

Are women stuck in the countryside? – A case study from Scotland

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Abstract – Women are often considered mobility deprived, this having an impact on their quality of life. Based on empirical research in rural Scotland this paper explores rural women’s mobility opportunities, their travel behaviour and the access they have to important activities. The study reveals remarkable progress in women’s access to transport resources. Even so, women’s journey decisions and their travel patterns evidently derive from traditional gender roles, especially from the remaining allocation of domestic and caring responsibilities to women. The resulting lack of time is a major obstacle for many women to participate in activities.

INTRODUCTION

Mobility opportunities and access to services and facilities vary between social groups. According to previous research, women are more likely than men to experience limited mobility which includes access to private transport as well as difficulties in using public transport (e.g. Cass et al., 2005; DfT, 2005; 2007; Knowles et al., 2008; Stradling et al., 2005).

Being mobile is essential for partaking in social and economic life. A lack of adequate transport can be a main trigger for social exclusion. Particularly in rural areas, transport is crucial to access work, education, health care, retail shops, and recreational facilities. If public transport availability is poor, private means of transport are virtually the only way to reach facilities of everyday importance (e.g. Gray et al., 2006; Halden et al., 2002; Pacione, 2004; SEU, 2003; Shucksmith and Chapman, 1998).

Thus, rural women can be considered to be exceedingly disadvantaged regarding the access to 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.

It has been argued that daily travel patterns reflect the degree of gender equality. Women’s travel patterns 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 (Fig. 1). 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 respon-

sibilities and activity patterns. Analyses of gender differences in work-trip length for instance indicate that the impact of gender is higher than family composition, the affiliation to a professional category or other socio-economic factors (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2006; National Statistics, 2006; Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Madden, 1981; Næss, 2008; Uteng and Cresswell, 2008).

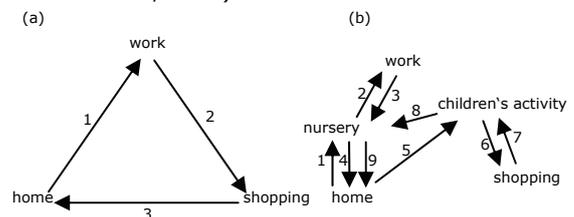


Figure 1. Men’s (a) and women’s (b) travel patterns (after Kramer, 2005, own modifications)

METHODS AND STUDY AREA

Using in-depth interviews, women’s experiences with transport mobility were explored. By theoretical sampling, 21 participants were selected purposively aiming to maximize variations within the sample, so that the results can be generalized to a certain extent (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Flick et al., 2005).

Aberdeenshire, the study area, has experienced a rapid employment-driven population growth in the last decades. Through commuting the rural economy is closely linked to Aberdeen. High car ownership rates can be assumed to be connected to low supply with local quality services and insufficient public transport (OECD, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2007).

RESULTS

The women spoken to are generally satisfied with their own transport mobility. Most have full access to a private car (17 of the 21 women). In ten of the 12 one-car households, the woman has the car during the day; the partner uses other means of transport.

Transport is found to be central for women to deal with the multiple roles they play. This is linked to time pressure and a need for time-wise flexibility. Therefore, nearly all women rely on the car and many feel it is their right to have it at their disposal.

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 trans-

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port opportunities but to lack of time as a result of their multiple responsibilities: nearly all retain primary responsibility for domestic labour and child-care, even when working full-time.

Even so, most do not express the longing to participate in more activities themselves; many mothers would wish for more leisure activities for children who are mostly completely reliant on their parents, principally their mothers, to shuttle them.

Aware of high car dependency, most women chose to live rural, trading off ease of access for the advantages of rural life. Even if public transport is available, women would stick to car driving because of its unsurpassed level of flexibility and comfort.

DISCUSSION

This work has shown that women's transport mobility in rural Aberdeenshire is quite good. For the overwhelming majority, reaching activities is not a matter of transport opportunities. It seems that women are not marginalised from rural life if they do not face other problems, as for instance poverty.

Women's 'control' over the car contrasts strikingly with Scottish transport statistics and previous research (e.g. 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, distribution of roles and tasks remain traditional and the ensuing lack of time is a major concern of many women. 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 (e.g. 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.

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 just makes it easier to reach shopping facilities and results in more chauffeuring of children.

Women's, especially mothers', tight schedules could be relieved by improving the offer of and access to activities for children and teenagers. The internet, widely spread among rural women, could contribute to improve women's access to certain services and supply with goods. In the context of demographic change, current and prospected needs of elderly women are of particular importance. This involves the improvement of alternative transport schemes, especially to health care facilities and in areas without regular bus services.

The analysis demonstrates that rural women exhibit particular needs. There is need for continuing to consider gender aspects in research and rural development. Transport related policies aimed at improving rural women's quality of life and gender equality should bear in mind that their mobility opportunities, behaviour and needs diverge according to lifestyles and life cycles. If these differences are

overlooked, respective programmes will not target those women who are in need of support.

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