

## **Stuck in the countryside? Women's transport mobility in rural Aberdeenshire, Scotland – experiences, behaviour and needs**

Sitzen Frauen auf dem Land fest? Mobilität von Frauen im ländlichen Aberdeenshire, Schottland – Erfahrungen, Verhalten und Bedürfnisse

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Räumliche Mobilität spielt in der heutigen Gesellschaft eine wichtige Rolle. Frauen gelten in Bezug auf Mobilitätschancen häufig als benachteiligt. Auf der Grundlage einer empirischen Studie im ländlichen Schottland werden im Rahmen dieses Beitrags der Zugang zu Verkehrsmitteln von auf dem Land lebenden Frauen untersucht sowie deren räumliche Verhaltensmuster und ihre Beteiligung an gesellschaftlichen Aktivitäten betrachtet. Die Ergebnisse verweisen auf bemerkenswerte Fortschritte hinsichtlich der Mobilitätsmöglichkeiten von Frauen. Deren Mobilitätsentscheidungen und die daraus resultierenden Aktionsräume sind jedoch deutlich von der traditionellen Rollenverteilung zwischen Mann und Frau geprägt. So liegt die Verantwortung für Haushalt und Betreuungsaufgaben weiterhin bei den Frauen. Der daraus resultierende Zeitmangel ist ein großes Hindernis für viele Frauen, an gesellschaftlichen Aktivitäten teilzunehmen.

**Schlagnworte:** Gender, öffentlicher Nahverkehr, Mobilität, Erreichbarkeit, ländliches Schottland

### **Summary**

Transport mobility is an important component of contemporary society. Women are often considered to be disadvantaged regarding the access to efficient and adequate transport opportunities. Based on empirical research in rural Scotland this paper explores rural women's

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access to transport resources, their travel behaviour and their involvement in basic activities. The study reveals significant improvement of women's mobility opportunities. Even so, women's journey decisions and their travel patterns evidently derive from traditional gender roles. Women retain primary responsibility for domestic labour and childcare. The resulting lack of time is a major obstacle for many women to participate in activities.

**Keywords:** gender, public transport, mobility, accessibility, rural Scotland

### **1. The importance of transport mobility and gender differences in travel opportunities and behaviour**

In our contemporary society, being spatially mobile<sup>1</sup> is indispensable for partaking in social and economic life and a lack of adequate transport can be a main trigger for social exclusion. Especially in rural areas, transport is crucial to access work, education, health care, retail shops, and recreational facilities. If public transport availability is insufficient, private means are virtually the only way to reach facilities of everyday importance. Mobility opportunities and access to services and facilities vary between and among social groups. According to previous research, women are more likely than men to experience limited mobility opportunities which includes access to private transport as well as the difficulties in using public transport, this having an impact on their quality of life (CASS et al., 2005; CfIT, 2001; DfT, 2005; 2007; GRAY et al., 2006; HALDEN et al., 2002; HIGGS and WHITE, 2000; KNOWLES et al., 2008; NUTLEY, 1992; PACIONE, 2004; SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, 2007; SHUCKSMITH and CHAPMAN, 1998; SEU, 2003; STRADLING et al., 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Here, 'being mobile' refers to geographical, not social spaces. Social mobility will not be treated but it is understood that spatial movement takes place within socio-cultural, economic, political context. Spatial mobility has two facets: (1) migration (not part of this paper) and (2) short-term spatial movement, i.e. going somewhere for a specific purpose but intending to return home afterwards. Besides, 'revealed' mobility and the potential for undertaking these movements can be distinguished.

Rural women can thus be considered to be disadvantaged exceedingly regarding adequate transport opportunities. The ensuing limitations lead to the assumption that rural women are especially exposed to the risk of 'poverty of access' (FARRINGTON et al., 2004) and, as a consequence, social exclusion.

Women's travel patterns are found to differ greatly from men's: they commute shorter distances and travel less far in general; they make more trips related to family responsibilities and they often travel off-peak. Women are also more likely to 'trip chain', linking trips for different purposes (Figure 1).

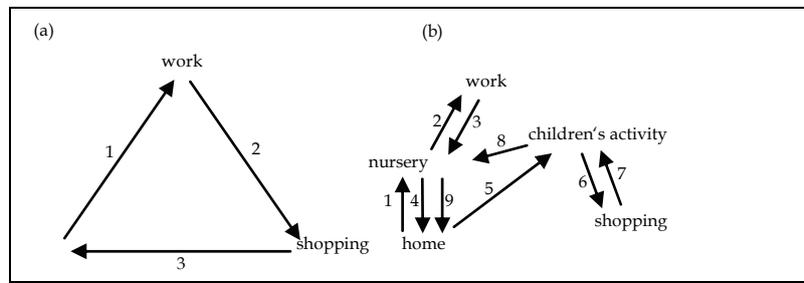


Abb. 1: Men's (a) and women's (b) travel patterns. Trip 8 might be necessary if different aged children attend care facilities with differing timetables (e.g. nursery, kindergarten, or school.)

Source: after KRAMER, 2005, own modifications

These gender differences in travel behaviour are not only due to unequal access to and attitudes towards various means of transport; they also arise from men's and women's differing responsibilities and activity patterns. Analyses of gender differences in work-trip length for instance indicate that the impact of gender is higher than socio-economic factors, such as the affiliation to a professional category or family composition. It has been argued that daily travel patterns reflect the degree of gender equality (HANSON and JOHNSTON, 1985; MADDEN, 1981; NÆSS, 2008; NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2006; NOACK, 2009a; SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2006; UTENG and CRESSWELL, 2008).

This paper presents some results from a study carried out on women in rural Aberdeenshire exploring their experiences regarding transport mobility, their travel behaviour, the access they have to activities important to them and their respective needs and wants. Since in

addition to physical travel the Internet allows to 'travel virtually' and has potential to improve accessibility in rural areas, this aspect has been included in the investigation.

## **2. Women's transport mobility and accessibility in rural Aberdeenshire**

### **2.1 Study area and methodology**

Aberdeenshire, the study area, has experienced a rapid, employment-driven population growth in the last three decades; the appearance of oil and gas industry and a growing service sector have augmented employment opportunities since the late 1970s. Through commuting the rural economy is closely linked to the City of Aberdeen. High car ownership rates can be assumed to be connected to low supply with local quality supply and insufficient public transport (cf. OECD, 2008; SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2007).

Using in-depth interviews, women's experiences with transport mobility were explored. By theoretical sampling, 21 participants of different age groups (between 27 and 81 years old) and different life circumstances were selected purposively aiming to maximize variations within the sample, so that the results can be generalized to a certain extent (cf. FLICK et al., 2005; GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967).

### **2.2 Results**

The women spoken to are generally satisfied with their own transport mobility and the access they have to services and activities important to them. It appears that driving allows rural women to overcome all major access problems: "*When you drive, nothing is really a problem.*" [Interviewee 19]. Most (17 of the 21 women) have access to a private car. In ten of the 12 one-car households, the woman has the car during the day; her partner uses other means of transport.

All agree that, "*rural living is very car-dependent*" [10]. For many the car is indispensable to manage daily life: "*I would be very, very stuck if I didn't drive a car. I would kill myself if I didn't drive.*" says one interviewee [13], ironically.

Transport is found to be central for the women to deal with the multiple roles they play. This is linked to time pressure and a need for time-

wise flexibility: *"I have to maintain the flexibility, to be able to just rush off."* [10]. Therefore, nearly all rely on the car and many feel it is their right to have it at their disposal: *"The car is generally with me because it's me who needs it the most!"* [12].

Even though the interviewees' mobility opportunities are quite good, many exhibit small action spaces: they work closer to home than their partners and pursue most leisure activities locally. As this study clearly finds, women's generally low rates of activity participation are not due to missing transport opportunities but time constraints are the main limiting factor to participate especially in leisure but also in employment activities. This lack of time results from women's multiple responsibilities: nearly all retain primary responsibility for childcare and domestic labour, even when working full-time.

Even so, most do not express the longing to participate in more activities themselves: *"I am quite happy living where I am, and not having access [...] but I do sometimes think that for the children there could be more, organized... like an evening bus [...] taking them somewhere specific, but not just to hang about."* [21]. Like this mother, many interviewees are concerned about the lack of access to recreational activities for the young. Children are mostly completely reliant on their parents, principally their mothers, to shuttle them: *"To everything, they have to be driven."* [20].

The analysis shows that for those living in a village with a regular bus service, reasonable accessibility is attainable by public transport. Out of those four who do not drive, three are satisfied with their accessibility. Apparently, regardless whether or not public transport could be used without much inconvenience, it is no alternative for car-owning women: *"I mean, you, having a car, you are not going to use public transport!"* [19]. It is not the negative experience with public transport that prevents women to reject it but the higher evaluated convenience of the private car: *"[...] it's far more convenient by car, especially with kids."* [15].

Even though, most car-owning women would consider using public transport only as a last resort, a large majority hold the opinion that the service should be improved. This call for an improved bus service stands in clear contrast to the opinion expressed by nearly all women as well, that they do not expect high levels of local service provision or even the same level as in urban areas. Even the interviewee who

depends on public transport acknowledge, “[...] if you move rural, [...] you can’t expect the perfect bus services everywhere. It’s what you expect when you move to somewhere like here [...], just not being too central [...].” [16].

Aware of high car dependency and accessibility problems in rural areas, most women chose to live rurally, trading off ease of access for the advantages of rural life. Many see low levels of service provision and driving as characteristics of rural living: “[...] It’s just part of living in the country and that’s why [...] we live in the country, because we want to.” [17].

Internet is widely spread among the interviewed women. An overwhelming majority use the internet for various purposes (mainly for shopping, banking, e-mailing and gathering of information) and there is no noticeable difference in Internet use in terms of age.

### 2.3 Discussion

This study has revealed that women’s transport mobility in rural Aberdeenshire is quite good. For the overwhelming majority of the interviewees, reaching and participating in daily activities is not a matter of transport opportunities.

Women’s ‘control’ over the household’s car contrasts strikingly with Scottish transport statistics and previous research (cf. DOBBS, 2005; NÆSS, 2008) indicating that women are less likely to be the main driver of a household’s car. Apparently, in terms of access to transport resources increasing gender equality can be observed.

However, how women perform occupational activities and how they spend their spare time is strongly related to the distribution of roles and tasks that remains traditional. The ensuing lack of time is a major obstacle for many women to participate in social and economic activities: many, especially mothers, tend to put their careers and their own leisure activities on the back burner to meet their caring and domestic responsibilities. In line with recent research (cf. DFT 2005, 2007; NÆSS, 2008; UTENG and CRESSWELL, 2008) it can be said that in areas with low service provision women tend to limit activity participation to the choices locally available.

Women’s, especially mothers’, tight schedules could be relieved by improving the offer of and access to activities for children and teenagers (cf. NOACK, 2008).

Moreover, the Internet could de-stress women's tight schedules by continuing to ease supply with goods (home delivery), communication and access to information and certain services. In Europe, the United Kingdom is in the lead with spreading Internet infrastructure. However, its full potential to improve accessibility in rural areas has yet not be tapped (cf. *ibid*).

Thus, mobility opportunities become alike but travel behaviour remains gendered due to static gender roles. Simultaneously, gender relations are changing: rural women take it for granted that they need and have a car to meet their numerous responsibilities. One might argue that the car even reinforces women's role: driving might just make it easier to reach shopping facilities and results in more chauffeuring of children.

Inadequate public transport makes nearly all women rely on the private car. Many women regularly link different trips to manage their various responsibilities. These multi-purpose trips are often not possible by rural public transport. Also their need for off-peak transport (many work evenings or at the weekend) when public transport is hardly ever available explains women's high car reliance.

But even if public transport is available, most women will choose to continue driving a car because of its unsurpassed level of flexibility and comfort. As long as car ownership is affordable, public transport is no alternative for car-owning rural women. Considering that the location of residence is based on free choice and women choose to live 'inaccessible' (cf. NOACK, 2009b), this raises the questions why public transport should be improved or what kind of quality should be aspired to. As long as the majority chooses to stick to car driving, there does not seem to be any need to maintain the network at the current level or even extend it.

Yet, as this study proves, for some, public transport is a 'lifeline' and there will always be people who rely on it. Besides, the demand for public transport might increase, for example as a result of demographic shift. In Aberdeenshire, the rise of older people will be substantial – and above all women, due to their higher life expectancy. Only a small proportion of very elderly women in Scotland hold a driving licence (cf. DFT, 2005). These (especially widows) are potential customers of public transport. However, it can be assumed that those not able to drive a car anymore are more likely to be in need of alternative

schemes, such as door-to-door transport to medical appointments. Current and prospected needs of elderly women especially to health care facilities and in areas without regular bus services are thus of particular importance.

Apart from accounting for elderly residents in public transport planning particular attention should be paid to the needs of the young, disadvantaged because they cannot travel independently.

### **3. Conclusion**

Levels of satisfaction with transport opportunities and participation in employment and leisure activities appeared to be relatively high among the interviewed women. At first glance the study seemed to suggest very little need for continuing to emphasise gender in rural research or to consider gender aspects in rural development policy in the study area. However, the broader analysis demonstrated that rural women exhibit particular needs that should not be neglected. The above are some issues that could be explored in further research to develop new ideas in rural and transport related policy and practice.

Policies aimed at improving rural women's quality of life as well as gender equality should also bear in mind that their women's mobility related opportunities, behaviour and needs diverge according to lifestyles and life cycles. If these differences and constraints of different socio-demographic groups are overlooked, respective programmes will not target those women who are in need of support.

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