is placed on intensive training activities covering a wide range of social, legal and cultural issues as well as training in collective action. Training methodologies draw on the pedagogic approach of Paulo Freire, elements of Marxist class analysis and cultural repertoires which borrow from people's movements in the Indian context.

The explicit focus on rights in all three organisations provide us with some idea of what *purposively designed processes* to promote citizenship identity and practices at grassroots level might look like in the context of Bangladesh. That the process had achieved some degree of success is evident in the fact that while many of our rural respondents spoke of barriers to their citizenship that were very similar to those encountered by the urban poor, many of these barriers were spoken of in the *past* tense, of barriers overcome. In other words, they saw themselves as citizens, or at least in transition to citizenship, to a greater extent than did our urban sample.

However, it was evident from our interviews that differences in organisational strategies had given rise to somewhat different trajectories of change in the lives of membership of these organisations and somewhat different engagements in collective action. Broadly speaking, the fact that BRAC worked with women-only groups and focused on explicitly gender-related issues (dowry, polygamy, child marriage, violence against women) in its training may explain why its members tended to confine their collective action to gender-related issues. Furthermore, their lower levels of activism may have reflected the fact that BRAC's micro-finance transactions took up a great deal of time during weekly group meetings and social awareness training was generally confined to monthly discussions.

Struggles over land rights had dominated the early years of NK and Samata. The focus on land rights brought their members into direct, often violent confrontation with local elites. On other issues as well, they were far more likely than BRAC members to engage in direct and visible forms of collective action, including demonstrations, pickets, strikes, petitions and so on. However, women's participation in these collective actions has led over time to greater attention on the part of both organisations to gender equality so that the collective actions of their membership has been increasingly directed at violations of women's rights.

Training is given a central role in these organisations and while men and women were trained in separate groups, the topics covered were wide-ranging and addressed the structural roots of poverty and injustice in gender, class and other social hierarchies. In the next sections, we draw out some of the commonalities and differences in the approaches taken by these organisations in their work with poor people and the implications these have for their identity and agency as citizens.

3.2 Competing routes to economic empowerment: markets and movements

The most obvious difference between BRAC, on the one hand, and Nijera Kori and Samata, on the other, relates to their strategies for promoting the livelihoods of their membership. BRAC promotes access to markets as its primary route to economic empowerment. Microfinance services occupy a central role in its strategy along with various kinds of practical information and skills: 'how to make better profit through poultry; also know about polio vaccination of the children, and various legal matters too'. The drive for financial sustainability over the past decade or so has meant that the programme has gravitated towards the moderately poor.⁶ Some commentators suggest that the preoccupation with loan repayments has affected the organisation's ability to promote social change among its membership (Montgomery 1998; Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996).

BRAC members in our sample generally invested their loans in traditionally female activities that can be carried out close to the home, such as handicraft production and raising livestock and poultry. Others gave their loans to their husbands. In addition, we came across a number of women in less traditional activities: setting up their own shops or engaging in door-to-door trading. The economic benefits from loans provided by BRAC have been well documented in the literature: they include increases in household income and assets as well as investments in children's health and education (Hashemi *et al.* 1996; Halder 2003; Khandker 1998). They were also testified to by the women in our sample: some had been able to buy land and build houses, others had expanded into new livelihood activities, others have accumulated savings.

Samata and NK differed radically in their approach to economic empowerment, not only from BRAC but also from the vast majority of development-oriented NGOs in Bangladesh. They were among the remaining handful of organisations that prioritised social mobilisation rather than accepting a service delivery role. Both had adopted an early version of what would now be called a 'rights-based approach' to economic empowerment. They used training and discussion within group meetings to promote collective reflection and analysis of the structural roots of poverty and inequality in Bangladesh, to strengthen members' awareness of their rights as workers, peasants and citizens and to mobilise their members to take collective action on issues of concern to them.

6 BRAC has separate programmes for the very poor which combine food transfers, savings and skills training.

Struggles over land featured centrally in the early history of both organisations. Many of their members had been born landless, others had become landless as a result of litigation, fraud, debt or river erosion. The movements of the rivers in Bangladesh are deeply implicated in the politics of land struggles: river erosion renders some families landless while the formation of new *char* lands, rights to which are unclear, become a major source of contestation. When the government designates these newly emerging land to be '*khas* land' (unutilised government-held land), it becomes available for distribution to the landless. However, most landless families were not aware of these entitlements and were, in any case, powerless to claim them. It was through their association with Samata and Nijera Kori that these families learnt about their entitlements.

Samata began its operations in an area in which the government's decision to drain a large *beel* or lake in the early 1960s had led to the emergence of new land which it declared would be distributed to the landless. Landless families in the area began to drain and clear the land for cultivation but lost out to local landlords who forcibly occupied the land and hired them as wage labourers. As Abdur Rahim told us:

Our fathers and forefathers would cultivate the land, they would clear the jungle and plant paddy and every year the jotedar's people would take away the harvest. We were never able to protest.

Land reform initiatives after independence gave legal entitlement to the *beel* land to local landless families but few either knew about it or had the courage to claim the land. As Momena recalled, it was through Samata that she and other landless families in the village learnt that the law could be used to promote the rights of the poor as well as wielded against them. Samata took group members to Tehsil office and the AC Land office to examine all the records in regards to *khas* land. The TNO and the government surveyors were invited to measure the drained land and establish its status as *khas* land. Once this was done, landless groups were able to demand that their landlords provide documents proving their entitlement.

Resistance by landlords led to over a decade of confrontation, often violent. When the landlords' musclemen were routed in physical confrontations, they resorted to legal harassment. False cases were lodged against Samata members, often several at a time. These made no reference to the legality of otherwise of their claims to land but accused them of various criminal acts, including rape, violence against women, murder, extortion and so on rather. The accused would be tied up in court cases over extended periods of time and sometimes gaoled for a number of years. Group savings and organisational support helped them to survive but it was not till the mid-1990s that they finally began to get full ownership of the land.

Nijera Kori group members from the *char* areas of Noakhali, where there were large tracts of disputed land, had similar stories to tell. Although the government had declared these lands to be *khas* and hence available for redistribution, there was little the landless could do to claim their entitlements. Maleka Begum recalled the lawlessness that had prevailed in Char Jabbar when her family had first moved into the area: 'people were afraid to come to this area, it was a dangerous environment'. They faced constant demands for toll money from local industrial elites and landlords backed by threat of forcible seizure of their livestock and

possessions if they failed to pay. The landlords had formed their own '*lathial bahini*' (armed force) from some of the 'money-hungry' families among the landless to assist them in these operations.

NK had arrived in the area to provide relief after a major cyclone in 1985 and stayed on to organise the landless. The elites had till then taken it for granted that landless families in the area could be bought off or terrorised into submission. The fierce confrontations that ensued took them by surprise:

They did not have any idea that the poor, whose only means of survival is land, would defend their land with the last ounce of blood.

Women took the lead in confrontations with the police on a number of occasions:

We were not afraid of confronting the police and local administration. In a place like Noakhali, where women rarely went out of the house, we discarded our burkah and took up brooms and sticks in our hands. In the face of our resistance to their hired goons, the industrialists began to lay charges of violence against women against the men in our area.

By the mid-1990s, the *jotedars* began to weary of the confrontations and landless groups began the process of taking over the land.

The active part taken by women in the struggles over land served to raise the level of gender awareness within these organisations. The women's groups in the organisations protested when they found that there was no provision to include them in land allocation process. In response, both NK and Samata adopted the demand for joint entitlement in their struggles for land. Many male members were also affected by women's participation in the land struggles. It brought home to them their own internalisation of social norms about women's inferiority. Abdur Rahman told us:

Before joining Samata, I hardly recognised women's roles. We really had no idea that women worked as hard as we did in running the family. Now I realise that our family is a result of our joint effort. When we received two bighas of land in 1994, it was in both our names ... I now believe that land should be allotted jointly in the name of both husband and wife.

Akkas was similarly influenced by his experiences with Samata:

In the past, I used to behave badly with my wife, I used to beat her if I did not get my meals on time. But during our movement I saw women help us in so many ways. They were behind us with bricks, pebbles, water and food ... They had so much love and affection for us. How then could we not show them affection in return. Everyone associated with Samata regards women as human beings.

Along with the joint entitlement to the khas land that was allocated to his family, he had also bought a small parcel of land, half of which he had registered in his wife's name.

Not all forms of collective action in the economic domain had the life-and-death quality of these struggles over land but they all relied on the power of collective action that the landless groups had learnt to bring to their demands. Samata's

women's groups had campaigned successfully to ensure that public works programmes in their locality filled the quota of jobs reserved for women. Both NK and Samata groups had gone on strike for higher wages or to resist wage cuts. In some cases, they did not win their demands and group members found themselves isolated as their fellow strikers gave into their employers' threats or blandishments. In other cases, where their associations covered neighbouring villages, it was far more difficult for landlords to find wage labour from outside the village. In still other villages, they had managed to persuade labourers brought in from outside to refuse to work unless they were paid the wages the groups were demanding. Regardless of these outcomes, one major change that was widely reported was the behaviour of the wealthy towards their labourers. According to Nasir, protests by NK groups meant that the earlier practice of holding back pay had been stopped. Now they were given their pay at the end of the working day: 'The importance of our word has increased'.

3.3 Improving access to justice

All three of the NGOs in our sample were active in the arena of law and justice. They provided training in legal rights, supported group action in the face of injustice and assisted members who wanted to take grievance to court. These activities have had considerable impact on the self-confidence of group members. Mossamet Fatema told us about how things had been in her village before BRAC had arrived:

Before becoming members of BRAC, the women of this group had no confidence. They were not even aware of their own rights. Most village women are illiterate. They do not go out of the house, and therefore do not have any solid conception about the world beyond. Although I myself have always had courage, even when I was a child, I did not understand about many issues. I had no idea about the extent of discrimination against women.

She described how change had come about:

People gain knowledge on different subjects through discussions and interactions with other people. As a result, women have slowly started to come out of their world of housework ... I came to know about women's rights after becoming a member.

She found herself questioning practices she had taken for granted before:

I now know that women face discrimination in marriage, that it is a crime to give or take dowry. Before, no woman ever got married without giving dowry. Now, through the involvement of group members, a number of marriages have taken place without dowry.

Fatema provided an example of how BRAC group members approached gender injustices within the community:

Many men beat their wives, especially in relation to dowry. Our group members first sit with the husband and wife and try to solve the problem through discussion. We try to make them realise that both giving and taking dowry are social crimes. We tell them that the law forbids dowry.

If they were not able to solve the problem within the group, they turned to BRAC's legal assistance centre which provided advice and support to the aggrieved party. These experiences meant that many BRAC members were knowledgeable on such matters as how to file a case, whether or not the kabin at marriage had been properly fixed and whether marriage fee was appropriate.

NK and Samata combine their training in legal rights with a structural analysis of socioeconomic injustice. Their membership engaged in a wider variety of collective actions than those of BRAC, challenging class and gender injustices as well as taking on religious discrimination and environmental concerns. Jobeda (Samata) described how her group members had campaigned against various manifestations of gender injustice within the community – and the changes that had taken place:

Men and women are equal, but many different kinds of violence and oppression are done against women in our society, talak [divorce], fatwas, dowry and so on. By not letting women go outside of their house, men are committing severe injustice against them. No women in this area used to go out without burkha. We have made processions, given speeches in the bazaar against such practices. Now we have come out and have realised that cooking is not the only job for women. To be able to study and work is also her right. Aside from the fundamental rights, a woman has the right to move around on the streets, to speak her mind and to hold jobs. There was a time when I used to wear burkha too. After joining the landless association, I have given up wearing it.

NK and Samata group members also took active part in the *shalish*, the traditional village-level forum for dealing with conflict. These tend to be dominated by village elites and their adjudications loaded in favour of the elites and their followers. The growing strength of NK and Samata groups has meant that their members are routinely invited to participate in *shalish* proceedings. Furthermore, where the traditional mechanism was found to be unsatisfactory and where the group presence was sufficiently strong, the organisations set up their own alternative forums for dispute resolution or turned to the Chairman and other elected members to convene the *shalish* on their behalf.

The NGOs had thus succeeded in setting up alternative mechanisms for dispensing justice which were not only seen to be more impartial, but also carried sufficient legitimacy to command the reluctant acceptance of the elites. In some cases, it was the threat that landless groups would refuse to work for those who did not abide by the verdict that led to this acceptance. In other cases, it was the threat to take a case to court, with the expensive and time-consuming procedures this would entail. The availability of a justice mechanism that is not loaded in favour of the rich and powerful has played an important role in building organisational support among the poor, particularly those who had direct experience of the unjust treatment that had been meted out to the poor. A number of our respondents told us that they had joined these organisations because of their memory of past injustice.

It has been of particular importance for women, given that the traditional *shalish* had long been used to shore up male domination. As Jobeda from Nijera Kori put it:

The woman whose husband is refusing to support her, she will not get justice from the village leaders. Instead they will accuse her of some fault that led to her husband's behaviour. Now nobody approaches the village leaders. Because women cannot be of much help to them, the village leaders do not see any fault in men. They look for a yardstick to decide whose side to take and their yardstick is power.

The existence of organisations whose members are prepared to stand up to injustice has also had repercussions within the community. According to Mossamet Akther from BRAC:

When people outside our associations hear that we are capable of solving these dowry disputes, they also come to us. At first, we members try to solve it by ourselves. If we fail, then the legal assistance division tries to give different kind of legal aid to the bride's side. Such as: filing a case, claiming for the allowance of feeding clothing and sheltering. People of this area know that our group members play important roles in solving different problems. As a result, they come to us for advice regarding various situations.

Evidence that the wider community had begun to recognise the legitimacy of these alternative systems of justice was to be found in the changing attitudes of the village elites towards the poor. Nurjehan told us that she had complained to the village head when her landlord had beaten her son because she had decided to stop working for him. When she was ignored, she took her complaint to Samata group members who carried out their own shalish and fined the landlord 1,000 takas. The landlord was forced to pay as he feared that others might refuse to work for him: 'This was when the village elite began to realise that the groups were becoming powerful. This judgement made us stronger'.

Arifa from Samata made a similar point:

In the past, the village matabor or a member were responsible for giving judgement but they would never give a fair judgment. Whoever had money was able to ensure the verdict was in their favour. Because we try to be fair, many people now come to us with their complaints. The matabors did not give us much importance before. They thought we had no capacity to solve problems. But now their ideas about us have changed a lot.

3.4 Accountability struggles in the policy domain

Group members of all three organisations have become increasingly engaged in the distribution of public goods and services within their community, but to a varying extent. Our interviews suggested that the primary form of involvement by BRAC group members related to the distribution of Vulnerable Group Development cards which were intended to provide destitute women with a 'package' of assistance, including food transfers, training and credit. Although most of BRAC's groups members were not eligible for these cards, BRAC's collaboration on this programme with the government and the World Food Programme explains their high levels of involvement in the distribution process.

NK and Samata group members, on the other hand, were engaged in monitoring and lobbying around a wide range of social services and poverty-alleviation schemes, including the allocation of VGD cards. While this wider degree of engagement may reflect the difference between a women-only organisation and organisations that worked with both women and men, it is also likely to reflect the explicit focus on citizenship issues and the significance attached to collective action in the philosophy and training efforts of the two organisations. Certainly Manan (Samata) made an explicit link between his constitutional rights and group demands for greater accountability in the public provision of social services:

As citizens of Bangladesh, we have the right to food, clothing, shelter, health and education. It is the state's responsibility to provide these needs ... Earlier we didn't have proper treatment facilities in the Union clinics. We put pressure on the UP Chairman who talked to the doctors there so that they provide better treatment. But we still have to ask, why do they steal and sell the medicines that are intended for our treatment?

Maleka Begum from NK also invoked her constitutional rights to explain the collective actions taken by her group members to protest the flawed provision of health care in her area:

Each citizen in this society has five fundamental rights but we do not enjoy these rights. There is no proper treatment or medicine in hospitals. We have demonstrated in Maizdi town demanding our rights and protesting against the corruption of doctors and theft of public medicine. So now when they hear at the hospital that someone is from our Landless Association, they give them a bit more respect.

This exertion of bottom-up pressure via elected officials was one mechanism through which landless groups were able to effect some improvements in the delivery of social services to the poor. In addition, they had taken active part in the various formal and informal committees responsible for the governance of important local institutions, including schools, markets, mosques and so on. Zulfikar from Samata told us:

In the past we were excluded from these services but now we are getting our due. Our members are the main source of the power that made this change happen. We have committees in each of the nine Wards of the Union. In our committees, we sit and discuss who is not getting proper education or medical treatment. As a result, people are getting some medical facilities. If there are irregularities in providing medicines, we demand explanations from the functionaries. Now they are afraid of us. We go to hospitals in groups and ask why people are not getting medicine or why they do not have the medicine in stock.

Akash told us that the chairmen and members used to misappropriate the wheat allotted to the poor once they got into power. This was less possible now.

Every month I check at the Union Council about what has been allotted to the poor. Under the VGD programme the chairman used to distribute 20kg wheat per head instead of 30kg. When we stood together to protest this malpractice, he was compelled to distribute the right amount of wheat.

He was on the school committee and saw to it that teachers were taking classes regularly.

Other kinds of collective action in relation to social provisioning were described in the interviews. In one area, NK group members had lobbied for the establishment of a school for their children. In another, groups spoke of their struggle to ensure that cyclone shelters were built in locations that were accessible to the landless. A Samata group member told us about her group's efforts to ensure that public works schemes in their area filled the quota of jobs reserved for women on these schemes. Greater awareness about gender inequality had translated into active pressure to promote the socioeconomic rights of girls and women. As Aleya put it,

We have to establish the rights of women all over Bangladesh, not only in our area. In our area, we talk to those families who only send their sons to school. We ask them to send their daughters as well. We even make arrangements for her notebooks, pen, school fee and books, which are essential to go to school. Before the teachers were not taking classes regularly; but now we monitor and take information about their attendance, regularities and class performances.

3.5 Providing leadership to poor people

A number of the rural respondents believed that proven willingness and capacity of their groups in representing the interests of poor people in informal justice procedures and in the distribution of social services has meant that group membership has provided a seedbed for alternative forms of leadership in the countryside. According to Akash, participation in various village committees was a training ground in leadership for their members:

We all want that the landless people get more exposure, serve outside so that they can get valuable experience and with that experience they make more poor peoples aware. When a poor person gets experience, he himself is learning new things and in turn, is also imparting this learning to the others. That's why we elect new leaders every year by rotation.

Manjura believed that their role in dispute resolution had contributed to their emergence as leaders:

Combining everything we do, we have become a powerful group, parallel to the mattabars. This was not so in the beginning. But now the poor know we stand for the law and we try to be fair. As a result the powerful people of the society are forced to listen to us. All of this could become possible through our membership of NGOs.

This leadership role was evident in the fact that group members were often consulted for their advice and opinions on various matters by other villagers. In the past, such consultations would have been directed to the village elite.

This leadership role has taken on an increasingly political form with the holding of local elections with the restoration of democracy in 1991. Local elections are held, in principle along non-partisan lines to positions in local government at the union

level. While seats had been reserved for women in local government, changes in the late 1990s allowed election to these seats rather than nomination by the ruling party. The years of activism have made NGO group members credible candidates in these elections. A number of those we interviewed had stood for elections with the support of their organisational networks and some had won.

Mossamet Fatema, a BRAC member who had won a reserved seat at the local election, explained her success in terms of the support provided by her group members:

We have been able to make people realise that we are on the side of fairness. I became a candidate after holding discussions with the group members. My group members went to the village with me to campaign for vote. Previously, due to lack of awareness, people did not understand the problems much and also could not differentiate between which judgements were fair and which unfair. Now they have more clear ideas and for that, they do not want to go to the corrupted member or chairman for justice.

For many of the landless groups, political participation reinforced their capacity to ensure greater responsiveness on the part of government to the needs and rights of the poor. Jobeda pointed to the benefits of having a NK group member elected to the union council:

If someone from the Bhumihien Samity becomes a member, we come to know about what the government is providing for the poor. Previously these were embezzled by members and chairmen. We have now elected Jamila in two consecutive elections. Through her we have come to know how many VGD cards, tubewells, corrugated iron sheets and so on have been allocated to our village. We did not distribute all of these but we distribute many. We will achieve the rest gradually. It is not possible to climb up the top of the tree at once.

Kashem, who had not himself been elected, but was active in local committees, believed that holding elected positions within local government allowed landless group members to ensure its accountability to the poor:

I am now in a school and madrasah committee. I make sure the teachers take their classes properly. The Chairman and Members of the village consult us before they distribute government assistance. However, we do not enjoy all our rights yet. We are unlikely to do so because we have not reached that level yet. We have elected the UP member from our landless group and the Chairman cooperates with us. Now we are preparing to put forward someone from our group to stand as Chairman. We have to win power if we want our full rights. You can only enjoy very limited rights if you do not hold power.

However, for some of the women in our sample, election to local government brought them into new terrains of struggle as they faced the deep-seated prejudices against women in what had hitherto been a male domain. According to Habiba who had been elected to one of the reserved seats in the Union Parishad: 'Women in the UP council are treated as inferior because they are women. Neither the chairman nor the other male members give us any responsibilities'. Her response to this treatment was testimony to the experience she had gained

through her membership of Nijera Kori. She collected the relevant policy documents from upazilla headquarters so that her group could learn about the roles and responsibilities of the chairman and different members. They found out that the chairman of the committee for the VGD scheme and elderly pension allowances had to be a female member. She then called a meeting of 33 elected women from 11 unions in the ward at which they agreed that they would withhold their signatures from all documents until they were allowed to fulfil their responsibilities. They decided to try and win the support of the male elected members while she also talked to other women. In the end, the chairman had to concede responsibility for the relevant schemes to the elected women.

Jomila from NK also had to deal with the entrenched prejudices of elected officials, but was less successful in gaining a voice within the union parishad. The male members did not give the women a chance to talk and the other two women in the council kept silent most of the time. She found being the lone female voice difficult but continued to express her views. She failed in her attempt to ensure that women officials were given their due responsibilities, including the distribution of VGD cards. However, she was re-elected and promised to fight on. She believed that her honesty in government had led to her re-election:

I was a Member for the landless for five years and I have been elected again, yet I do not have my own homestead or my own land. I do not want to build my house by stealing from the poor.

3.6 On becoming a citizen: insights from the rural context

As we noted earlier, analysis of the experiences of members of groups organised by socially-oriented NGOs provides us with some insights into the processes generated by purposively designed efforts to promote the identity and practice of citizenship. We are now in a position to summarise some key elements of these processes. There is no necessary sequence to these elements, they operate iteratively and interactively. However, an increase in *awareness* was the starting point for change in most cases. We noted the emphasis placed by some of our urban respondents on the need for greater awareness if the poor were to protest against injustice. This emphasis resonates with the significance given to consciousness in definitions of citizenship in the wider academic literature. What emerged from our rural interviews was the extent to which such awareness could be built up over time through organisational efforts at training and discussion.

Jobeda, who had first learnt to identify the letters of her name after she joined NK 24 years ago, told us that their previous ignorance had made the poor silent, afraid and acquiescent:

We had no knowledge then. Whatever the village elders said we used to take as the truth. We never protested even though there was a lot of injustice and oppression in the locality. We were afraid of the chairmen, village leaders and members. Moreover, we could not see any reason to protest. After all they were our village leaders, we used to honor them. We thought that to argue with the chairmen was to commit an offence. We do not think that anymore.

Nurul Islam spoke of the diminution of fear that came with greater awareness:

The greatest achievement from our connection with this organisation is awareness. Before we were scared to even talk to a guard. Now we know the reasons of our fears and so we can talk to them. Even without having formal education, through participating in NK programmes and activities, I have been able to become fully conscious human being.

Shanti believed that she had learnt more from being a member of BRAC than she had from her formal education:

Although I have an HSC pass, I learnt more from the training I received here than from my studies. If there had been no BRAC, I would not have learnt about the usefulness of different plants. I have learnt that a tree is the dearest friend of a human being. The education I got earlier told me that my only duty was to serve my husband after my marriage. But a woman has so much she can do besides serving her husband. A woman can work as hard as a male.

Training often helped to make unexpected connections between abstract rights and every day life. For instance, Arif commented on how NK training had altered his way of thinking about the family diet:

NK created a learning environment for us. We learnt about our constitutional rights. Till then, we had eaten simply to survive, our forefathers had also eaten simply to survive. But when we learnt that we had a right to food, we became interested in knowing more. We began to think about the matter differently. We learnt that you need a balanced diet to lead a healthy life. In everyday meal there should be protein, vitamin and fat. That means we need fish, meat, egg, vegetable, pulse etc. But when we ate before, we tended to only have the same items.

Changes in awareness did not take the form of a one-off shift in thinking but of an ongoing process of learning, reflection, action, experience, observation and analysis that raised theoretical and practical questions about aspects of inequality that had hitherto been taken for granted. They contributed to a second element in the processes of becoming a citizen: *building 'voice'*, the capacity to question, dissent, persuade, influence and challenge. Some of the women in our sample spoke of voice in terms of their increased role in household decision making while some of the men acknowledged greater willingness to listen to their wives. However, it was the capacity to exercise collective voice in the public domain that featured most frequently as the hallmark of citizenship. According to Mussamat Nurban from BRAC, this was the essence of citizenship:

I am certainly a citizen of this country. Protesting against child marriage, making sure VGD cards are properly distributed, protesting against violence against women – these are my rights. I have a right to speak out if anybody is involved in corruption.

For members of Samata and NK, their collective engagements with the structures of power in the local community ensured that their voices were heard by those with power:

We are now able to talk directly to the SP or DC. We organise processions, meetings, gheraos to claim our rights and against briber and corruption. When necessary, we submit memorandums. I am an ordinary mechanic but now I stand on the stage and give a speech in defense of our rights. We are now able to go to the clinics and talk about our health care. We do not allow areas clinics to steal our medicines and sell them in the market. Everyone talks to each member of the landless association with respect.

(Kalam, Nijera Kori)

Earlier we didn't know what the TNO was, now we are in discussion with that very TNO and with the AC (land). When there is injustice, we protest, we gherao, we bring out processions. Earlier we did not have any opportunity to see their faces. Now we sit beside them in the chair. We talk to the chairmen and not just the chairman. We can now face up to the upazilla administration, the TNO, police station and others ... In the hospitals, there is still no proper treatment or medicine but if they hear that someone is from the landless association, they try to give extra respect. Because we also made procession in Maizdi town in defence of our rights. We have demonstrated against the demand for bribes among doctors and theft of medicines.

(Jobeda, Samata)

Everyone in the society has equal rights. Before, we had no say in the local shalish [alternative village court system]. We had no right to speak about what was fair or unfair. Apart from that we were not allowed to be part of the committees, for school, madrasa, graveyard and so on. But now we have established our rights. Nowadays, we are the ones who organise the village court or shalish. In different committees, landless people are now also included. When we came to understand about all our rights, we learnt to speak out for them as well.

(Korban Sheik, Samata)

This ability to exercise collective voice and agency was premised on the development of a *collective identity*, a third element in the processes of change reported by our respondents. Economic incentives, the promise of credit or access to land, may have motivated many to join NGO-initiated groups but it was sharing life experiences and seeking solutions to common problems that held them together over time. As Mossamet put it:

Being BRAC members, the people of the group have developed strong, intimate relationships. They knew each other before, but the closeness was not like this. Now, if any member is in trouble, we try to help them. If one person has financial trouble, we all pool donations and try to help her. If anyone tries to harm one of the group members then our whole group would protest against this unfair situation. All of these became possible because we became organised.

An NK member described a similar process:

The people in our Bhumiheen Samity knew each other before we became a group, but our relationship to each other has changed through our association with each other. We didn't use to share each others problems before. Now we have got united, each one's problem affects the others. We have to take care of each other.

The regular face-to-face interactions between group members over a sustained period of time played a critical role in the consolidation of this collective identity: as one Samata member put it, 'Regular meetings keep the samity alive. If we met every two months, our samity would lose its vitality'. Meetings were held at group, village and federation levels for a variety of different purposes: savings and credit activities, training, discussion, conflict resolution, decisions about collective action. Regularity of meetings served to build up predictable routines for dealing with disputes and addressing problems and built the confidence of members in each other. Alam described Samata's approach to disputes between group members

In case of any problem, we find solution in the group meetings. At first, the members try to find out a solution. When it is not possible, the solution is found through the Village Development Committees. If that is not possible, we go to the Union or even further to the Regional Committee.

A similar process took place in BRAC:

We sit in monthly meeting regularly. Women together place their demands. It is possible to establish the demands when all are united. We ourselves decide the agenda of the meeting. BRAC representative attends the meeting. Everybody is informed about the agenda of the meeting. Things which we don't understand are explained by the BRAC worker.

The relationship between *group solidarity and collective action* was an interactive one: group solidarity provided the willingness and courage to act, on behalf of self and others, while collective action helped to build and strengthen group solidarity. The importance of 'unity' was a common thread running through many of the interviews. One Samata member said:

One stick can be broken, a bundle of sticks cannot. It is not possible to achieve anything on one's own. You have no value on your own. Now if I am ill, my samity members will look after me. Moreover to establish your rights you need to struggle, you need to be united. If I want to stand in an election, I would need support for that, to vote for me, to run my campaign. Can I make myself valuable on my own? I cannot. No matter how big you think yourself, you have to win support.

Shanti from BRAC believed that the poor gained strength through solidarity:

What is a burden for one is a light weight for ten people. It is not possible to do any work alone. You have no value alone. Who will look after me if I am ill? Now there is my samity, they will look after me, will help me. Moreover, in order to establish your rights, to do struggle you need to be together. If want to stand in election I would need manpower for that. They will seek vote for me, run publicity for me. Can I make myself valuable by myself? I cannot. It will be of no use if you think yourself big. You have to win everybody's love'.

And an NK member said:

The members of the landless organisation have gained courage. We hope that by going on with the struggle, we will be able to change this society. This would not be possible without an organisation for the landless. The way we are able to speak out is our strength. The main source of this strength is that 10 to 20 of us got united and 10 or 20 more ... I hope this unity will continue for a long time.

A fourth important element in the organisational strategies of all three groups was the significance attached to issues of *justice and legality*. A concern with legal and constitutional rights was interwoven into the training provided by all three organisations. The significance attached to the law was understandable. In a country where elites have been able to use a variety of ideologies to justify their privilege, where governance failures impact on the poor in a myriad different ways, the legal system, for all its imperfections, provides the only discourse within the country which holds out the promise of equality and due process to all citizens, men and women, rich and poor. And while the legal system has often been used against the poor, one of the major contributions these organisations made in strengthening respect for the law was to demonstrate that it could also be used to defend the interests of the poor.

Finding out that they had legal entitlements to the khas land in their areas, and that landlords were occupying them illegitimately, constituted an important political moment in the process by which landless groups shifted from unquestioning acceptance of the privileges of the powerful to a recognition of their own status as citizens and a willingness to act collectively to enforce their legal rights. The importance given to legality as a source of validation for their struggles was echoed in the frequent references made by group members to what might be called the 'procedures and paraphernalia' of citizenship: agendas and records of meetings, presentations of memos, filing of petitions, measurement and documentation to back claims, knowing the procedures for claiming entitlements and consulting policy documents, visits to various government offices, sitting in chairs alongside important officials and speaking on public platforms. While these might be regarded as mundane or bureaucratic by those who take their citizenship rights for granted, they constituted important building blocks in the construction and visibility of a citizenship identity among the disenfranchised.

A fifth significant aspect of pathways to citizenship associated with group membership was the *increasing willingness and capacity to provide grassroots leadership*. The collective actions undertaken by group members were motivated, in the first instance, by the interests of group members but over time, groups began to mobilise on behalf of others within the community. BRAC members emphasised that their involvement in the distribution of VGD cards was largely on behalf of those who were eligible for these cards, very few of whom belonged to BRAC groups. They spoke also of their role in dispute resolution and taking up cases of gender injustices within the wider community. Both NK and Samata groups also took collective action on behalf of their own membership as well as others outside it. Their collective actions included direct confrontations with landlords and police, strikes and collective bargaining, labour boycotts,

demonstrations, petitions, campaigns, press conferences and other uses of the media. Organisational emphasis on regular savings by group members, to be controlled and decided on by them, was a critical resource in tiding members through these struggles since they often entailed legal costs as well as interruption to their livelihood strategies. Collective savings underpinned the capacity to take the risks associated with collective action.

The capacity to win gains by NGO groups played an important catalytic role in developing this leadership role as well as helping groups to sustain and expand their membership. By standing up to those accustomed to getting their own way, and often prevailing over them, landless groups demonstrated their capacity to act as a countervailing power to established hierarchies and drew others to their cause. Habiba from NK emphasised the strategic importance of such gains for the poor, however small in scale, for the credibility of organisations that claimed to represent their interests:

In a village where women rarely left the premises of their homes, such victories can play an important role. They show what is possible through the awareness, unity and organisation of oppressed women ... Before women became organised, they could not make out the difference between what was just and what was unjust. But through our discussions in NK we were able to understand. People have come to appreciate what we do and we are invited to participate in shalish and dispute resolutions. Now the supreme authority of the mattabar and chairman has been reduced. Their partial judgements have always frustrated the poor so now they come to us for justice. And often our organisation takes the initiative to mobilise opinion and protest on behalf of people's rights.

Abdur told us that he had joined Samata in 1984 when he observed how their groups dealt with a local chairman who had tried to sell 18 trees from land belonging to one of the poor families in the locality. The group had called in the *amin* to measure the land and thereby establish that the chairman, a powerful local figure, was breaking the law. Matin had joined NK because he saw how their groups were able to articulate the demands of the landless:

I saw that those who had never spoken before were now giving speeches in meetings, processions and conferences. Before we only saw ministers and MPs standing on the stage and delivering speeches, now a landless person is standing in their place and giving a speech.

With the restoration of democracy, NGO groups had moved from putting external pressure on the state to a more direct engagement from within. Their sustained history of collective action on issues that mattered to the poor stood them in good stead in local elections: many stood for local elections, a number of them won and some were re-elected. This provided first-hand evidence to the group members, and to the community at large, that it was possible to mobilise the poor behind candidates either drawn from their own ranks or selected for their pro-poor sympathies. In contrast to the cynicism expressed by many of the working poor in urban areas, rural group members regarded elections as an exercise in democracy. As Akkash from Samata said:

The vote is a priceless commodity. It is a kind of power. It is through our vote that a person gets elected and commands respect in society. Our votes help to make leaders.

For Korban Ali (Samata), the vote provided a route to power for the landless:

I am a citizen of Bangladesh. Food, clothing, education, health care – these are our rights ... To achieve these rights, poor people will have to take power. At present in this area, the members and chairman of the union parishad have been elected on behalf of the landless people. Most of the members of my union are the members of our landless association. Therefore even if the Chairman is not a landless person, these members can create pressure on our behalf so we can claim our rights. It is not possible to get into power in one go. We have to work for it slowly. We have elected our members, next we will elect chairman from our groups and then afterwards we will be standing in elections for the MP election too.

A final important dimension in the processes of becoming a citizen related to the sense expressed by many of our rural respondents of a transition from 'communities of fate', in which life chances were determined at birth, to 'communities of practice' which are evolving out of their shared learning and experiences and which have opened up their future to new possibilities. Our rural respondents spoke of many of the same barriers to citizenship that had featured in our urban narratives: the corruption of government officials, exploitation by the rich and the insecurities of the poor. What was different – and significant – about them were that these barriers were spoken of in the past tense. Rural narratives of citizenship were thus largely narratives of change. The nature of this change was exemplified by the account provided by Abdur Rahman. His father had been one of those who the cleared char land only to lose it to a landlord. He described the circumscribed nature of his father's life, the life he had believed he too would lead: 'I never knew the tehsil office before; I barely knew how to talk with other people. I used to see my father chopping woods in other people's houses, but that was as far as he could go'. Now, as a member of Samata, he had learnt to protest and to defend his rights, he knew the various government offices and those who held office in them, he participated in different committees of the union council. And while the rich people he encountered continued to look down on him, 'such an uncouth person, nobody even knows who his father is and he wants to sit with us', they could no longer express their contempt aloud.

Ibrahim from NK had also believed that his life would mirror that of his forefathers, that the system of domination and subordination would continue to reproduce itself endlessly into the future. His membership of Nijera Kori had opened up a different future defined by new possibilities:

If we are to talk about the main strength of NK, I would say that in the past, we the poor did not realise many things. My father was a sharecropper, I also became a sharecropper. We thought that we would have to pass our days doing the same things that our forefathers did, that those with assets would stay rich and those without would stay poor. Through NK we came to know that we are not born poor, that the government holds wealth on behalf of the

people, that our fundamental rights as citizens of Bangladesh are written into the constitution. Before when I needed help, I went to the mattabar. Now I go to my organisation.

4 Visions of the just society: the ‘capacity to aspire’ in the absence of good governance

Our analysis of the narratives of the working poor bears out our expectation that their experience of citizenship would be shaped in important ways by the possibilities for associational affiliation and collective action available to them. It also bears out our expectation that these possibilities would vary considerably between urban and rural contexts. As we have suggested, the greater ability of socially-oriented organisations to flourish in rural areas was itself symptomatic of underlying differences in state-society relations in the two contexts. Before we consider the implications of our findings for the competing depictions of Bangladesh society outlined in the earlier section of the paper, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which the ‘capacity to aspire’ might be influenced by these variations in the experience of citizenship. We explored this through a series of questions which asked our respondents their views about different models of social justice. The questions, which drew on the ILO (2004), were:

- a society in which people were free to earn as much as they were able to
- a society where everyone earned the same amount
- a society in which people were free to earn as much as they were able to but with an upper limit on earnings.
- a society in which people were free to earn to the extent of their ability but with a minimum floor to earnings
- a society in which people were free to earn to the extent of their ability with government assistance for the poor.

No attempt was made to enforce a uniform interpretation of these questions. They were used instead as means of stimulating discussion and reflection. This open-ended approach allowed our respondents to articulate their own visions of the just society in ways that reflected their understanding and experiences of injustice. Many opted for more than one model, ranking them in order of preferences of combining them as different aspects of their vision.

What emerges from this discussion is a remarkable similarity in the visions of justice expressed by our respondents. There were, of course, variations in their interpretations of their vision and in the sense of grievance, despair or hope that motivated their preferences, but by and large, most respondents gravitated towards similar views of justice for similar reasons. The ‘maximum ceiling’ model of justice received the least support of the five alternatives presented, possibly

because it was most difficult to grasp in practical terms. The option of allowing people the freedom to earn as much as they were able was recognised to give rise to inequalities but also considered fair by many in that it rewarded people for differences in efforts or competence, a merit-based model of justice. Government assistance to the poor received remarkably little support as a first preference, although it often featured as a second, perhaps because the preferred option was seen as out of reach. The reasons why government assistance to the poor did not receive a great deal of support as a first preference varied. Some believed that the sheer numbers of poor people in the country meant that government assistance could not constitute a sustainable solution to the problem of poverty. Some believed that people would be 'ruined' by long term reliance on government relief: that work was preferable to welfare. A third reason was the lack of faith that the government could be trusted to help the poor, given that its functionaries were engaged at every level in the relentless extraction of rents of various kinds. Consequently, it was the idea of a minimum income floor and an egalitarian distribution of income that received the greatest support from our respondents for reasons that are discussed in greater detail below.

4.1 Visions of a just society: dignity and basic security

The preference for a model of justice based on the idea of a minimum floor strongly reflected the insecurity which characterised lives and livelihoods of the workers in our sample and the value they attached to security of basic needs. A system which guaranteed that everyone could earn at least some minimum level of income was seen by many as fundamental to their sense of dignity and self respect because it would allow them to meet their own basic needs rather than having to rely on uncertain handouts from government and the equally unreliable benevolence of the rich. Some used the language of minimum wages to describe this principle while others expressed it in terms of the right to work.

The retrenched jute mill workers were the most emphatic in their support for the idea of the right to work. Their responses expressed the strong sense of entitlement of a previously privileged group of workers combined with anger at the unfair and abrupt withdrawal of these entitlements. According to Giyas:

Every citizen has certain rights from the state. The first and foremost duty of the state is to ensure the basic rights of its citizens in all spheres of life. Such security can be guaranteed through a stable flow of income but the state has taken away my job and exposed me to insecurity from all sides. The future of my children is now uncertain. Without an income the citizen can have no rights.

Altaf also prioritised the right to work:

We have rights from the state, we are its citizens. Food, shelter, education, health care, these are fundamental rights. And then there are the right to freedom of movement, to freedom of speech. But all these rights of mine were lost with the closure of the mills ... My first and foremost right from the government is the right to a proper job ... If I had work, I would not have any grievance against anyone. I need work to mitigate the hunger in my stomach

... If I could earn, then I would meet all my other needs, such as educating my children, food, housing and so on.

His support for other models of justice were also interwoven with his despair at his situation:

I want a society where everyone will help each other. If the government or the rich would assist the poor with money, then our situation would never be like this. One person has crores of taka. If he can give another poor person a sum of 20,000 taka, then that person can manage his career ... there is a need for such a society where there would be scopes for everyone to earn their minimum wages. I am jobless now. If I had alternative arrangements to get work, then I would not have had so much frustration piled up inside me.

Other categories of workers also gave support to the idea of a minimum floor but interpreted it somewhat differently. For the garment workers, it was equated with the idea of a minimum wage. This was Jhorna's (female) preferred model:

I hope for a society where there will be system for everyone to earn minimum wages. If there was a system for me to earn some money everyday, then I would not have to depend on anyone ... If the meritorious people earn more, I would have no objection. But there should be a system for the poor to earn their minimum wages.

The idea of a minimum wage was also supported by Rafiq (male garment worker):

I want a society where there will be a system for the poor and the labourers to work for a minimum wage. People with education have more knowledge than me, I do not object if they earn more than me. But it is necessary to have a system that allows the poor to earn a minimum wage so they do not starve.

Support for some version of a minimum floor had been strongly reinforced among many self-employed urban slum-dwellers by the government's decision to ban rickshaws from certain streets of the city. It appeared to them that not only had the state failed to provide for the working poor in any way but it was actively attacking their efforts to provide for themselves in the interests of the car-owning minority. For Jahanara, the right to work was the basis on which she could achieve her other rights:

My first and foremost right is the right to work. Yet the state does not provide it, and when I manage to arrange my own work, it tries to stop my earnings. When the government banned rickshaws, it did not simply ban my source of income, it also stopped my other rights such as education, health and shelter.

Similarly, for Salma, the ban of rickshaws, the right to work and her children's right to education were closely tied:

If I could earn just 100 takas a day, I would not have to depend on anyone ... The right to food is a fundamental right but the state has taken away our source of income ... the people in the slums will have to starve. I hate rich people ... It was for them that the rickshaw got banned in Dhaka city. They said the rickshaws created jams on the roads and they could not get to school or office on time. But we have no cars. Do our children not also need to go to school?

For Shathi, who had been forced to give up her garment factory job by her husband, the right to work had a special meaning for women:

Since my husband did not like my working in the garments, I was more or less compelled to give up my job... I believe that I have a right to work ... but my husband will not listen to that ... I want a society where there will be a system for every one to earn minimum wages. If I have means to earn a little bit everyday then I could have solved my own problem by myself. And I would not have any complaints against any one.

For Rizia Khatun, the right to work was quite simply about self-respect:

We need a society where there will be jobs for the poor. No one wants to beg, everyone has pride and self-respect. I have nothing. If I had a job, I would not have to beg.

Rural workers related the right to work or the right to a fair wage to the question of social justice, probably because of their affiliation with socially-oriented NGOs. For Mossamet Momena (female, Samata), a just society provided employment to all at fair wages:

I want a society where people have the guarantee of a minimum income. No one wants to remain unemployed. There must be jobs and people must get fair wage. A worker has a right to a fair wage. The country needs to provide a sufficient number of jobs for all. Secondly there is no way that one person should earn 50,000 taka and another earn nothing. That is not right. We need to reduce such high incomes and increase the income of the poor ... The rich can spend 50 takas in one day just to buy fish for one meal while we do not earn 50 takas for the whole day. This is not just.

Ibrahim (male NK) said:

What we need for all our people is the guarantee of work, adequate food and a more egalitarian society. At present, some people cannot manage a day's meal despite working hard all day while others spend their days in comfort and luxury without working at all.

For Akash Ali (male, Samata), land provided the possibility of a minimum floor:

Land is of vital importance to the poor. Being poor we don't have any skills, we do not always get work as daily labourers. We do not have any work during the rainy season. One day without work means starvation for us. If we had a little land, then we could manage to meet our subsistence needs by cultivating it as well as working as daily labourer. If we could store rice at home, then we wouldn't have to borrow from loan sharks. For these reasons we have been fighting for our right to khas land.

A somewhat different perspective was provided by Habiba (female, NK) who saw the right to work as the basis for the voice and agency of the poor:

One thing is clear: the rich are united in their ability to exploit but the poor are not united in their ability to resist exploitation. This is because they are financially weak. So we need to a society in which there will be scope for

some minimum level of earning. When only one person in the family has a job, then the family is bound to become a puppet of the rich. But if all were earning, then this would not happen. Secondly, there is a need for a society without discrimination between rich and poor. Everyone will get equal opportunities. The most urgent need of the present time is to have an aware society. Without education, it is not possible to have a conscious society.

4.2 Visions of a just society: security of shelter and the right to ‘place’

Support for the idea of a minimum income floor, whether interpreted as the right to work or as a minimum wage, represented support for the idea of meeting basic needs with dignity and self respect. Although it was not explicitly factored into our models of the just society, the right to shelter was emphatically singled out by a number of workers as a fundamental expression of citizenship as they understood it. The strongest articulation of this right came from those members of our sample who had been forced to migrate into the city in search of work, who lived in makeshift shelters and who faced the constant threat of homelessness because of extortion by landlords and local gangs, inclement weather, accidental and deliberate fires but above all, because of the periodic efforts by successive regimes to evict them from land they were deemed to have occupied illegally.

It is not surprising therefore that the right to shelter played such an important role in their discussions about citizenship rights and the just society. In some cases, it was invoked as a constitutional right. In others, the significance attached to shelter expressed a more informal understanding of citizenship. Along with the various material meanings attached to shelter (a roof over their heads, protection from the elements, a basis for livelihoods), it represented a fixed point in lives characterised by uncertainty and flux, a recognised ‘place’ in society. The significance of the idea of *place* in the context of Bangladesh is evident in the responses to questions about identity: the majority of workers in both urban and rural areas expressed their identity primarily in terms of the place where they were born, their *desh*. For those who had been forced to leave their *desh* behind, the absence of security of shelter, of a permanent address, signified the absence of a secure identity and therefore secure relationships in society.

As Razia Khaun put it,

In Dhaka city we have no land or home ... Poor people like us also need an address. Every one has to have an address, but we don't. Our relatives cannot find us without an address, no one can find us ... The slum evictions take away even our place to sleep. I have nothing left, what kind of identity can I have?

According to Rafiq, a garment worker,

I have no place to sleep in Dhaka – I share the rent to a room with another person because it is so expensive. Yet to have somewhere to live and sleep, that too is a kind of right. Where is that right?

Rasheda was most explicit in making the link between shelter and citizenship, arguing that denial of security of shelter was an abrogation of a fundamental human right:

More than seven thousand people live in this slum. If the government evicts us, it will turn us into homeless people. If we claim to be civilised people with a constitution, and if everyone has a fundamental right to decent accommodation, how can the government evict so many people without making alternative arrangements? I have one son. After much hardship I am sending him for SSC. He received Grade A in his final examination. If this slum is destroyed, his education is destroyed as well. I have come to the end of my tether. I have no address of my own. If I cannot give an address, even to my children, how can I be a citizen of this country. The question of rights and citizenship is irrelevant in a country which cannot even give me assurance of accommodation.

In the rural context, it was land, rather than housing, that signified security of 'place'. For Hashem (male, Nijera Kori):

Land is our birthright. All governments are obliged to provide land to their people. Among the five fundamental rights, there is also the right to accommodation. If I had land, I could build my home on it. I could meet my other fundamental rights by cultivating land.

Aleya Khatun (female, Samata) saw the security of land rights as bound up with security of place and security of identity:

If our samity did not exist, we would be driven away from here. We would get no justice. We would have no place in this country. Land is wealth; it lets me send my children to school. It is my right. It is my identity. I am not a nomad. There is a union council, as a citizen of this country, I have to pay the chaukidar tax of the union parishad. But to pay such a tax, I need at least some land or a house to live in. This is the right of a citizen.

Mossamet Shanur (female, Nijera Kori) made a similar point:

My first right from society and state is a place to live in. If I have a permanent and safe place to stay then I would be able to manage our food myself. But the society doesn't want to give me this simple right to a safe place to live. We are people uprooted by river erosion. Everything that we owned had perished in the river. We are citizens of this country. The only thing that the landless believe in is that they should not be afraid of anybody except God. The place where I live is a very beautiful and holy one. None of us will give away our rights on this land. This char is my only family.

For Chobura (female, Samata) land represented a permanent address as well as protection from domestic violence:

I am a citizen of this country ... if I do not have any land, any permanent address, how can I claim to be a citizen? We need land to live. As long as my feet are on the ground, I will feel strong. And when women have property, their husbands cannot torture them. Nor can family or society neglect her.

4.3 Visions of a just society: equality as shared humanity and realisation of potential

A third set of interpretations of the just society was sparked by the idea of an egalitarian distribution of income. In general, equality was interpreted in broader terms than income, encompassing the way in which society should be organised and opportunities distributed. However, there were variations in the articulation of this broader vision and in the rationales offered for it. A number of people invoked the idea of shared humanity as the rationale for a fairer world. This was the rationale put forward by Amerunessa (female, urban self-employed):

I want a society where there will be no discrimination between rich and poor. Everyone will be equal. We are all human beings, we have the same blood flowing through our bodies, we were created by the same god and when we die, we all go the same way. No one can take anything with them when they die.

A similar argument about shared humanity was made by Jahanara (female, urban self-employed):

I want a system in the country where there will be no discrimination among people. Everybody would live at the same level and enjoy equal opportunities. If birds and animals can live in a similar way to each other, why can't human beings. After all they have more brains than animals. So why at the end of the day is there food for one person and no food for another?

Anwara (female, urban Proshika) described her aversion to the consequences of inequality:

I do not like the idea of letting people earn whatever they can and whichever way they find. In this kind of society people do not help each other. Nor do I support a society where people are allowed to earn as they can and where at the same time the government supports the poor because the government doesn't help the poor. We starved during the flood of 1987 without government's help. I like the idea of everybody earning the same. Doesn't it look bad living in the same society some of us can eat while others starve? What kind of a society is it where some have food while others don't?... The society with equal income for all does not allow such situation. It is also good to fix a lowest income because everybody has to survive.

Rasheda (urban self employed, Nijera Kori), who had been without work for the last six months, had prioritised the idea of a minimum wage floor. However, her most eloquent argument was for a society based on equality of opportunity in which everyone could realise their own potential:

I want a society where there will be no difference between people. No one will be overlooked. If everyone gets equal opportunity, then everyone can express their merit. My son has intelligence but there is no scope for it to flourish. I teach children in the slums and observe that their intelligence is no less than others. But they will not even have the opportunity to finish primary school. The existing system is responsible for this. That is why I want a system that provides equal opportunities for all.

Manjura (female, rural, BRAC) envisioned a society which combined equality, government support and provision for a minimum level of earning:

There should be a society where there is true education, there should be no conflict or argument, no injustice imposed on the poor. There should be a system of earning in balance with the expenses and the possibility of making savings. The government would financially help the country's poor population so that their suffering and miseries are ended. And lastly there should be a system of minimum earning sources for the poor people.

For Fatema Akhter (female, rural, BRAC), arguments about equality extended to equality between men and women:

It is necessary to have a society in which what is fair and right will win. Everybody will stand up to injustice. Everyone will get equal opportunity to work. Women are paid less than men for the same amount of work. In a just society there would be no discrimination. Everybody has the strength to work. If everyone had a job and some way to earn a minimum wage, discrimination would decrease

For many members of NK and Samata, the egalitarian model of society conformed most closely to their view of justice because it would eradicate the inequalities of power and privilege which defined injustice in the present society:

I dream of a society where everyone will have equality of income and opportunity. We see that in this society the rich can get away with anything because they have money. So we want a society where justice is impartial. There are so many disparities ... they get richer and we remain trapped in the same poverty. Yet the rich have the same two hands and two legs that we have.

(Johura, female, rural, Nijera Kori)

Poor people need the same opportunities as the rich to survive in the society. I do not get any opportunities while you will enjoy them all: that is not right. There should be no discrimination between rich and poor, Hindu and Muslim. My child cannot go to school, your children can. You have money, you can spend 500 taka for your child to go to school. I cannot. There should be law in the country so that everybody's children can go to school.

(Afazuddin male, rural, Samata)

The whole of Bangladesh is one family. 14 crores of people live here. If your family has two members and you are doing everything for them whereas another family has eight members who are passing their days starving and you do nothing for them, is that right or wrong? The sunlight is distributed equally, air is distributed equally but when it comes to land, you say, 'this land belongs to some big business man of Noakhali.

(Shajahan male, rural, NK)

5 Conclusion: constructing citizenship in the absence of good governance

We are now in a position to revisit some of the ideas about constructions of citizenship in challenging contexts with which we began this paper. In this concluding section, we summarise our main findings and consider their implications for these theoretical propositions. The overall hypothesis of the study was that the organisation of poor people's livelihoods, and the social relationships it generated, was an important site for understanding their meanings and experiences of citizenship. This is borne out by our findings. First of all, it is evident from our interviews that livelihood activities constitute a major preoccupation for poor people as well a major source of injustice in their everyday lives. It is also evident that their economic location had an important bearing on their social relationships, including their relationships with state officials, market actors and civil society organisations.

Secondly, while our analysis confirms the pervasiveness of bad governance in Bangladesh, and the central role of the state in generating and perpetuating this state of affairs, it also suggests that the state is not a uniformly negative presence in people's lives, even in the lives of the working poor. Relationships with the state varied – across failing and competitive industries, across public and private enterprise and across the formal and informal economy – but it was variations across urban and rural locations that emerged as a major factor in differentiating experiences of citizenship among our respondents.

The state was experienced as a largely malign presence by our urban respondents. Many had been at the receiving end of various recent actions by the state which had harmed the lives and livelihoods of working families in urban areas, including the closure of the Adamjee jute mills, the ban on rickshaws and recurring attempts to evict slum dwellers. In addition, of course, there was the ongoing harassment by the police, a routine feature of the everyday lives of the urban poor. These actions generated a great degree of antagonism towards the state, and in the case of the anti-eviction struggles, direct confrontations. In addition, the *absence* of the state in critical aspects of the lives of the urban poor, such as provision of health, education, water and sanitation, were as damaging to their struggles for survival and voice as its malign presence in other aspects. There was, of course, also considerable antagonism towards the wealthier classes for their exploitative use of the labour of poor people, for the benefits they reaped from state actions just described and for their apparent ability to bend the government to their will. But in a context in which disenfranchised sections of the population confront powerful systemic barriers to the realisation of their rights, these barriers take on an insurmountable quality when they are actively reinforced by a hostile state.

Rural narratives offered a very different picture. Here the actions of the local elite featured far more frequently as the primary source of injustice in the lives of poor people: their illegal occupations of *khas* lands to which poor people were entitled,

their refusal to pay fair wages; their use of hired thugs to intimidate and silence opposition, their domination of informal justice systems, their resort to false litigation to harass, arrest and jail their opponents and their ability to manipulate court verdicts in their own favour. While the corruption of local government officials also featured in these rural narratives, there were also many examples of the more positive manifestations of the state in the form of legislation recognising the rights of the landless to khas land, various poverty reduction programmes, political decentralisation and the opportunities it offered to organised groups of the poor to contest elections or vote in their own candidates and the protection provided by the law against the depredations of the rich.

Thirdly, there were also marked differences in the implications of participation in civil society organisations in rural and urban contexts. At one level, this was a reflection of the purposive selection of our samples and the decision to focus on socially-oriented NGOs in rural areas. This rules out the possibility of any straightforward comparison of the implications of organisational affiliation across the two contexts. At another level, however, differences in experiences of citizenship and collective action reflected real underlying differences in the two contexts. Along with the active rural bias of government strategies for poverty reduction, we noted other important differences in the lives and livelihoods of the working poor in rural and urban areas: the interrupted and intermittent nature of economic activities and the insecurity of shelter and 'place' which featured in the narratives of our urban respondents compared with the greater stability of the rural community, even for poor people, and the more established character of their social relationships within the community.

These differences in underlying conditions gave rise to different configurations of civil society associations. Trade unions were more likely to be active in urban areas but were largely confined to formal sector workers. The older trade unions in the nationalised jute industry had a more stable membership than any of the other civil society associations which featured in our interviews, but they were largely extensions of political parties into the economic domain and their leadership represented the interests of their parties rather than their membership. In any case, the contraction of the public sector had led to a decline in their membership and power. A number of newer unions had grown up in the newer export-oriented garment industry but their capacity to organise workers was constantly undermined by the hostility of employers and the threat of dismissal that hung over any employee that showed an inclination to protest.

The civil society organisations most frequently encountered among the self-employed men and women in our urban sample were the more minimalist microfinance organisations that restricted their activities to credit transactions. They offered no further support to their clients and their clients expected little else from them. The lack of regulation of the microfinance sector had meant that a number of unscrupulous individuals had defrauded some of our respondents of their savings, thereby increasing the general mistrust in which urban NGOs were held. While we came across a number of the more socially-oriented NGOs with less instrumental relationships with their constituencies, they were few and far between.

Minimalist microfinance organisations are also very active in the rural areas but our rural sample was drawn from the membership of the more socially-oriented NGOs in the country. As a result, the study has few insights to offer as to how membership of minimalist MFOs might differentiate the attitudes and experiences of the rural population. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that our rural respondents had far more positive and engaged accounts of citizenship than our urban sample but with important variations in the changes that they had experienced which we traced to variations in the strategies of the organisations that they belonged to.

In brief, the fact that BRAC confined its group-based activities to women, its commitment to individual market-based routes to economic empowerment, its provision of group-guaranteed loans, with the attendant need to ensure repayment rates by members, and fluctuations in its commitment to the social change agenda may have both restricted the scope of the agenda around which its members took collective action as well as diluted some of the impact of its awareness training.

Both NK and Samata, on the other hand, have remained consistently committed to a structural analysis of poverty and to a radical agenda of social change, based on the development of organisations of landless men and women and their collective action to claim their rights. The decision to forego any form of service provision, financial or otherwise, means that affiliation to these organisations is based on the intrinsic value that members attach to group solidarity and to the possibility of material gains through their collective efforts to save, to bargain for fairer returns to their labour and to mobilise around their rights and entitlements. Our interviews suggest that NK and Samata members engaged in much higher levels of collective action than those in BRAC: they were more likely to refer to participation in protests, marches, petitions and so on, to participate in forums for the informal dispensation of justice and in various committees responsible for local level governance.

In addition, the fact that the two organisations mobilise both women as well as men has had a number of positive impacts. On the one hand, it has acted directly and indirectly on men's awareness of gender inequality. The trainings they attend cover gender as well as class injustice. The experience of shared struggle with women around class-based issues, such as the right to land or the behaviour of village elites, appears to have engendered a greater respect on the part of many men towards women in their families and a greater willingness to mobilise around gender-based violations of women's rights. On the other hand, it has promoted women's collective action around a wider range of class- and community-based injustices rather than limiting these actions to gender issues.

Given these differences in relationships with the state and experiences of civil society organisations, it is not surprising that meanings and expressions of citizenship varied considerably across our sample. The Adamjee jute mill workers, with their long history in a nationalised industry and high levels of trade union membership, spoke forcefully about their economic rights as workers, particularly their right to work, and expressed their anger at failure of state responsibility in upholding these rights.

Members of socially-oriented NGOs were also extremely articulate about their rights, relating it to the need for basic socioeconomic security and social justice. As their discussions of preferred models of justice suggests, a basic level of wellbeing and security was perceived as essential precondition for a life of dignity and to build a better future for children. They had a strong sense of the state's responsibility for ensuring these preconditions, based on their knowledge of their constitutional rights and their enhanced understanding of how government delivery systems were meant to work. In addition, they also expressed a strong sense of the 'horizontal' responsibility, their obligation to stand up for the rights of other poor and disenfranchised sections of the population.

The rest of our respondents, garment workers who had sporadic encounters with trade unions and self employment workers who were 'thinly' affiliated to minimalist microfinance organisations, tended to frame their responses in terms of the wrongs they suffered as human beings rather than as violations of their rights. Their benchmark was justice rather than citizenship: how could a society in which some people ate well and regularly and others were routinely hungry be described as just? If all human beings had the same blood flowing through their veins and were created in the same way, what justified the privileges of some compared to the deprivations of others.

In terms of the broader challenge of constructing citizenship in difficult circumstances, therefore, it is clear that state–society relations in Bangladesh exemplify many of the barriers to citizenship that we outlined in our introduction. But whether the metaphor of the prison used by Wood is a particularly appropriate or helpful depiction of the nature of the problem is a different matter. Certainly we found evidence of 'prisoner-like' behaviour among many respondents in the urban areas: the compliance by the rank and file workers in the Adamjee jute mill workers with the corrupt practices of their trade union leadership, the fear of unemployment that led garment workers to accept employers' violation of their labour rights; the despair expressed by many of the urban slum dwellers that they could ever find leaders who could be trusted to represent their interests. A recurring theme in their narratives was the unpredictability of lives subject to the everyday arbitrary exercise of power so that buying a ticket in the queue did not guarantee that the poor person would see the doctor ahead of the rich person who had not bothered to buy a ticket. Yet even these groups were able to provide eloquent articulations of their vision of a more just society, a vision that evoked the principles of natural justice and denounced the unfairness of the society in which they lived.

Our rural interviews, on the other hand, offered a less prison-like picture. As we noted, many of the barriers to citizenship described in rural narratives echoed those we found in our urban narratives. What distinguished them was that these barriers were spoken of in the past tense, suggesting that at some significant level, there has been a real shift in the balance of power. The compliance of poor women and men with the dictates of the wealthy could no longer be taken for granted. Our rural respondents spoke of unpredictability in the more positive sense of a future that was no longer dictated by their circumstances at birth but defining by evolving possibilities. They saw themselves as citizens, or in transition to citizenship.

It is difficult to encompass these changes within the metaphor of a prison. Prisons describe social reality in dichotomous terms: people are either inside a prison or outside it, prisoners or escapees. If the deep structures of society are as restrictive and resilient as Wood suggests, there is little prospect of escape until the prison has been destroyed. Such a model of society fails to capture the gradual, diffuse and sometimes unanticipated ways in which social change can occur and instead interprets anything but the most radical of changes as merely shifts in the terms and conditions of imprisonment.

The analysis of change provided by the citizenship narratives in this paper has a greater resonance with Sobhan's view of the relative fluidity of social relations in Bangladesh and the possibility of mounting challenges from below. The anger with which our respondents spoke of the injustices in their lives, their antagonism towards privileged sections of society and their view that government acted on behalf of the rich bear out his contention that legitimacy of social inequalities is not widely accepted in Bangladesh. What Wood sees as the 'innate deference' of subordinate groups may reflect a 'surface compliance', concealed dissent waiting to for the opportunity to express itself.

This raises questions about the kinds of associations that are likely to give voice to this dissent and to forge the challenge from below. We have noted that there has been a rapid proliferation of civil society organisations in Bangladesh, many of which are geared to the needs and constraints of the poor. But it is clear that they are not necessarily capable of challenging power relations, or are even designed to do so. Most see themselves as enabling poor people to engage with the market and to enhance their purchasing power. There is an implicit assumption that economic agency will translate into political agency, at least to the extent of participating in the electoral process. Yet it is clear that the political process operates through corrupt and clientelist structures. In the absence of a democratic and responsive state, economic improvements in the lives of individuals are constantly undermined by various forms of unruly practice on the part of more powerful sections of society. Survival and prosperity does indeed require conforming to the rules of the game and hence remaining imprisoned within these rules.

It is here that organisations like BRAC, NK and Samata hold out the possibility for real change. While these organisations have very differing approaches to service provision, they share a belief in the transformative potential of group learning and solidarity. They have demonstrated that it is possible to develop alternative models of social relationships in the countryside, replacing the vertical patron–client relationships which bound poor women and men to the interests of the rich and powerful with relationships based on horizontal solidarities with each other. They have demonstrated that it is possible to transform consciousness through collective training, analysis and reflection, replacing resignation to an apparently unchanging and unchangeable 'prison' with the willingness to question the justice of the system and to aspire to a different kind of society. And they have demonstrated that it is possible to transform this critical consciousness and solidarity into the collective willingness and capacity on the part of poor and landless women and men to act in pursuit of their vision.

These changes have clearly not emerged spontaneously – they have been built up over time through what we described as ‘purposively designed processes’ to build the values, identities and practices of citizenship. But the organisational commitment to these forms of change, and the hope they offer for the longer-term democratisation of state–society relationships, is today the exception rather than the rule in the NGO sector. Part of the explanation for why Bangladesh has performed so poorly on the governance front is that a key force for social change within the country, its development NGOs, have been transformed over time from organisations willing to challenge socioeconomic injustice into organisations largely committed to the values of the market place.

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