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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women's "timepass"

Waiting as work, politics, and survival among Delhi's poor

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Abstract

In a poor neighborhood of Delhi, women try to cope with unemployment among male breadwinners, and in so doing they often frame their practices as a way of passing time. From the long wait at service points to contentious involvements in work and politics, they depict a host of different and seemingly contradictory activities as meaningless idleness. My analysis of these discourses uncovers a wider pattern of minimizing in which women sometimes internalize and sometimes quietly oppose the constraints that limit what they can do with their time. In a gender landscape where public waiting has usually been associated with men destabilized by a lack of opportunities, women's conversations about lost time become a playing field for alienation, resilience, and subversion, even as the practices that hide underneath allow us a glance into their untold public involvements.

KEYWORDS
gender, India, politics, poverty, power, time, waiting, women, work

Reena Koli is sitting in her small shop,[1] her head resting against glittery garlands of washing powder, chewing tobacco, and sweets—all in small, individual packets, the kind sold to people who can afford only a single-use quantity at a time (see Figure 1). When a customer comes by, Reena reaches out to vend, here a cigarette, there a piece of soap, there again two sweets. "The shop is nothing, just a way of passing time," she told me the first time I met her. Nearly a year later she would say the same, shrugging at my comment about having seen her on duty every time I passed this spot between the bus stop and the stairway down to the slum and the resettlement colony beyond. "I just sit around," she says. "It hardly makes any money, just the small things, like food and water."

Reena was not the only woman in this poor neighborhood on the periphery of Delhi to describe her work as mere idleness. Others spoke of their sewing as "something of no value," or more plainly as "nothing." They said of the long wait to buy subsidized food, "Whether we wait here or there, what does it matter? We just hang around anyway." In their depiction, both the task of queuing at the shop and the domestic chores this interrupted were a matter of "hanging around." Much of their day became just "timepass," to use the common Indian-English term.

How is one to understand these expressions? The question speaks to a renewed theoretical engagement with temporal experiences of limbo and emptiness in anthropology and related disciplines. Most immediately, it evokes Jeffrey's (2010a, 2010b) ethnography of young men in northern India who speak of "doing timepass" to convey their feeling of being stuck, without the jobs they need to start a family, in an environment far removed from the portrait of cosmopolitan life that filters in from large cities. As in many other contexts worldwide, waiting is a trap of lost opportunities and domination suffered by people with limited resources and power (Auyero, 2012; Harms, 2013; Mains, 2007; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016). It is also, however, a state of relative freedom, one in which new solidarities and forms of activism can emerge (Jeffrey, 2010a). In some cases, like that of acquiring a house, it can even be a means of achieving an end for people who lack the money to do otherwise (Appadurai, 2001; Castellanos, 2020, pp. 79–99; Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Waiting, then, is nothing if not a condition of ambivalence, sometimes reflecting powerlessness, sometimes constituting a space of discretion or even a politics of its own (Hage, 2009; Janeja & Bandak, 2018).

Yet one aspect of waiting remains constant: it is an eminently gendered condition. In northern India, where women

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FIGURE 1 Reena awaits customers at her shop, Sunder Nagri, Delhi, November 2016. (Arjun Claire) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

are constrained by concerns of both safety and respectability, men are the ones hanging around in public spaces when they lack jobs to keep them busy. Their powerlessness and freedom are rooted in a masculinity that is destabilized by unemployment yet dominant in a starkly gendered landscape. In contrast, women's waiting usually occurs in confined spaces (Pinto, 2013) or is a burden of drudgery silently blending into domestic chores (Antonopoulos & Hirway, 2009). That, in any case, is how it appears in the ethnographic literature, and it is also an influential normative view in northern India. My interlocutors, however, broke with this pattern.

Why, then, did women in the two neighborhoods of Delhi where I conducted research keep on speaking of being idle and hanging around? Sometimes, they used "idleness" to describe their long wait for basic services. Other times, they referred to their work or to their involvement in the shadowy politics that emerged around their neighborhood's unmet needs. Often, as the conversation unfolded, I realized that the activity they had brushed over was in fact essential to their household's survival. Food and water, for example, which Reena described as "just the small things," represent a large share of expenditures among the poor. Another woman, who said she was doing "nothing" while her fingers were sticking beads on a piece of velvet, had been the household's sole earner for several months.

My analysis of these ambivalences uncovers two different phenomena. First, women internalize the gendered relations of power that restrict what they can do with their time. Their talk of senseless idleness reflects how the long and unpredictable wait for basic services prevents them from leaving their lane for much of the day. As with Auyero's (2012) "patients of the state," such expressions convey a form of governing the poor that disciplines them into obedience and weakens them as active citizens. Second, women use the same discourse to spread a veil of acceptability over contentious practices. Their tactical downplaying allows them to reclaim some space to go about their lives amid frequent conflicts of gender, caste, and religion. As they hide their work and politics under the pretense of doing nothing, their practices quietly defy the gendered limits of their condition.

With these two phenomena, discourses about time become a place to explore when and how experiences of alienation and subversion give way to one another. These notions, in turn, anchor a relation among speech, power, and acceptability, one that explains the shifting and, at times, contradictory nature of women's discourses.

By ethnographically attending to these nuances, I aim to link questions about how time, gender, and power interact, with epistemological questions about how this interaction plays out in the way people speak. In doing so, I hope to help expand the ethnographic literature on waiting, which is largely focused on young men. By paying attention to what women do when they claim to be idle, my analysis exposes both their hidden labor and their politics. Being their family's most involved member in sourcing basic services, they are the ones routinely arguing with providers, turning to power brokers, or getting organized to manage their wait. Their time becomes the forgotten foundation of a politics otherwise dominated by men. Among these women, unexpected leaders emerge, including several Muslim widows, among the poorest in their otherwise predominantly Hindu neighborhood. While hanging around, they navigate multiple societal fault lines and invoke the long shadows of powerful political and economic figures.

TIMESCAPES OF URBAN MARGINS

This article draws on research in Sunder Nagri and Madanpur Khadar, two resettlement colonies built on the periphery

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of Delhi to accommodate, respectively, 80,000 and 100,000 former slum residents evicted from central parts of the city in the 1970s and again in the early years of the new century. Over 12 months from 2015 to 2016, and during several visits since, I conducted in-depth interviews with 60 residents. These interactions eventually blended into informality during the long hours I spent hanging around in public spaces.[2] I also surveyed 210 individuals and their 952 household members, ascertaining basic socioeconomic information and asking about common time-consuming chores.[3]

When planning these two strands of empirical research, I hoped they would support each other, the survey helping situate the ethnographic research within the neighborhood and region. I had not even passed Sunder Nagri's first houses, however, when I met Reena, who claimed to be doing nothing while earning her family's food and water. Soon, there would be more such apparent contradictions between what women said about their time and what I saw them doing; what they said when answering survey questions and when speaking freely, alone or in the presence of husbands and neighbors. Progressively, a pattern emerged in which women especially downplayed the long wait for basic services while describing much of their work and politics as merely a way of passing time.

Men seemed less prone to such downplaying. Rarely did I hear them speak of their work as a way of passing time, and they also tended to exaggerate their involvement in time-consuming chores, like fetching water. These differences seemed to suggest a relation between speech and power reminiscent of what Scott (1990, p. ix) observed: having realized that rich and poor spoke differently in the presence of each other, he found himself creating settings in which he "could check one discourse against another and, so to speak, triangulate [his] way into unexplored territory." My own approach was less purposeful and always limited by the precautions I took to avoid exposing my interlocutors.[4] Still, the tensions between discourses and practices left a trail through my notebooks that called for analysis.

I investigate these tensions in two neighborhoods created by a politics that relies on violently evicting the poor from the city's historic and economic heart. Both neighborhoods are "timescapes" of urban marginality, to use a notion that ties together multiple facets often explored separately in ethnographic writing about time—the environmental and societal features that influence our experience and the subjectivity of this experience; the time we suffer and the time we act on (Adam, 1998; Gell, 1992). In these peripheries, the poor are caught between rushing in long commutes and prolonged waiting for basic amenities, services, and jobs (Harms, 2013; Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Divorced from their past by their forced relocation and prevented from projecting themselves into the future by the lack of opportunities, they join the diverse people whose temporal experiences are defined by ruptures and limbos, among them patients in a psychiatric ward (Pinto, 2013), migrants in frontier zones (Bayart, 2007; Haas, 2017), and the unemployed (Honwana, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010a; Mains, 2007; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016).

While my analysis in the coming sections shows the disparities that exist even within these underprivileged neighborhoods, most residents of Sunder Nagri and Madanpur Khadar shared a similar trajectory. They had left an impoverished village life hoping to find better opportunities in Delhi. After settling in central slums, they were forcefully moved to these resettlement colonies, set in India's National Capital Territory, but on formerly agricultural land, right along the border with one of the country's poorest states, Uttar Pradesh.

Madanpur Khadar, where the last resettlement occurred 10 years before my first visit, felt particularly remote, surrounded as it was by a river and fields. Here, the skyline of the city's suburbs lay inaccessible and hazy across the waters. All but children recalled how they had been forced out of their slum near the economic center of Nehru Place. "Everything was nearby," they recounted. "Look here, there's nothing but wilderness around." Even in older Sunder Nagri and more widely across resettlement colonies of Delhi (Tarlo, 2003), seniors still used the same expressions of hostile wilderness to describe the place they had been forcibly relocated to. They contrasted it with their former dwellings near Delhi's historic center, in a quarter that, for many of them, was also their workplace.

In the two neighborhoods, many of them felt stuck at the city's edge—as one man put it, "like animals [...] caught in [their] cages, looking at each other without being able to get out." For him, the 12-to-18-square-meter plot allotted to each household had become a prison. In these constricted spaces, where three generations often had to coexist, private lives inevitably spilled out into the lane. Looking at each other, residents were either powerless to help or, depending on how we interpret the quote, defiantly surveying each other's every movement.

For this man to speak of being caught is to express just how deeply the lack of opportunities unsettles traditional gender roles. Locked up, he forfeited his responsibility as breadwinner and was stuck in a place traditionally associated with female domesticity. The manifestations of this unsettling were manifold; from men's frequent complaints that they had nowhere to go to women's vigilance as they warned that their husband might come home anytime. Each spoke of a situation in which men's unemployment destabilized the gendered spaces and rhythms of everyday life, and in which women were thrust into a tense negotiation over practices that pushed boundaries of acceptability and safety.

In both neighborhoods, many men had lost their jobs during the resettlement. In their trajectory since, the forced move exacerbated a wider trend toward precariousness among low-skilled workers (Breman, 2004; Gooptu, 2007, 2013). Just 21 percent of men in my survey said they were regularly employed, versus 40 percent among similar age groups in Delhi.[5] In a country lacking adequate welfare safety nets, 12 percent said they were fully unemployed. Underemployment was pervasive. Respondents spent hours at hiring sites for daily laborers or waited for passengers in their unlicensed rickshaws. Others waited weeks for a tailoring assignment, then rushed to honor it during 14-hour-long workdays. They were the precarious counterparts of the lower middle classes described in many studies about waiting (Jeffrey, 2010a; Mains, 2007). As people who self-identified as poor, laborers, and often as illiterate, they were from a group against which this other section defined itself. Unlike these lower middle-class men—who have just enough capital to escape demeaning jobs, but too little to find better

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ones—these were men for whom every lost moment raised issues of survival. Unable to find steady work, they alternated between periods of forced idleness and frantic activity.

The economic consequences of this situation were evident in the women's discussion of daily life. They spoke of their husbands' waiting in terms of missing food, clothes, and schoolbooks. Many also said they wanted to work, although their doing so remained contentious in a region sometimes dubbed the *purdah belt* ("veil," from Urdu and Persian; Kabeer, 2000, pp. 36–37), since practices of gendered segregation are widespread there. Notwithstanding these sensitivities, 32 percent of women in my survey said they were involved in paid work, versus 13 percent across Delhi. Mostly, they did home-based piecework, but opportunities to work outside had also increased. As middle-class areas grew closer, they brought with them demands for housekeeping personnel. NGOs offered women training and places as caregivers or aestheticians. None of these were well-paid positions, but in a context where men struggled to find work, even such fledgling opportunities were both essential to many households and highly contentious. They brought women's time to the center of a tense negotiation about whether to work, and what work to opt for, between the lower-paid but more acceptable home-based work and the slightly better-paid controversial alternatives that involved leaving the neighborhood.

The negotiation straddled multiple societal cleavages, two of which are worth highlighting. In Sunder Nagri, about two thirds of residents belonged to India's Muslim minority. Previously, the proportion had been lower, according to residents and charity workers, but, as elsewhere in the country, Muslim kin were regrouping in response to widespread discrimination (Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2012; Susewind, 2017). The result was a tight-knit community, one whose cohesion was further strengthened by the dominance of two weaver groups among its residents, the Muslim *ansaris* and the Hindu *kolis*. Each were underprivileged in the societal stratification that defined their respective religious collective.

In contrast, Madanpur Khadar had roughly the opposite share of one third Muslims, two thirds Hindus, and no one community dominated among the wide range of castes represented. Although discriminated castes were most represented, there were also intermediary and upper castes, all living in the uneasy proximity created by patterns of resettlement not yet reshaped by people informally moving in and out. Communal tensions were palpable in neighbors' interactions, none so much as those between Hindus and Muslims. In Sunder Nagri, instead, they tended to be associated with the world beyond, even as overlapping ties of kinship, caste, and religion brought societal controls deeper into intimate aspects of life.

WAITING AND ALIENATION AT THE IRON SHUTTER

It is 2:45 p.m., well after the 2 p.m. opening time written on the board of a subsidized food shop in Madanpur Khadar. There, I join the 28 women, eight men, and five children seated around the shop's closed iron shutter. "Have you been waiting long?" I ask a woman near me. "One hour," she says, and soon others join in: "I've been here since the morning"; "Me too. We came at dawn."

"Have you ever tried complaining?" I ask. There is silence. "What about problems with your ration card? Do you know where you have to go?" A woman nods toward the iron shutter: "We ask him." From across the crowd, an elderly man waves toward the distant city. The government office, the man says, "used to be there, far away." He adds that he is just visiting his daughter in the neighborhood. Then he goes on to criticize the shopkeeper's habit of opening late and cutting the rations of anyone who dares complain. At last he falls silent, and one of the women says slowly, her gaze fixed on the closed shutter, "Whether we wait here or there, what does it matter? We just hang around anyway."

At 3:00 p.m., a door bangs, and people rush toward the shutter, then disperse again. "It was only the helper," someone says as a man walks away. In front of the shutter, a handful of people remain in line, standing at first, then, crouching, silently.

Now it is 3:25 p.m., and there are about 70 people waiting; the shopkeeper calls the first woman forward. For about half an hour, the queue moves ahead slowly, then at 4 p.m., the shutter closes again. Still more people are coming. While the shopkeeper prepares to leave, three women linger, speaking quietly until one of them notices my presence. The woman speaks louder, paying no heed when the shopkeeper leaves on his bike. "I came yesterday and this morning again," she says, "but the shop was closed. Now I came as soon as I heard that it had opened." In the now empty lane, the woman's voice grows louder yet, her face and gestures expressing violent anger. "And the food is dirty. He closes early. It's always like that."

Such scenes were common in the two neighborhoods. Every month, people waited for subsidized rice, pulses, and other non-perishable food. They waited for the shop to open, then waited for their turn to collect food. Many people also waited for the daily visit of the water tanker, in most of Madanpur Khadar and parts of Sunder Nagri, where houses lacked a connection to the city's water grid. The vehicle was meant to come at 10 a.m., but it usually came much later, sometimes as late as 3 p.m. Until the horn announced its arrival, people had to stay in their lane and be ready to join the queue. Having filled up their buckets, they returned for a second, sometimes a third time, before the tanker left. The back-and-forth took some 30 minutes, according to my observations at different water points, a fraction of the time they spent bound to their lane and ready to drop everything when the horn blew.

These delays were caused by bottlenecks often described in the literature on the state in India—from guidelines far removed from the reality of delivery to private interests colluding to divert scarce public resources (Gupta, 2012; Harriss-White, 1997; Wade, 1982). Getting food, for example, should have been possible throughout the month, but providers across Delhi's union of shopkeepers opened only when deliveries arrived, and even then, only for a couple of days for each subgroup of recipients—those above the official poverty line, those below the line who receive more food at a cheaper price, and the poorest, who receive more food yet. Throughout this staggered delivery, opening hours were short and unpredictable. Sometimes the shopkeeper was absent; at other times, power cuts disabled the new electric-powered biometric register of

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recipients. Despite the halting pace of distribution, people not only had to be at the right location on the right day, but they also had to come early, because corruption in the delivery chain meant that there was often not enough food for everyone. Those who failed to collect their share several months in a row were removed from the registers altogether. So it was that at least one member of every household remained available around the date of delivery, ready to drop everything when their turn arrived.

Beyond the basics of halting services, these situations were defined by a relation between time and domination. In the scene above, only the man who does not live in the neighborhood knows—or dares to say—where one can find the government office in charge of food deliveries. Others keep silent, because the shopkeeper, who controls the distribution of food and information about procedures, also has the power to punish those who complain by unlawfully cutting their ration. As he arranges opening times to suit his convenience, recipients can spend days waiting for the shop to open, then again hours queuing at the shop.

"Making people wait" and "delaying without totally destroying hope" are part of the working of domination, as Bourdieu (2000, p. 228) noted. Waiting, and making others wait, enter here a wider field of societal institutions that bind a person's actions, thoughts, and emotions to inherited identities of class. They become more than the expression of an external relation of power, taking root inside people and within the constraints that define how people wait and what waiting brings them.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this relation between waiting and internalized domination as pervasive as in Auyero's (2012) ethnography of how people seeking social benefits in Argentine welfare offices are turned into "patients of the state." Unlike other studies, in which domination cedes ground to creativity (Jeffrey, 2010a) and resistance (Appadurai, 2001), here, waiting and uncertainty constitute a form of governance that forces people into submissiveness and prevents them from asserting themselves as citizens. In a different setting, it is a form of governance that evokes Verdery's (1996, pp. 39–57) depiction of how long queues and constant transportation delays took hold of people's time in Ceauşescu's Romania.

While the next sections feature more subversive responses to this seizure of time, the scene above shows how the work of domination plays out even in interactions between people who wait. Unlike many in India, residents in Madanpur Khadar did not use the system of surrogate queues in which bags line up for their owners, allowing them to sit in the shade. In a place where temperatures can reach the mid-40s Celsius, this arrangement made a big difference, but it required confidence that cheaters would be reined in, and some degree of trust in the delivery chain (Corbridge, 2004). As people rushed to the shutter, such trust and confidence were lacking. Waiting amid a silent crowd could feel like an experience of isolation, or, when fights erupted, a vector of division.

The lack of unity, people told me, along with the feeling that no one listened and nothing ever changed, was among the main reasons that they were unable to do anything about unreliable services. Against this backdrop, moments like the one at the subsidized food shop could undermine the social capital required to challenge the power relation underlying them. They pitted neighbor against neighbor and weakened essential informal safety nets. Much more than moments of lost opportunity, they eroded the founding elements of resilience, more insidiously so because they involved the banal act of waiting.

Most people who waited in front of food shops were women, in a proportion that was roughly consistent with the two thirds noted above. Behind the water tankers, women made up an even larger share. This was so even though neither was viewed as a woman's chore, unlike cooking and childcare. If anything, households that followed a strictly gendered role division considered them men's chores, too heavy and crowded to be done by women. Nevertheless, if someone had to stay in the lane to get food or water, it was usually the women who did so, even when men struggled to find. Doing otherwise exposed people to shame and domestic violence, as shown in testimonies in the next two sections. The unpredictability of supplies also left no space other than home-based work for the more widely accepted arrangement that had women supplementing their husband's income.

Households could also buy food on the free market whenever it suited them and pay to have bottled water delivered to their doorstep. But at a monthly premium of about 450 rupees for water and at least as much for food, the cost was significant relative to the average household income of 14,600 rupees reported for the same period. In a setting where already-low female wages were seen as an addition to men's salary at best, the high cost of potable water dragged them down further, adding weight to the preconception that paid work for women was not worth the while. Not once did I hear anyone mention the idea of spending more to avoid the monthly wait for food. Even in areas serviced by the water tankers, the additional delivery fee discouraged about half the households from paying for this faster alternative.

As the wait for food combined with the wait for water, unpredictability cast a shadow of constraints that stretched over much of life. The stall one woman wanted to set up, the skill-building programs others aspired to—all these were out of reach. Since they were unable to leave the lane or make plans, it did not much "matter" whether they waited "here or there," as the woman at the food shop had said. Her comment thus reflects a broader leveling down in which her time is emptied of its potential. It is her internalization of this outcome, an expression of alienation by someone who has integrated the lesser worth of her time.

The same attitude surfaced in a wider pattern of downplaying in which women described their work as "nothing," and their income as less than it really was. When asked about what activity they had interrupted to join the queue, many said "nothing much," even when complaining about the poor quality of services. They reported lower figures than the ones I observed about the length of queues or the time spent in them. There was a consistency to this downplaying, one that seemed at least partly founded in how they assimilated a broader set of constraints linked to gender, class, and practices of governance involving stark imbalances of power; those elements, in turn, combined to undermine that very basic measure of self-worth, that is, the worth of one's time.

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A WIDOW'S WAITING AND THE "BIG MAN": RESILIENCE AND THE ART OF HANGING AROUND

Not all scenes of waiting were as oppressive as the one above, nor did the attitudes of people involved always fit my analysis in the previous section. Even in Madanpur Khadar, where services were particularly unreliable, the relative isolation at the food shop contrasted with the networks that had emerged around water. The women who first told me about the water tanker's arrival, for example, asked a neighbor who called the driver when delays became too much. Over time, I would come across several of these women, who were often overseeing the queue behind the water tanker and preventing people from cutting the line. There were usually three or four of them at each delivery point, having formed what they called a water committee.

The first time I heard about a "big man" behind the committees, I was conversing with four women, not noticing at first that a fifth had sat down on a chair, which had towered empty above us since I joined the others on the ground. "You should ask me if you have any questions," said the woman, who would later introduce herself as Firdoz Begun. One of the other four said, "You can ask her about the water committees." Firdoz continued, "I will tell you, everything good here comes from Guptaji. He is the one who got us organized. Whenever we have a problem, we just call him."

"Guptaji?"

"A big man. From the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP], they say. I tell you, any problem, we just call."

Off she went, but an hour later, she appeared again as I was leaving the block. "You might be interested, Guptaji is organizing a health camp," she said before turning into the next lane. By the time I met her again, I had heard many things about this Guptaji. He was a selfless benefactor; a man with suspect motives; "the guy from the tanker mafia"; and a man linked to each of the three major political parties battling to win Delhi.

Amid the confusion, the geography of the committees became increasingly clear. Out of the 24 water points, the 14 with active committees were in areas where amenities were particularly scarce and residents less able to buy water. Most members were from this poorer section, the same among whom the name "Gupta" and its added honorific "ji" had the power to evoke mixed attitudes of gratitude and suspicion. Among this section, Firdoz was perhaps the most vulnerable, being a widow and sole provider for two young children; a Muslim in a predominantly Hindu neighborhood; and someone whose house of raw bricks stood out as poorer than others in the lane.

Having learned as much, I came across the health camp mentioned by Firdoz. The event, said the organizer, Satish Kumar, was sponsored by a trust connected to a large conglomerate named after its owner, an heir to an influential business dynasty, the Guptas. Satish himself was a resident of Madanpur Khadar, who worked as a chauffeur for Mamta Roy, the head of the Gupta Group's Corporate Social Responsibility activities. Apart from paying for the health camp, Roy commanded money and influence that were instrumental in getting the Delhi Water Board to send tanker trucks filled with drinking water. When deliveries became too unreliable and residents needed to complain, Roy also paid for their transportation, food, and refreshments.

She would be at the next health camp, Satish said, when I asked him whether I might be able to meet her, but the camp was postponed time and again. Satish was not allowed to share her contact information. Nearly a year later, she, like "Guptaji," remained a distant figure, synonymous of the power and money required to get a host of services that had, until then, been denied to residents.

As mediator of this capital, Satish had considerable influence, which he used to sustain a network that blended some elements of patronage with principles of participative governance. The all-female water committees disciplined the queues and alerted Satish when tanker trucks at one delivery point were too unreliable, while a looser male-dominated group was involved in monthly cleaning drives. One of the few in these networks who lived in a block equipped with fixed water tanks, Satish had other reasons to get involved. Coordinating the committee was for him a way to buttress his standing with both his employer and peers.

In contrast, most women had come across Satish while desperately trying to find drinking water. Their involvement in the committees was born out of necessity. As they devoted long hours to overseeing the queues, however, it became more than a means of securing this requirement. This was particularly true for Firdoz, for whom the committee had become a means of securing a standing against the odds of her condition as a widow, Muslim, and a person poorer than even her poor neighbors. To defend this standing, she had developed an ability to be everywhere, appearing here to establish her authority, there to glean a bit of information or pay respect. Being so vulnerable, she had had to perfect this dexterousness into a capacity of near ubiquity. Back at the health camp, for example, she appeared again while I was speaking with Satish. Her hands joined in respectful greeting, she bowed toward him, then whispered to me, "He's the one who gets us organized." She retreated soon after, but as I was leaving the camp, she was suddenly walking at my side one more time. "What did he tell you?" she asked, nodding as I offered a semblance of summary. "I told you," she said, before turning into the next lane.

Waiting under the distant shadow of "Guptaji" had become synonymous with constant vigilance. It was an art of hanging around, born of extreme vulnerability. At the price of constant alertness, it resulted in a fragile resilience. This differs from the depiction of waiting as suffered domination in the previous section. It is both a symptom of powerlessness and a space out of which new practices and opportunities might arise (Appadurai, 2001; Hage, 2009; Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010a; Khosravi, 2017).

Nevertheless, it remains true that for all the time Firdoz devoted to the committees, her supplies were woefully inadequate. For all her dexterousness, she remained utterly dependent on Satish. These limitations came into sharp focus when contrasting her trajectory with that of Sunita Devi, the

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first woman I was directed to after my inquiries about the water tanker's arrival. Sunita had joined Satish's network early on, but she soon grew weary. Supplies, she said, came only every few days. The water was dirty. When she approached Satish, nothing happened. Eventually, she asked her daughter to write to their Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), then got her neighbors to sign and accompany her to hand over the request. New water tankers started coming, and her focus then shifted to getting the block cleaned up. "Coming together has changed things," she said. "It has changed us."

After she succeeded with the letter, Sunita stopped relying on Satish and turned directly to her elected representative. As her ability to get things done grew, so did her influence over others in the neighborhood. As a result, she had more power to arrange time as it suited her. She waited a little less after the new trucks began stopping at her doorstep. She did not have to be as dexterous, because people had started coming to her. Around her, too, something "changed" as neighbors united to demand better services. Their collective experience mattered in an environment where many people said that officials and politicians never listened to their complaints unless they went as a group. As one of several women whom I met complaining about a clogged drain at the MLA's office in Sunder Nagri put it, "We used to go alone, and they would just humiliate us, but then we learned." For Sunita's neighbors to unite around a collective claim in these conditions entailed new powers to demand change. Out of their waiting for water, a new degree of discretion had emerged.

In achieving this outcome, Sunita's college-educated daughter played an essential role. Her husband, meanwhile, attended political rallies. A chauffeur like Satish, he sometimes used his car to take neighbors to government offices. "We are like that in the family," Sunita added. "My father was too." Hers was the trajectory of a family, enabled by the literacy of a daughter, supported by the capital of having a functional car, rooted in her father's example. These were all things Firdoz lacked—Firdoz, who remained dependent on the water tankers that Sunita had found too unreliable, trapped as much as ever in vigilant waiting.

While both figures take us far from the resignation depicted in the previous section, they also illustrate how people's ability to harness their own time remains linked to the social, cultural, and economic capital they command. This explains some of the disparities that exist among people who share a broad background of poverty and forced resettlement. It also draws attention to how these disparities are entrenched by microscopic processes of capital accumulation or erosion. In that sense, it fits Bourdieu's (2000) conception of how different forms of capital add up around a person's practices to create different outcomes of freedom and influence. More broadly, it echoes an analytical lens often found in the literature about waiting (Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010a).

The contrast between Madanpur Khadar and Sunder Nagri provides further insights into the factors that shape people's temporal experiences. In the latter neighborhood, even food shops had somewhat more reliable opening hours. Queues were louder and relaxed. People chatted in the shade while their bags marked the line. Sitting down, I was soon surrounded by a cheerful crowd. "I don't even waste time arguing with these people," a young woman said about the shopkeeper and his helper on one of these occasions. "I just go straight to their boss."

Although fiercer than most, even for Sunder Nagri, she was not exceptional in that she knew where to complain since the office was across the road. Nor was she among the minority of residents who had been directly involved in the neighborhood's struggles against corruption. Like everyone here, she knew other people who had taken part, and she had witnessed their confrontations with shopkeepers. What role had these examples played in building her confidence? Other factors might also have played a role, among them age-related differences in education. Like most young people, she had finished secondary school, while older residents had rarely completed primary school. In Sunder Nagri, a woman of her age also had not suffered through the violence of forceful eviction. These different dimensions point to how one person's social and cultural capital interacts with an environment shaped by collective mobilization or by the geography of the state. Together, they allowed this young woman to say that she did not want to waste time arguing with the shopkeeper. Beyond this young woman, they created a space in which people had the confidence to let their bag line up for them while they chatted in the shade.

Neither Firdoz, Sunita, and their peers nor other residents mentioned the water committees when asked whether someone in their surroundings did anything about unreliable services. Most people said they knew of no one who had attempted anything about these shortfalls. The few who did mention one of these attempts usually spoke of the collective complaints about a clogged drain or the lack of water supplies.[6] Unlike the day-to-day management of the water committees, which involved women, these one-off initiatives predominantly involved men, although Sunita's letter shows that there were exceptions to this gendered division. Still, by focusing on these initiatives, people depicted their interventions as focused on men, leaving out women's routine involvement in challenging the state. Beyond the water committees, they omitted women's frequent participation in meetings called by local politicians or power brokers.

The long hours that women devoted to these activities were an unaccounted capital of time, one that adds to a body of evidence about untold female practices in a male-dominated public sphere (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Behl, 2019; Hancock, 1995; Moore, 1998). It was an unrecognized capital that political entrepreneurs were well aware of: Satish set up female-only committees; male local cadres of political parties explained that they worked primarily with women on issues pertaining to service delivery. The involvements cemented these men's authority in the party but rarely led women to join its hierarchy. Women's wait for unreliable services became the silent bedrock of networks of power dominated by men.

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THE QUIET SUBVERSIVENESS OF "DOING NOTHING"

Women also spoke of being idle in other, seemingly contradictory circumstances. Sarah Bano, for example, said she was not working, even as she was sticking beads on a piece of velvet. When I pointed to the arabesques of shiny plastic under her fingers, she shook her head, lips curled down in disdain: "That's nothing." She wanted to do some proper work, she explained, set up a stall and sell beauty products, but her husband objected.

Two neighbors came by, and Sarah stopped to address them briskly: "The money has not arrived." The two objected, but she paid no heed. "What can I do if the contractor doesn't pay me?" she said when they were gone. Tensions had worsened since her husband had lost his job and she had had to keep more of the work she used to pass on to neighbors. She and her husband also fought about her work. He viewed it as "useless" and a threat to their position in the lane, which was already vulnerable, since they were the only Muslim household. She agreed about the tensions, and about their vulnerability, but she did not see how, with two children to feed, they could do without her income if he had no stable work. Because he objected to her idea of setting up a stall, the beading continued as an uneasy compromise.

This work was typical of women's home-based labor in the neighborhood. Some of them embellished cloth or ribbons; others sewed garments; all of them were paid a piece rate. They had often established a working relationship with a contractor and further subcontracted work to neighbors. Sarah was also typical in how she downplayed her earnings. Only by deducing did I realize that hers had been the family's sole income for three months. Her claims about the amount of money she got from subcontracting pieces to her neighbors were also much lower than neighbors claimed. According to her, she took a cut of five rupees on each 30-rupee piece. According to them, the cut was 25 rupees for each piece worth 30 rupees.

What the truth was, I do not know, but the underlying tensions were clear. At home, the violence had reached such levels during her husband's unemployment that she had considered going to the police and lodging a complaint. She eventually gave up, "because how would I live?" Nor could the family afford to leave their plot to escape tensions with neighbors. Forced to work within these constraints, she minimized the value of her labor and thus avoided challenging her husband's status as breadwinner openly, while also brushing over her conflict with neighbors.

She was not alone in this. Above, Reena depicted her shop as "a way of passing time." Her profit, she said, only covered "small things." Reena was also one of the few women who had, for a time, worked outside the home while her husband was unemployed. She never dwelled on the matter, however, instead emphasizing his other contributions during this period. For her and other women who spoke of their piecework as "something of no value," or replied no when asked whether they worked, downplaying helped deflate tensions and allowed them to claim some space to go about their lives.

Often, women's accounts of their time changed when other people were present. Natissa Qureishi, for example, said she and her father sold clothes for a living when I first met her alone. A few weeks later, I met her with her husband, who was back from touring the country as a salesman. This time, the clothing business was her father's, and Natissa accompanied him only occasionally because he was so frail. The father, meanwhile, would tell me with a kind smile, "It's her business. I am too old."

In these different versions, Natissa adapted, here to wider social controls, there to the starker restrictions of her husband, there again to her permissive father. A series of shifts featured in her way of accounting for her time as she juggled life between an elderly father and a mostly absent husband. For her and other women, discourses of uselessness and idleness made up a verbal balancing act through which they negotiated the diverse constraints that surrounded them. They were part of a discursive loyalty to traditional gendered roles, one that hid practices that quietly challenged some of the economic and societal fundamentals of these roles.

The tactics involved women of all ages, but there were nuances that seemed to reflect the way social control evolved over a lifetime. Natissa and Sarah, for example, who were in their 20s and mothers of young children, faced constraints that a middle-aged woman like Reena did not. Reena, for her part, recalled her struggle to achieve the freedom she now enjoyed. As a young woman, she hid even her participation in the meetings of an NGO to avoid being beaten by her jealous and unemployed husband. When she learned about the NGO's training program for caregivers, she asked its older male director to convince her husband. She did the same when she was offered a position in a rich patient's family. As her husband progressively came to accept these new roles, the violence that had defined the first years of her marriage stopped. When I met the family, he had found employment at last, while she had stopped working as a caregiver after a road accident left her permanently disabled. She still spoke of her shop as if it were nothing, out of habit or because that reflected how she felt about her new livelihood.

Age added a further dimension to the contrast between the two women of the water committees. The widow Firdoz was, like Natissa and Sarah, a young mother of two. She was at an age when hanging around as she did was widely considered unsafe and inappropriate, given the male attention she attracted. Her relative freedom came at the price of her greater exposure to hazards and social judgments. Sunita, in contrast, a middle-aged woman with grown-up children, had gained greater liberty over the years.

Beyond age, religion also played a role in defining the stakes of women's downplaying. For Sarah, being a Muslim was essential to both her position in a subcontracting chain dominated by Muslims and to the conflicts around her. "People take issue with what we eat. We have to be careful about everything," she said. Her words were threateningly echoed in red graffiti along nearby roads: "Those who kill cows should be killed." In a country where a series of lynchings had killed Muslims accused of eating or transporting beef, these slogans and Sarah's words spoke of an environment where ritualized eating habits channeled wider tensions. Conflicts over unpaid wages could easily take a nastier turn.

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Against this backdrop, she replied no when asked whether she worked, and she quoted a lower cut than her neighbors claimed on the pieces she passed on to them. To recall Firdoz from the water committees once more, it is also this context that gave the widow's vigilance all its meaning. Nor was it by chance that Firdoz survived on piecework, in an environment where most contractors were Muslims. As demand circulated through networks of acquaintances, the poorer women from this community were often the ones who, after necessity forced them into the business, ended up passing on work to their Hindu neighbors.

One final example further clarifies the triangle of work, gender, and politicized religious identities underlying these women's vulnerability and resilience. I was seated with a group of women who had invited me to share their food, near the edge of Madanpur Khadar. Soon they started speaking about how a nearby water tank had been damaged. “Is there anyone who can help you get it fixed?” I asked. “No one,” one of them said. I asked, “Who do you usually turn to when you have a problem?” There was a silence, then one of them pointed toward an elderly lady who was passing by: “She is the one we go to. She also gives us work, sometimes.”

As they gestured toward her, Isan Sheik came closer and eventually started narrating how her once-sheltered life had fallen apart when her husband died; how she had shed tears and suffered shame when she had to go “begging for work”; and how, having managed to get subcontracted work, she eventually started passing some assignments on to neighbors. The other women listened, nodded, and joined in, steering the discussion toward the deteriorating atmosphere in the neighborhood: young men were hanging around, doing drugs, and committing crime. “They come roaming from there at night. We don't even dare go out,” said one of them, gesturing toward the wall that separated the resettlement colony from the informal cluster beyond. “See this wall?” another added, her hand cutting the air in front of her in an exaggerated gesture: “It separates India from Pakistan.” She laughed loudly; others too; then someone explained, “No Muslims on this side, one or two, that's it.”

One or two, among whom was the widow Isan, who was by then listening silently. “I should go back to my work,” she said, excusing herself soon afterward. As someone who could subcontract embellishing assignments, she had become the person other women went to for help. The evocation of unemployed youth, however, also paved the way for the communally loaded reference to Pakistan. Like the other women above, Isan had to negotiate multiple social fault lines, and, just as often, silence played a central role in this negotiation.

Hers was another example of a form of empowerment resulting from a breakdown of traditional role distributions. That rupture was complete for Isan, Firdoz, and a handful more single mothers, but other women were also forced to deal with a reality that differed widely from the idea of a family supported by a male breadwinner. As they navigated the diverse set of constraints that surrounded them, speaking of useless hanging around was part of a series of verbal tactics that relied on downplaying and elusion to avert conflicts and to reclaim some space to go about making ends meet.

It was a use of language that evokes other researchers' findings about how women negotiate patriarchal power from within (Dyson, 2018; Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022). Like the “weapons of the weak” described in Scott's (1985) ethnography of the everyday resistance of poor villagers in Malaysia, these were the tactics of people bound by stark constraints and exposed to frequent threats of violence. Even the term *resistance* seems inadequate to describe practices often aimed at reconciling the reality of an impoverished household with its members' gendered imaginations. If there was subversion or resistance, it was rooted in hardship and defined by the women themselves as a necessity.

It remains true, however, that their practices challenged the economic and social fundamentals of the gender and communal partition around them. Against all odds, Sarah and Reena had supported their families through hard times and gained a fraught authority in the lane. Isan and Firdoz had managed to survive as widows and kept simmering religious tensions in check. As they spoke of doing nothing and perfected the art of hanging around, their deeds quietly defied the limits of their condition.

Their practices also had broader implications. When they passed on work, wrote to their political representatives, or formed a water committee, they encouraged neighbors to get involved. As other women joined, these practices became more visible and accepted. It was an influence that evokes Bayat's (2007, 2013) work on Iranian women who resist the obligation to veil. They acted outside an organized collective and rarely framed their gestures as contestation, but their multiplicity could be a force of change. The mere presence of many like Firdoz, Reena, and Sarah who were working on a doorstep or overseeing water delivery modified the neighborhood's gendered landscape. The money they made, the public space they occupied and watched over, “quietly encroached” (Bayat, 2013, p. 15) on the stricter differentiation in obedience that led other women to forgo paid work and withdraw into their homes.

CONCLUSION: GENDER, POWER, AND THE MEANING OF IDLENESS

What, then, lies behind these women's claims of senseless idleness? From the experience of alienation to resilience and discretion, the temporal experiences featured in this article are shaped by a distinct set of constraints. They are rooted in the timescape of resettlement colonies, a consequence of poor people's exclusion from the city where they had hoped to find a better life. Here, waiting has a particular political economy underpinned by a scarcity of income-generating jobs and dependence on unreliable basic services. This is a setting in which poverty and male underemployment profoundly destabilize the starkly gendered landscape of northern India.

These, then, are eminently particular temporal experiences and practices. At the same time, they bear striking similarities to the picture other researchers have described in different geographies and among different classes, age groups, and genders. In their ambivalence, they echo the “Janus-faced” (Jeffrey, 2010b, p. 477) condition depicted by a small but growing body of studies (Hage, 2009; Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Khosravi,

2017), as part of a renewed theoretical interest in the politics of waiting (Appadurai, 2001; Auyero, 2012; Bourdieu, 2000).

My discussion makes at least three contributions articulated around a triangle of gender, power, and speech, together spanning literature in ethnography and beyond. First, I flip the gender lens around in a literature that has often described this ambivalent temporal experience as an expression of a masculinity destabilized by unemployment. From across this landscape, I show how poor women wait in the lanes of their neighborhood and speak of useless hanging around as they engage in activities that challenge gendered expectations.

Second, I present evidence that there exists a wider pattern of minimizing, self-effacement, and elusions around women's talk of idleness. I show that these ways of speaking sometimes integrate, and sometimes subvert, the gendered constraints that erode this basic reflection of self-worth that is the worth of one's time. In the first instance, they express how the long and unpredictable wait for services weighs on much of these women's days. They bear the mark of a form of governance that turns the poor into "patients of the state" (Auyero, 2012), too caught in their own waiting to come together and collectively challenge its causes. In the second instance, in contrast, women use the same discourse to avoid conflicts while engaging in contentious practices. As they claim to do nothing while working or getting involved in the informal politics of service delivery, their behaviors quietly defy the limits of their condition. Regimes of waiting and discourses about idleness become a matrix to explore the boundary between alienation and subversion. The two notions of alienation and subversion, in turn, articulate how discourses and practices are bound in a tense interaction, full of apparent contradictions, but ultimately rooted in the same underlying constraints. It is not, to be clear, that such attitudes are always neatly distinct. They often blur into one another, sometimes ironically, sometimes silently, in ways that can, at times, leave some scope for interpretation and uncertainty. The broader pattern, however, remains, as I hope to have shown in this article.

Third, focusing on what women do when speaking about idleness lets us glance into their untold work and politics. Far from being negligible in these poor urban neighborhoods, these practices feature an important capital of time, and an essential bedrock for the political economy of everyday life. Ethnographically attending to these moments and to the broader pattern of minimizing around them, therefore, adds to a body of study that has highlighted women's often-untold politics in the region (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017; Hancock, 1995; Moore, 1998), and it provides lessons for a much wider set of disciplines, from quantitative efforts to assessing women's burden of paid and unpaid work (Hirway & Jose, 2011; Jain, 1996), to literature about interactions with the state. It highlights blind spots in discourses about everyday life and shows that, far from being a technical issue of underreporting, these are fertile spaces where methodological questions meet substantial issues of power, and the language and subjectivities born out of them.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All research interlocutors' names are changed, including the name Gupta later in the article. This also applies to specific locations and addresses. In Figure 1, Reena Koli (name changed) agreed to have her portrait published and was aware of the implications, having earlier featured in a documentary about the neighborhood.

[2] Respondents roughly represented the two neighborhoods' religious and caste demographics described at the end of this section. During much of the fieldwork, I was accompanied by one of several students whose names are given in the acknowledgments. Our collaboration was initially motivated by safety concerns for a sole female researcher and by the challenges that could arise from some of the regional dialects found in the neighborhood, but beyond this our work together proved very fertile. I use the first person in this article, therefore, for the sake of clarity, to avoid a constant back-and-forth between persons, and because all questions, observations, arguments, and shortfalls are mine.

[3] Since the purpose of the survey was to support the ethnographic evidence, I used a basic sampling method that relied on aerial maps to randomly select lanes. In each of them, I covered every fourth household and interviewed their male and female working-age head.

[4] From domestic violence to conflicts with neighbors and power brokers, threats loomed large in conversations. To steer clear of such sensitivities, I performed individual interviews in places where we could be alone, and I kept cross-references to a minimum. I also asked respondents for their agreement before interviewing their kin. The student accompanying me was a woman when interviewing women, a man when interviewing men.

[5] Delhi-wide figures draw on the National Sample Survey Organization's latest official available data at the time of research (NSSO, 2011–12).

[6] This is also the finding of a study that asked poor people in Delhi what they did about inadequate services (Harriss, 2005). My observations, however, challenge its conclusion that "women in general are much less likely to be active problem solvers" (p. 1044).

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