

Middle-aged Women and Intergenerational Aspirations in Dehradun, India:

Mobility as Social Achievement During Post-active Motherhood

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Post-active motherhood can be a period of flourishing for many women. Aspirations for social achievement beyond the domestic sphere become imaginable or realisable as women are released from the more intensive work of raising children. This article examines this period of life for a cohort of women in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India. After years of social service and political activities, these women seek social advancement through the formal status as municipal councillor for their ward. Such projects are frustrated, unachievable due to not having the right type of capital, resulting in mobility in imagination, immobility in fact. In revealing how such projects are frustrated, I draw attention to the constrained mobility of women in post-active motherhood as a feminist and social issue.

Keywords: middle age; post-active motherhood; intergenerational mobility; aspirations; India; women and politics

Introduction

Three days after the urban local body elections in Dehradun, India, we found Anjali in her front room, still bearing the look of devastation on her face. Anjali had fought the election to become a *parshad* (municipal councillor, or ward member) as an independent, amassing

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significant support in her area, but narrowly losing the election by 300 votes. Anjali had been a ‘social worker’ for the past twenty years: a term commonly used in India to refer to a broker or mediator who helps people gain access to government entitlements, deal with authorities such as the police, and pressurise officials to ensure the provision of services and infrastructure in the locality. She had also been a loyal party worker, regularly organising busloads of supporters to attend party rallies, mobilising smaller groups for protests, and attending party events. Anjali conducted this labour during her years of active motherhood. Now that her daughter was married and her son in permanent employment, she decided that it was the time to formalise her work and progress up the career political ladder by standing for election.

Anjali wanted to contest the election on a party ticket. She felt that due to her decades of loyal work for the party and the personal support she had amassed, the party elites would give her the ticket for her ward. Instead, they gave it to a male party worker who was little known in the locality and, indeed, had spent most of his life outside it. Nonetheless Anjali faced an uphill battle. She was known as a party cadre and associated with their symbol. In the weeks leading up to the election, groups of 50 to 70 supporters accompanied her on the streets, going door to door to inform them to vote for ‘bangle’: the symbol for Anjali. It had not been enough. With the votes of loyal party cadre and alleged inducements of money and alcohol to voters, the candidate who ran on the party ticket had won. After the buzz of the election when her home was full of supporters, the silence of her empty house was deep. ‘I had already visualised what I would do as *parshad*’, Anjali said. ‘Now, what is there to do?’.

Anjali’s disappointment was common across Dehradun. Countless loyal women cadre from all parties were denied the ticket despite sacrificing time and money as social/party workers.

The majority were like Anjali, entering post-active motherhood: a period roughly corresponding with middle age. For women, such a period is pregnant with possibilities and new self-imaginaries as the responsibilities associated with motherhood and domestic duties are lightened (Ahmad 1982; Brown 1982). It is also a period when some of the taboos or norms around women's movement and activities are relaxed; for some it is a time of increasing authority if not power within, and occasionally beyond the home (Brodkin-Sachs 1992). Yet when women such as Anjali seek to pursue new ambitions or enact a sense of self that was formerly impossible, they find that the resources they have acquired during the years of active motherhood are insufficient or mismatched with these aspirations. Women such as Anjali find the years of party labour and local support are less important than social networks and political alliances to gain the party ticket: resources and capital that gendered norms and years of active motherhood have prevented them from acquiring.

This paper examines the aspirations and 'mobility' of women in the period of their lives of post-active motherhood, but prior to debilitating physical and cognitive degeneration (old age). Globally men and women have an extended 'middle age' due to improved life expectancy and reduced early morbidity, yet the possibilities for 'mobility' in later life have been largely overlooked. To understand the nature of this issue, we need to rethink 'mobility' in two ways. First, intergenerational upward mobility has focused on the ability of children to achieve a higher social class or standing compared to their parents, or the achievement of familial mobility through investments in the next generation—that is, children (Krishna 2014; Jacob Meerman 2001; Torche 2015). Rarely is the mobility of parents over their life course considered, nor how strategies for familial mobility rest on a gendered division of labour that supports the acquiring of individual capitals for men, while diminishing those of women. I

argue for an approach to familial mobility in which strategies are extended to help women become ‘unstuck’ following active motherhood.

Second, I examine im/mobility over the life cycle of a cohort of women in Uttarakhand, India, to examine how years of active motherhood set the stage of (im)possibilities (Niehof 1998). I demonstrate that for women political actors, a future aspirational self did not arise in imagination at the moment of its possibility but, rather, was something that they worked towards during their years of active motherhood. The women’s desired social achievement and political ambitions come up against the stark realities of conditions in which these aspirations are all but unrealisable. This paper seeks to extend understandings of how women reimagine a self outside the domestic sphere and how such projects in self-making are frustrated, representing an under-acknowledged form of immobility. My aim is to draw attention to the constrained mobility of women in post-active motherhood (PAM) as a feminist and social issue.

This article draws upon ethnographic research conducted between 2015 and 2018 with women municipal councillors (*parshads*) and party workers in Dehradun, India. I worked with a local non-government organisation, Panchayati Raj Gender Awareness and Training Institute (PRAGATI), to generate ethnographic material on the everyday work of women *parshads* (2015–2017). In 2018 I returned to Dehradun for the 2018 Urban Local Body elections (April–May and October–November 2018), following the campaigns of many former *parshads*, in addition to joining with a larger pool of party workers and candidates in their election activities. Formal interviews, countless conversations and, of course, participant observation were all held in Hindi. I was accompanied by a PRAGATI worker or three, who

helped in case my Hindi failed me (usually around 3pm in the afternoon) and in the reconstruction of events in fieldnotes. Interviews were often recorded and then transcribed.

As PRAGATI is a politically neutral organisation, so too was the research. I engaged with women from the three major parties in Dehradun: Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Nearly all the women were aspirational lower-middle class. Their households were ‘comfortable’, with sufficient income from their husband’s salary to ensure the women did not have to work outside the home: an important sign of social status (Donner 2008). Most women were not highly educated and did not have a career outside the home. Women party workers belong to different castes, particularly as reservations (see below) have made politics a route to social mobility. We engaged with a handful of Muslim party workers, but the majority were Hindu. Caste, class and religion all inflect mobility strategies; here I focus on the effects of age as a common factor among these women. During these years, I, too, was inching closer to middle age. In 2018 I was in my early 40s, within ten years of the majority of my interlocutors, sharing an affinity on account of similar chronological age. I do not have children, however, and as such do not have lived experience of active motherhood and the expansionary moment when children become adults. As a ‘white’ Australian woman married to a man born and raised in India, my own domestic arrangements were at times a topic of conversation and comparison.

Post-Active Motherhood

Middle-aged women have been minor actors in the ethnographic literature—walk-ons, occasional comic relief, terrorizers of daughters-in-law—but seldom subjects in their own right. Likewise, discussions of the lives of women tend to

be discussions about young women's lives. Age bias combined with male bias has left women little space between youth and uselessness. (Brodkin Sacks 1992, 1)

Karen Brodkin Sacks' (1992) observation that middle-aged women are overlooked as a topic of research and group worthy of social investments is dated only inasmuch as in hindsight, she was writing during a peak of anthropological attention to the topic. Type 'middle-age' into Google Scholar or J-STOR and one brings up pages of articles on the physical and mental changes associated with menopause but few on the culturally specific ways that women experience their change in social roles and status. Representations of middle age in Development Studies are even worse. Middle age is a topic of concern only in relation to the 'aging crisis' affecting many countries rather than seeing middle-aged people as a population worthy of initiatives to 'empower'ⁱ them at a critical juncture in their lives. In contrast to the burgeoning literature on youth (Deuchar 2014; Dyson 2014) and the more modest, yet still significant, literature on old age (Lamb 2014; Traphagan 2009), middle-aged women remain minor actors. The ambition of this paper is in part to reinvigorate research on this topic.

What constitutes middle age is culturally specific and slippery (Brodkin Sacks 1992). Definitions based on physiological changes—particularly the end of fertility—are experienced by women everywhere, yet whether menopause marks a significant transition in the lives of women beyond the physical varies and, by some accounts, is less pronounced than expected (Datan et al. 1981). Other definitions focus on women's social roles, in particular the lessening of their familial responsibilities once children become independent. Post-active motherhood captures this period of life but should be qualified so that it does not extend into 'old age'. I therefore use Brodkin Sacks' (1992, 2) definition of 'women who

have adult offspring and who are not yet frail or dependent'. This definition of '*middle age*' has the obvious disadvantage of excluding women without children. Such women face different conditions and challenges once they reach middle age, and while also important, they are not the focus of this paper. I therefore retain the label post-active motherhood (PAM), which I understand as a different and prior category to 'old age'.

Many consider post-active motherhood as a time when women enjoy greater freedom, autonomy and power. In an early article, Judith Brown (1982) finds cross-cultural similarities for women of middle age, including increases in authority and status, and closing the gap in power differences with men in some contexts. Women who are no longer fertile have fewer restrictions on their mobility and are less restricted by norms and taboos related to menstruation (Brown 1982). Women are able to aspire to and aim for age and gender-related positions, such as midwives, and in some contexts, political or religious positions of status. Women gain heightened social and economic authority, and greater control over people, particularly within domestic settings. Books such as *In Her Prime* (Brodkin Sacks (ed.) 1992) and *A Time to Reap* (Datan et al. 1981) indicate how middle age is seen as a period when women are able to reap the rewards of earlier investments. Brodkin Sacks (1992) describes the post-parental period as being one of 'fluorescence', while Valory Mitchell and Cindy Bruns (2010) describe it as a process of transformation and creativity through new possibilities that are both cultural and material.

Such positive changes that occur around 'midlife' are cultural and not without their drawbacks. In Euro-America ageing is seen as a long process of decline. As Susan Sontag (1972, 33) describes it: 'One of the greatest tragedies of each woman's life is simply getting older; it is certainly the *longest* tragedy'. A woman's value is located in 'timeless' qualities,

such as intuitive knowledge, which do not increase with time, or others which unavoidably decline, including ‘youthful looks’. In contrast, qualities associated with men—competency, experience and money—do improve with age, and a man’s value increases just as a woman’s decreases (Sontag 1972). As Sarah Lamb (2014) highlights, such ideas around aging are ideological and cultural, and the meaning of ‘aging well’ differs cross-culturally.

Nonetheless, middle age is often a time when gender-related discrimination intersects with age-related prejudices, resulting in women becoming invisible and less, rather than more, valued (Rohlinger et al. 2020).

Post-active motherhood therefore places many women at a crossroads. Women experience additional freedoms and changes to their household roles but may face these conditions with ambivalence and/or within a constraining external environment. There are expansionary possibilities for self, as well as foreclosures. The end of what can be a consuming role of motherhood may spark new imaginations as to who one is or can become. At the same time, the resources to enact and realise aspirational selves may be constrained as a consequence of their life thus far and/or structural conditions. Sontag (1972, 32) observes the ‘possession’ of imagination: that is, the ways women remain bound to ‘the way society limits how women feel free to imagine themselves’. What is clear is that there are ‘attendant and heightened risks in the lives of women of middle age’ (Brodin Sacks 1992, 5), with a possibility of *mobility in imagination and immobility in fact*.

(Im)mobility manifests in complex ways during post-active motherhood. In addition to economic and/or social status, ‘mobility’—as understood as new possibilities for self—is particularly pertinent for PAM women. We are not static beings, but rather we develop new aspirations, new means of gaining satisfaction, new accomplishments. This paper examines

women who are facing up to such a moment, when an expanded sense of who one wants to become proves to be unrealisable within the conditions of her life. Rather than seeing this as a singular period of flourishing or frustration, I enquire as to how a woman's life cycle shapes these possibilities and limitations at this critical juncture. By sharing the narratives of how they experience dashed ambitions, I aim to draw attention to the inequalities in 'mobility' as commonly understood, as not only being about inequalities across class or gender but, also, intergenerationally—a form of inequality that I argue is overlooked in the current literature on 'mobility' and middle age. Like other forms of (im)mobility, these are a product of individual characteristics and resources (Torche 2015), as well as the exogenous conditions which enable entire population groups to achieve social advancement (Rigg 2006). In the next section I examine these exogenous conditions that have influenced the possibilities for mobility for a cohort of women born approximately between 1954 and 1974 in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.

'We Are Not Flowers, We Are Fire'

Anjali was born in a village in the Western Himalayas, not far from the borders of Nepal and Tibetan China. Life in the Himalayan foothills is tough. Due to the 'remoteness' of many villages, government oversight and services have historically been limited. Himalayan villages are considered remote hardship posts; doctors, teachers and other civil servants are frequently absent. Anjali received a good education, in part due to being a Brahmin: ritually the highest caste in Hinduism with families known for placing great importance on education. The mountainous regions of Uttarakhand are distinct in having a high percentage of Brahmin, resulting in higher literacy rates compared to other parts of North India. Nonetheless, economic and educational opportunities are slim in the hills, and Anjali moved with her

parents to Dehradun (a city on the plains) when she was in her late teens, marrying soon after. The migration from the hills of Uttarakhand has continued unabated, as villages across the state have become de-populated or deserted (Singh 2018).

Anjali tells us that women in her village played an important role in local politics when she was growing up and, hence, she did not see her own involvement as counter to any gender norms. In part, women's participation has been necessary due to the high rates of male migration, but it is also reflective of the degree of autonomy long enjoyed by remote villages and the establishment of local governance institutions such as the *van panchayats*, community forest councils, in which women had a large role. Women have also been at the heart of important protest movements, such as the Anti-Alcohol movement (1956–1965) and the famous Chipko movement in the 1970s (Kumar 2011). When reservations for women (33 per cent) were introduced in 1993 across India in local *panchayat* (village) governments, elected women in Uttarakhand were found to be more literate, more active and less likely to be accompanied by men compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country (Jayal 2006). Such historical conditions have led to a popular saying among women political actors in the state: 'We are not flowers, we are fire, we are the women of Uttarakhand'.

Arguably the most critical historical condition for the cohort of women to which Anjali belongs is the Uttarakhand Andolan. Following India's independence in 1947, the two Himalayan regions of Garhwal and Kumaon were part of Uttar Pradesh: India's most populous state that stretched from the border with Tibet to the Gangentic plains and Vidhya Range in the South. Chronic under-development was blamed on the centres of power being located on the plains, far from the realities of conditions in the hills. Further ignition came through the Mandal reservations that reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other

Backward Classes (OBCs) in education and government positions. Garhwal and Kumaon have very few OBCs, and the Brahmin-dominated population feared the loss of opportunities. The *jan andolan* (people's movement) demanded statehood for Uttarakhand (Kumar 2011), at times clashing violently with police. In the most famous of these clashes—the Rampur Tiraha incident in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, on 1–2 October 1994—police opened fire on activists, with additional allegations that security forces raped women activists. Eventually the *jan andolan* was successful, and 'Uttaranchal' became India's 27th state in November 2000, renamed Uttarakhand in 2006.

Speaking at a workshop for women interested in contesting urban local body elections, Laxmi shed tears as she spoke of her experiences during the Uttarakhand *andolan*:

At that time, my children were still small. I was an active participant, involved in all activities ... One day my son came to a protest with a toy gun, saying that he wanted to kill Mulayam Singh [then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh]. "Because of him, the schools are closed and my mother has *bagh gayi* [flown off] and does not spend time with me, or cook for me". I became scared, thinking that maybe he will say the same thing to my family and they will not like it. So I tried to convince him that I was doing all this for the future of Uttarakhand, so that no-one dies of poverty, or because of unemployment. My son was convinced.

Built upon a story of sacrifice, the status of *andolan kari* (fighter in the movement) is a powerful political claim. For women in particular, these sacrifices are often framed in terms of their inability to fulfil their role as mothers. It is these same experiences that provide the motivation for a life in social service. Laxmi is now a three-term *parshad*, stating: 'We were doing things selflessly ... This is what convinced me to work for the society, and now, by being a *parshad*, I have the power to work, to get things done'.

Many of the women political actors in Dehradun, including past and present *parshads*, are former *andolan kari*. In theory, such a status not only brings symbolic capital but also social networks. Mridula told us, ‘whenever I go to any office to get the work done of the people, I do not tell them that I am a *parshad*. I go to all of these offices as an *andolan kari*’. Mridula is also well connected to senior figures in the party. Now in her late 50s, she was senior to many of them during the *andolan*, and they should treat her with respect. She is bitter that they do not. She supports them in their campaigns, yet they refuse to help her carry out her work. She laments that despite their sacrifices, ‘the sad thing is, women of the *andolan* are getting nothing’. Anjali too based her sense of entitlement to the party ticket in part due to her status as an *andolan kari*. She tells us in the meeting in her home following the election: ‘I was an activist in the Uttarakhand Andolan ... I have served this state and the party for so long, given all to my area, and all to my party, and this is how we are treated’. According to many women, men purposefully ensure women lag behind, ‘*picche rakhna*’, imposing restrictions on women from moving ahead ‘*aage badhana*’. Women conceived their mobility (or lack thereof) in terms of a desire to ‘move forward’ while being ‘held behind’.

The cohort of women political actors now in post-active motherhood in Dehradun therefore have had opportunities to build significant social, political and symbolic capital: the symbolic power of sacrifice, status through being a ‘senior’ in the movement and extended social networks. Yet these capitals are seemingly insufficient when it comes to advancing a political career or achieving social recognition. Laxmi has never fulfilled her ambition of advancing beyond the position of *parshad*, Mridula quit politics after one term as *parshad* as she was unable to get things done, and Anjali was not given the party ticket. I argue that this

immobility is in part due to the attention on the social mobility of the next generation, with implications for middle-aged women's ability to 'get ahead' later in life.

Active Motherhood

Geeta describes getting her youngest child through his year 12 exams as her 'second PhD'.

The first she completed two years earlier, when her eldest graduated from school. Such is the pressure on women to ensure optimal conditions for their children as they struggle through India's highly competitive and very demanding schooling system (see also Donner 2008).

Geeta spent her thirties ensuring a conducive domestic environment, adequate and nutritious meals, and the supervision, encouragement and assistance to help children study. She has not foregone a career, and has used her Master of Education as a principal in a private primary school. Her own aspirations for a PhD have taken a backseat, however. When her eldest son was in year 9, we used to talk endlessly about the possibilities for her future study in India and beyond. Now that her son is through university, she is out of steam, lacking the momentum to further advance her own education.

Ideals of middle-class womanhood interpellate women as 'mother-teachers', responsible for helping children become educated (Roy 2019), often at the cost of their own career progression or educational attainment. Arguably the emphasis on education as a pathway to mobility (Krishna 2014; Rigg 2006) within competitive schooling systems (Jakimow 2016) requires mothers to concentrate on domestic responsibilities (Donner 2008), at the cost of their own social achievement. There is a distinct difference here between men and women within household intergenerational mobility strategies. Livelihood strategies to improve the socio-economic condition of children usually also improve the capitals of men. As the main

breadwinner, at least normatively if not in reality, a man's career success, income and social networks are endowments for the next generation, as well as accumulating cultural, economic and social capital, enabling his personal social mobility and achievement. In contrast, women's role within familial strategies for intergenerational mobility not only confer few opportunities to generate capital, they frustrate them.

A few years younger than Mridula and Laxmi, Anjali did not have children at the time of the Uttarakhand Andolan. At the time of statehood, her son and daughter were just entering primary school, and so began the decades devoted to ensuring they achieved qualifications and a good match in marriage. Anjali was politically active during active motherhood and became a locally recognised social worker. *Sevak samajik*, or social worker, is a common political 'style' for both men and women political actors in India (Price and Ruud 2010).

Millions of social workers across the country undertake everyday activities such as facilitating access to state entitlements, liaising with authorities for the provision of services, and helping people deal with authorities such as the police. They are often tied to a particular political party, and they include among their activities the generation of party support through, for example, bringing supporters to rallies. Social worker is a particularly effective political style for women due to its compatibility with socially acceptable models of femininity (Bedi 2016; Ghosh and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2005), as opposed to more explicitly politically ambitious identities.

Such activities come at a cost for these women, however. Pooja has been a social worker for many years and outlines the hardships that this has entailed for her family. Describing the period of active motherhood when she was also a social worker, she tells us: 'First we used to finish our household work, and then go out and do party work. But sometimes party work

took so much time, and it would be 8pm at night before we returned home. And many a times, our household work remains untouched'. She speaks of her children eating late and how guilty she felt that she was not always there when they needed her. Beyond feelings of guilt as a mother, there is also the risk that the public would perceive Pooja as failing in her most important social role: a perception that would be politically damaging, particularly as women's political legitimacy is often framed in kinship terms (Ghosh and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2005). While it was her decision to prioritise 'settling' her children before pursuing an elected position, structurally she had little choice. Few, if any, husbands extend a helping hand with domestic chores, and while a sister- or mother-in-law may help out at times, the importance of raising a family for gendered personhood (Donner 2008) limits what labour a woman will devolve to others.ⁱⁱ

The extent to which women will sacrifice their family for the sake of a political career therefore reaches a limit. Padma, who in 2013 was enjoying her second term as *parshad*, describes the decision to contest the first time:

I could have become ward member long back but I was powerless to do so because of my family, my children. I had no support from my family and my husband was a government employee. He was transferred to different places and so I had the responsibility of my children on my shoulders. So even though I served the society by being a part of the [party], I did not come into active politics. Therefore, I always had in mind that once I am through with all my responsibilities then I will come into active politics. So I did that only. In 2006 I got my son married, in 2007 I got my daughter married and in 2008 I contested the [municipal] election. I was relieved from house responsibilities as I had my daughter-in-law to look after the house. It is very important that one woman

should be there in the house. If no woman is there at home, and you also move out of house [on becoming a *parshad*], then the house [family] is ruined.

Padma's experience was not of someone who reached a period of liberation and then sought opportunities but, rather, of someone who had quietly bided her time until the conditions were right to contest an election.

Having raised a family, it is often children who then support the activities of their mother. On the campaign trail, sons and daughters will go door-to-door with their mother, providing not only support in numbers but also proof of the success of the candidate's child-raising. Indra said that she was always interested in contesting elections, and as they approached in 2013, she made a quick decision to do so.

When I run for ward member election, my husband would accompany me for canvassing, my younger daughter would book an auto to make announcements, and she would go and make these announcements herself. She would also put up posters in the ward ... and deliver speeches while walking. I did not have to employ anyone for such purposes ... we used to conduct *nukkad* meetings [meetings in street corners] ... For all this my biggest support was my family.

Indra's years as social worker and provider of familial support were critical to her successful election as an independent *parshad* after she too was denied the party ticket.

Years of active motherhood help women political actors in Dehradun generate resources and capitals that can help them transition from social worker to elected representatives. These include the symbolic capital of having raised a family, as well as the moral ties that provide access to economic capital needed to contest elections and undertake the tasks of *parshad* (see Bulloch, this issue). At the same time, women's domestic responsibilities limit the types

of political and social activity that they can undertake; they can be social workers, performing significant political labour for the party, but more ambitious roles are put on the back burner. The majority of the women who expressed a desire to contest elections in 2018 long held this ambition; it was not a whim or fancy that came to them once they reached the moment of its possibility upon reaching post-active motherhood but, rather, a stage in their aspirational strategies. That is, their future orientations of self (Moore 2011) included this sense of mobility: from social worker to *parshad*, with accompanying social recognition and power. PAM is the moment they await, when these possibilities become realisable.

Mobility in Imagination; Immobility in Fact

I have everything. I run a small shop, have my own home, my son is now working and my daughter is married. When my children were small, I worked so much for the party; I feel that now I am free. (Anjali)

The sense of liberation, or expanded possibilities for women who have reached post-active motherhood, is presented in some literature as a cross-cultural condition (Brown 1982; Brodtkin-Sachs 1992). How women experience this juncture is, however, very particular to the conditions of the cohort. Social imaginaries of ‘retirement’ have changed in India over the last two decades. Previous ideas of increasing dependence on children in a context of morbidity and physical decline are being replaced with messages of financial independence, travel and self-expansion (Devi and Samanta 2018). For women, PAM is no longer imagined as solely a time to care for grandchildren and to oversee domestic work in the extended family home. Rather the rise of nuclear families and heavy rates of migration in Uttarakhand means that it is increasingly rare for PAM women to be living in joint families. Instead,

women find in later years that they are living in an ‘empty nest’, with few responsibilities and distractions. At the same time, this cohort had their children relatively young, and they have years of healthy living left. While this moment can be one of liberation, it can also be one of emptiness, necessitating finding new avenues to devote their energies and new ideas of self.

At a workshop for women interested in contesting the 2018 Municipal elections in Dehradun,ⁱⁱⁱ the vast majority were, therefore, PAM women: common to women politicians in India (John 2007; Ghosh and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2005). At the time of the workshops (April 2018) the elections seemed imminent, and party workers were trying to show party leaders why they should be given the party ticket to contest the seat in their ward. The workshop participants had been preparing for this moment through their decades of being *sevak semajik* (social workers) and *karya karta* (party workers). As we invited each woman to tell the group why she wanted to contest the elections, they ran off lists of activities: health camps, organising ration cards, solving problems of electricity and water supply, organising marriages, assisting the poor with small gifts, accompanying people to the police station, and so on. Through such activities they had generated a huge amount of support in their area and were loved by the people and, therefore, they believed the party would select them.

Speculation was also rife about which wards would be reserved for women. Dehradun Municipal Corporation has 100 wards, each comprising approximately 5000 voters who vote for a single representative. As per the 74th Constitutional Amendment (1994) a third of all seats in Urban Local Bodies must be reserved for women. Seats in Dehradun are also reserved for SCs and OBCs in accordance with their numbers in the population, including seats for women OBC and women SC.^{iv} Women used past patterns of the distribution of reserved and unreserved (or general) seats to try to predict whether the seat for their ward

would be one they were eligible to contest, and whether they would have an advantage over male party hopefuls. At the same time, these workshops were often filled with tension, as women predicted that men would be selected for all ‘general’ seats, and that even seats reserved for women would go to the wives of male party members. Parties too were keen to identify the candidates that would give them the best chance of winning, conducting extensive surveys of voters to measure the support for each prospective candidate. Then there were the inevitable backroom deals and the shoring up of political alliances through ticket selection. There were also rumours that many of the candidates had paid for the party ticket, including paying to have their wife receive a ticket in reserved seats to contest on their behalf. Some of the recipients of tickets had been party members for very short periods of time, raising eyebrows among both male and female party workers.

Anjali’s experiences attest to the accuracy of the women’s fears. She, like the vast majority of workshop participants, was overlooked for the party ticket. In her case, the ticket for her ward went to a man in his early thirties, who was born in the area but had resided outside it for most of his life for education and work. He was a Bania (a caste that originates on the plains), and hence connected to the party faction of the Chief Minister. When Anjali was told that as a *pahardi* (someone from the hills) she was too soft and meek to contest the elections, her mind was made up. She ran as an independent. Her decades of social work had culminated in considerable support from the people, with ties of obligation or gratitude creating a sizeable loyal base of campaigners. But when it came to the election, her personal support base was not enough to offset the loyalty of party workers and party recognition among voters. The kinds of political capital and skills acquired during her years as a social worker, while also looking after her family, did not equip her with the more important forms of social and economic capital required to get the party ticket. She lacked both the experience and know-

how to manoeuvre in the party and the patronage of dominant party leaders. That gendered norms constrain her in both respects is important to acknowledge, but so too are the importance of the years she was unable to devote to acquiring such networks. Anjali had significant political capital, but it was the ‘wrong kind’ or insufficient capital and resources in order to get the party ticket.

Even sitting women *parshads* have often generated the ‘wrong kind’ of capital based on personal connections rather than the ‘political presence’ (Bedi 2016) required to be selected. Padma was denied the party ticket when the seat was unreserved despite being a two-term *parshad*. While she had done a great deal in her area helping individuals and families, she had not been successful in implementing major infrastructure projects such as roads, drainage or bridges. Limited discretionary funds in Dehradun mean that *parshads* must rely on the Member of the Legislative Assembly to support works in their area or liaise with relevant government officials. Padma lacked the contacts with relevant officials, and while the MLA may undertake some work in her ward, he takes the credit, erecting his own signboards that fail to mention the labour of Padma in putting together the proposal and overseeing the work. Compare her circumstances to those of Kumar who prior to becoming involved in politics ran a bakery close to government offices. Through this work he built connections with officials, and now had no problem getting work done. In 2018 his wife was elected as *parshad* for the second time on his behalf in a seat reserved for women. In contrast, Padma lacked a physical presence in her ward, she lacked visibility, so that when the party did their survey, not everyone knew or supported her.

There are many successful women *parshad* in Dehradun. The former *andolan kari* Laxmi, mentioned above, was elected for her third term in 2018; one woman contested and won as an

independent in the same election, a feat also achieved by Indra in 2013. But the odds are stacked against them. It seems that the kinds of resources and capitals that women have the possibility to acquire during active motherhood do not equip them with all that they need to take advantage of that moment of ‘freedom’ and self-realisation once they reach post-active motherhood. It is not that Anjali and other women who contested and won achieved nothing through the experience. The extent of her support was heartening, it provided a *recognition* of her previous work and her standing in the community. Yet, ultimately, she had not *advanced* her ambitions, she had not managed to *extend* her power and social status, or in her words, *aage badhee* ‘move forward’. She was stuck, immobile relative to the social achievement she desired.

Rethinking Mobility

It is the limited ability to *advance* and *extend* one’s social achievements (Benei 2010) that prompts me to think of Anjali’s circumstances as one of immobility. Mobility captures progress, an ability to ‘climb the social ladder’, to increase one’s social and economic status. ‘Mobility’ in a normative sense, in which an individual’s social status and achievement is a function of their efforts rather than their circumstances, is critical to an equitable society (Krishna 2014). That is, being (un)able to acquire a status of *parshad* should not be dependent upon one’s ascribed characteristics or circumstances but upon the qualities and ambitions of the person. In a socially equitable world, all with the right qualities should be able to equally aspire to hold such a position and have as much a chance as anyone else in achieving it. The reproduction of wealth/poverty, and monopolisation/exclusion from opportunities is a detriment to social cohesion and justice (Hickey and du Toit 2007). An

ability to achieve ‘mobility’ in later life for PAM women is for this reason a social and feminist issue.

Using the concept of ‘mobility’ helps me to draw attention to the ways intergenerational mobility ignores the ability of older generations to pursue social achievement. Studies of intergenerational mobility examine the association between the social origins of individuals (the status of parents) with their offspring’s attainment or ‘destination’ (Krishna 2014) as measured by education level, occupation or income (Torche 2015). Household livelihood strategies also mostly prioritise improving the endowments of children (Rigg 2006) through, for example, investment in education or paying bribes to help gain entry to employment. For poor parents in particular, being able to provide a better livelihood for children than the one they have endured has significance for their self-understanding (Jakimow 2016). Beyond a sense of one’s duty or role as a parent, investing in children can ensure one’s socio-economic well-being in later life (for example through migration, see Bulloch this issue). For these reasons, the focus on familial efforts and those of governments and development agencies has been overwhelmingly on achieving mobility for, or through, the next generation.

While important, the scholarly, policy and familial emphasis on children’s mobility has led to a disregard for how other family members may suffer from immobility at various times during their life cycle. As Supriya Garikipati (2008) shows in her study of rural households in Telangana, India, men and women in the same household often have a different class status. The same can be said for mobility and the different ways that familial mobility strategies position men and women at various stages of their life cycle. For example, Anjali’s husband pursued a satisfying career in the civil service; his promotions and increasing social and economic capital were critical to the household livelihood while also setting him up with

status and a network in later life. In contrast, Anjali devoted years helping her children acquire the educational qualifications that resulted in significant upward social mobility for the family. As noted above, such achievements are not irrelevant to her desires for greater social status, yet they have come at a cost of acquiring other resources that are arguably more important for her ambitions *at this stage of her life*.

Intergenerational *immobility* for mothers can therefore be seen as the mirror consequence of intergenerational mobility for children. This statement needs some qualification. Mothers do benefit from the increased socio-economic status of husbands and children. And, as mentioned, being a good mother is almost a pre-condition for being a successful female politician in India and beyond (Ghosh and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2005).^v At the same time they are ‘immobile’ in the sense that their *social achievement* is limited to imagination only; they are not able to progress their aspirations in their entirety. In arguing for this immobility to become a feminist and social issue, I am drawing attention to the ways it intersects with women’s life cycle, becoming critical during the early years of post-active motherhood. Being ‘mobile’ or ‘stuck’ is at this time not only a matter of class and social status but the very (im)possibilities for becoming. I am not advocating that women spend their years of active motherhood in any other way than they currently do. Rather, I point to the need to take seriously their desires to move up the social ladder, or beyond the circumstances that constrained them in the past, and to prioritise the achievement of these desires in familial and development strategies.

Anjali had failed to realise her ambitions to become a *parshad*, and her loss hung heavily over our conversation after the election. Anjali had lost not only the election but her future imaginary, and she was coming to terms with this painful realisation. Her son who had come

to Dehradun for the campaign had now returned home. Her daughter, sensing her mother's grief, was due to arrive from the hills tomorrow. In the interim, her home was quiet, empty. Anjali was angry with her party, though further inspired by the support shown by the people. It was with this mix of anger, frustration and desire to do more for the people who showed faith in her that prompted her to ask my PRAGATI colleague to help her provide programs for the women and youth in her area. Anjali had already re-routed her aspirations and plans. She could continue to do her social work even if it did not provide a greater social status; such is the lot of many women. As we took her leave, she was tying the laces on her walking shoes, preparing to tour the neighbourhood with her friends to see what needed to be done.

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ⁱ By empower I mean the expansion of the possibilities for personhood (Jakimow 2018).

ⁱⁱ Support from female in-laws was more likely in families seeking social mobility through politics, usually through the political aspirations of men but at times also of female family members due to reservations.

ⁱⁱⁱ This workshop was run by the author and PRAGATI, my NGO partners, and was funded by the Australian High Commission in New Delhi. The workshop provided a space for women to think about their decision, and to learn the myriad rules and regulations to contest elections. It was also a space where women discussed their shared frustrations with the party ticket selection.

^{iv} No seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes in Dehradun itself, although they are reserved across the state, particularly in Panchayats.

^v Such conditions for women politicians is not restricted to India. Examples abound, including the treatment received by Julian Gillard, Australia's first female prime minister.