Women, Men and Mobility Practices in Northern Fishing Communities

Siri Gerrard

Aim, Localities, and Organization of the Project

The aim of this project is to gain more knowledge about women’s and men’s mobility practices and how they organize their everyday life within coastal, fishery-related and relatively scarcely populated contexts. The locus of the research is three municipalities in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway: Loppa, Måsøy and Nordkapp. By means of a research project carried out in these municipalities I hope to be able to come closer to an answer to the following question: How can we understand women’s and men’s work-related geographical mobilities in northern fishery communities applying gender and lifestyle perspectives?

The research project is based at the Centre for Women’s and Gender Studies, UiT the Arctic University of Tromsø (UiT) and is a part of the project Mobile lifestyles – Perspectives on Work Mobilities and Gender in the High North, funded by the Norwegian Research Council and UiT.

The Background

Fisheries related coastal communities in the north of Norway represent an interesting starting point when studying forms and practices of mobilities. One of the reasons is the long tradition of performing mobilities in such communities. Many fishers have obtained necessary experience and knowledge going to and coming from the fishing fields, moving between fishing fields etc., sometimes combined with commuting. For generations young women and some men have migrated to other places while others move in. The migration of whole families and households seems to have accelerated the last 25 years. Some of the various forms of mobilities take place daily, weekly, monthly or seasonally. Some represent circular migration. All of the forms can be performed by young, middle-aged and elderly women and men, coming from other places in Norway, Norway’s neighbouring countries or from further away.

Developing Knowledge about Mobility Practices

On this background I will use the concept mobility practices as a term covering the various actions that can be related to employment-related mobilities. The concept of practices connects
the actors to their actions in specific cultural, material and social contexts as parts of larger structures. I therefore define the concept of mobility practices as *routinized practices whereby people relocate from one site or place to another within the social, structural, cultural and material environment they are surrounded by* (Gerrard 2013). By looking closely at how women and men of various ages practice mobilities I hope to obtain a better understanding of the processes and factors that “mobile” women and men, individually or in units like households, schools, fish plants or other workplaces develop. Or stated differently: Is there a relationship between mobility practices and the structure and culture of the communities. If so, do such relationships have impact on the local norms of femininity and masculinity?

Since I am interested in employment-related work, I study the different “mobile” professions that can be found in coastal communities of Finnmark, for example within the health sector, aquaculture, fishery and transport etc. These sectors represent institutions with varying and different hours of work and organization of work. It is therefore interesting to look further into the consequences of different systems for organizing work. What is the impact of various rotation arrangements, for example “Two weeks on and three or four weeks off”, in contrast to the more irregular work arrangements that we find in coastal fishing? How do the workers themselves conceive such arrangements? How do others who work regular hours or live together with women and men with such an arrangement conceive such arrangements? Do women and men have the same practices and opinions about how such rotation work functions? Are there differences between the different positions? Do such working arrangements lead to different mobile lifestyles? By means of these and other questions, I hope to get further into what mobile lifestyles can be.

**THE ANALYTICAL STARTING POINT**

Women’s and men’s mobility practices can be linked to many perspectives, for example to gender, actor and/or structural perspectives (Rudie 2008; Ortner 2005). Gender perspectives are particularly important in studying the questions raised above.

Gender perspectives highlight gendered relationships, for example power relations between women and men in various contexts (Berg et al 2010; Borchorst & Christensen 2006). Forsberg (2001:161) has developed the concept of gender contracts focusing on *unwritten rules that regulate relations between sexes, and re-create and reform relations as everyday actions within the framework of these local structures. Together these various local contracts construct a regional structure.* Mobility practices can also be studied by means of more cultural and interpersonal perspectives. In Norway “the negotiating gender-perspectives” have been developed by Ingrid Rudie (1984) and Hanne Haavind (1997). Such perspectives focus on the actors and their interaction in specific contexts and how they come to an agreement about the
meanings and practices of gender. Others, like Lykke (2008) and Berg et al (2010), have demonstrated the importance of intersectionality by focusing on how gender, age, class, ethnicity etc. may interact. To look at the interrelations between such aspects or categories is important in the Finnmark context, and it is not a new perspective (Gerrard 1986). This is related to the multiethnic population, the resource-related industries and a strong division of work between women and men.

Fishing and coastal communities with their households, schools (if they still operate), business enterprises etc. relate to larger local, regional, national or international structures, which in turn can also be studies as frameworks for local actors, as well as actors in a network (ANT) (Latour 1987, Haraway 1991). Whether one chooses to apply a structural or an ANT approach, the material and technical items and natural resources, households, political and bureaucratic institutions, national and international laws and regulations, markets with various economical systems represent sectors or fields that are many and complex – in other words a serious challenge for the researchers. In order to go further into this, I have to study the local relations and their outreach and perhaps make a choice between some of them to elaborate further.

**Research Locations and Methods**

Loppa (1030 inhabitants), Måsøy (1400 inhabitants) and Nordkapp (about 3200 inhabitants) are small, but interesting in different ways. Except for the fact that they have long traditions of fishing and fish production, and have a large number of their employees in the public sector, all three municipalities have been facing loss in the number of inhabitants to bigger centers in Finnmark and/or to other parts of Norway, either by migration or commuting. There are still immigrants to the fishing industry, although not so many as before, and to the health sector and tourist industry. In most of the sectors there are examples of firms that practice a rotation system or circular migration. Nordkapp stands out as a large tourist place where tourists and workers come and go.

To explore mobile practices and get a better understanding of the character of mobile lifestyles interviews with women and men who relate to different forms of mobilities will be carried out. In addition newspapers, reports and documents from the municipalities will be studied. I will also consider use of registry data. Such data will give a better overview of the patterns of mobility while the qualitative data can give insights in the patterns behind the mobilities. Hopefully, at the end, I might also be able to make comparisons between mobility practices in these three municipalities in order to search for commonalities and differences.

Literature


