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Gender and Mobilities: Current Empirical, Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Concept Paper and Program for the 2012 Symposium/Ph.D.-course

Introduction: Gender and spatial mobilities

The introduction of the new mobilities paradigm into academic discourse and the related mobilities turn in the social sciences (Sheller & Urry 2006) has facilitated the broad and multidimensional research on human mobility. This research includes both human and non-human actors and extends beyond the separate discussions of the specific forms of mobility while attempting to understand them in their variety including domestic and international migration, temporary mobility, transnationalism, migrant labour or commuting (see Bell & Ward 2000; Papastergiadis 2000; Cohen 2010; Green 2004).

It is within this broader context of the new mobilities paradigm that we situate this international symposium/PhD-course that focuses on challenges entailed in the analyses of the relation between gender and mobility. The empirical point of departure is different forms of spatial mobility in the areas bordering the Atlantic Ocean and parts of the High North. The North Atlantic region is characterized by social and economic interconnectedness with high levels of mobility of its citizens both within and between the nations. Mobility takes specific forms in the Nordic “welfare states” with the Icelandic and Norwegian labour markets, for example, receiving foreign workers and Faroe Islands sending women for work to neighbouring countries (Skaptadottir & Wojtynska 2008; Aure 2008; Munkejord 2009; Poulsen 2009). Sweden, and its small rural communities, has experienced considerable immigration from other countries (Stenbacka 2001) while young Swedish women and men migrate for periods of time to Norway and other countries (Bore 2005).

A distinctive geographical concept, mobility embraces different mobility practices developed by individuals and groups. Although connected to individual actors, mobility practices influence and are influenced by the wider social systems in which women and men participate and their identities are inscribed (e.g., their immediate families and wider kin networks, friends, neighbourhoods and communities). Central to this thinking is the concept of the gendered contours of space and place as described by Massey (1994). The intention of the symposium/PhD- course is to develop a deeper theoretical, methodological, and empirical understanding of the connections between gender and mobility within and across countries, a conversation which has yet to emerge fully in the new mobilities literature and certainly in need to be initiated with respect to the North Atlantic geographical area.

The phenomenon of rising mobilities, whether as a temporary movement, permanent migration, or staying in a place for shorter or longer periods of time, brings to the forefront the specificity of place as well as the meaning of location and locality. Thus, scholars see gendered mobilities as part and parcel of the social fabric of place and space. Inspired by Yvonne Hirdman’s work, Forsberg (2001: 161), for example, has elaborated the concept of local or regional gender contracts with respect to rural areas in Scandinavia. Forsberg defines gender contracts as unwritten rules that regulate relations between the sexes, and re-create and reform relations as everyday action. Gender contracts exist within frameworks of local social structures that are dependent upon local actors and geographies. Gender contracts can vary depending upon geographical scale, including, for example, local and regional contracts. This and other perspectives will be critically engaged during the symposium.

Towards New Contours of Understanding Gender and Spatial Mobility

Gendered differences in spatial mobility have been arguably noted by Ravenstein in the late 19th century Britain, where he found that women were more mobile than men, at least across short distances (Donato et al. 2006). Despite this early evidence, gendered approaches to mobility and migration, at least in the Norwegian context, did not emerge until the 1970s when researchers began problematizing the fact that women left rural areas more often than men (Gerrard 1975) and examined the so-called feminization of migration during the 1980s (Morokvasic 1984; Castles & Miller 1993; Donato et al. 2006). Today, women comprise over 50 percent of international migrants. The degree of migration and its gendered composition vary depending upon the country of origin and destination (see ILO 2010). The mobility patterns of men and women manifest important differences whether in migration or temporary mobility (e.g., commuting). Overall, rural mobility remains gendered with women leaving rural areas at higher rates than men (Corbett 2007a, 2007b; Dahlstrom 1996; Ni Laoire 2000; Stockdale 2004; Walsh 2009; Sørli 1993; Gerrard 1995) while, in contrast, women are known to commute to work over shorter distances than their male counterparts (Ederveen, Nahuis & Parikh 2007; Hanson 2010; Hanson & Pratt 1988, 1992, 1995; Sandow & Westin 2010; Turcotte 2005; Turner & Niemeier 1997; Aure 1996; Hjorthol 2008). In some areas these tendencies seem to be changing (Gerrard 2011). Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska (2008:118) show that Iceland receives both male and female work migrants from many parts of the world. The reasons for and outcomes associated with these patterns are, however, worthy of further investigation that requires analyzing men and women as gendered actors.

Cresswell and Priya Uteng (2008) argue that a holistic understanding of how mobilities enable, disable, and modify gendered practices is an important dimension of the mobilities paradigm in the social sciences. Olwig and Sørensen (2002) and Cresswell (2006) argue that mobility can be the basis for ways of living in a globalised world and in the Western world. Gender, as Mahler & Pessar (2006) have argued, matters in our consideration of mobility because how people move over time and distance is, at its core, indicative of spatial gender relations, particularly gendered power hierarchies (Cresswell & Priya Uteng 2008). Mobility and gender intertwine in the very core of the everyday gendered practices, oftentimes reproducing traditional gendered relations but also creating spaces for the new ones.

Gendering of mobility occurs in different ways and at a number of scales. Globally, women are often concentrated in precarious low-wage and low skill occupations that lack benefits, security, and protection (Aure 2008; Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska 2008; Vosko 2006; Vosko, Campbell & MacDonald 2009). They also continue to earn less than men, even though the number of female breadwinners is on the rise in some countries (Doucet, n.d.). The research on commuting points out that the interplay between class, gender, and geography leads to higher concentration of women in occupations that involve less travel and often lower wages. In welfare and “rich” societies mobility is also increasing with respect to holidays, visiting friends and relatives, and traveling for health reasons. Importantly, gendered mobilities have been a complex outcome of the intersectionality of many processes across time and space. In addition to gender relations, they include the effects on mobility of class, race, ethnicity, age and identity construction (McCall 2005; McDowell 2008).

The mobility literature has increasingly emphasized the role of the overarching socio-economic structures and global processes in the neoliberalizing world (Massey 2010). The effects of these relations and ideologies on production of gendered mobilities needs to be further problematized. Thus, it is important to develop comparative analyses of mobility

practices under neoliberalism in different national economic, sociocultural, and political contexts.

This PhD- course will highlight various aspects of women and men's entry into various mobility practices as well as their mobility capabilities, but also some of the challenges of today's mobilities. Here gender perspectives and practices including household and other responsibilities (Turner & Niemeier 1997) will be emphasized. At the same time, it will try to put emphasis on the relevant overarching economical context including the neo-liberal ideologies and policies (Massey 2010). International employment-related mobility, too, results from the intersection of gender with ethnicity, age and other processes of differentiation and similarity that work to produce identity (Aure in press). The course will adopt a 'doing gender' perspective (Fenstermaker & West 2002) in combination with the discursive and cultural analytical approaches (see for example Olwig and Sørensen 2002).

The interrelations between gender and mobilities vary geographically and seem to become increasingly complex as mobility unsettles old modes of gender practices and organization. The PhD-course will familiarize the students with a range of relevant approaches and perspectives for understanding the intersections of gender and mobility.

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