

Transformational Mobility as Capability

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I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.

—Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*, 1847)

In the great epic Ramayana of the Indian subcontinent, the story of ‘abduction of Sita’ began when she accidentally crossed the *Lakshman rekha*,¹ which had been drawn to keep her safe inside the dwelling in the forest. The boundary line that limited the movement of Sita is entrenched in the sociocultural ethos of India so deeply that there have been several feminist interpretations of the mythological boundary line. The portrayal of constrained mobility in the epic through an imaginary boundary line drawn by patriarchal norms still remains pertinent to be discussed in twenty-first-century India in the context of the modern manifestations of constrained gender mobilities.

Mobility or the ‘freedom to move’ has been a theme of intellectual discourse of human geographers, sociologists, and demographers who have examined the concept from different theoretical perspectives. The questions pertained to how mobility determined the employment structures, fertility patterns, career opportunities, and social mobilities of women depending on their subject disciplines. The ability to move freely around social spaces, without any visible or invisible constraints on the basis of caste, gender, and social classes, is a positive freedom² which is the foundation of inclusive societies. Mobility is ‘positively coded as progress, freedom or modernity itself and it simultaneously brings the issues of restricted movement, vigilance and control’ (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008: 1).

Mobility plays a key role in the social equilibrium. ‘Mobility’³ defined as ‘the ability and freedom to move’ is a necessary aspect of human life. The constraints on movement by individuals, society, or the state curb the ‘positive freedoms’.⁴

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The instrumental freedoms improve the capabilities of persons and enable them to live more freely. These freedoms are in turn the function of the social arrangements.

I present in this book the mobility aspect, especially of women, which has not received much attention in the development studies discourse so far. The analysis of mobility of women in a given sociocultural context can illuminate the various dimensions of mobility and the underlying gender norms that determine specific behaviour patterns among women in work, social, and public spaces. As women, work, and well-being are closely related and equally debated issues in the contemporary development discourse, economists and sociologists have argued that paid work outside the household improves women's earning capacity and thereby their sense of self-worth and decision-making capacity. However, at several instances, mobility, defined as the freedom and the ability to move, is curbed, especially for women, due to societal norms and practices as in the case of cultures that practise the seclusion of women or *purdah*⁵ (Kabeer, 1999). Moreover, the improvement in autonomy and well-being is not always a necessary outcome for women who have the freedom to be mobile and engage in paid work outside the household, especially for those in informal modes of work.

It is stated that 'the expansion of employment that ensures adequate livelihood security and decent conditions of work ought to be the bottom line in the pursuit of economic development in a country like India dominated by what is called the informal⁶ economy' (NCEUS, 2007), and there is a large number of sectors in India which employ workers, especially women, at exploitative terms and conditions which perpetuate inequalities in pay and work. The 'feminization' and 'informalization' under the neoliberal framework⁷ have largely contributed to the growth of a large segment of women workers who are trapped in the lowest paid informal modes of work.

It is in this context that I have researched on women workers engaged in informal work in a unique setting, which is the socially advanced state of Kerala.⁸ The informal women workers are 'mobile' in terms of independently pursuing their work in fisheries. I have analysed mobility by focusing my research on two groups of informal women workers in fisheries in Kerala. One group of informal women workers are engaged in the seafood-processing industry as peeling workers at the bottom of the global production chain and another group of women are self-employed as fish vendors. In the context of informal women workers in fisheries in Kerala, I examine whether 'work mobility' or paid work outside the household necessarily guarantee 'transformational mobility'. Transformational mobility (TM) is a new concept that I have introduced in this book to analyse mobility–autonomy linkages. I re-conceptualize mobility using the theoretical lens of the capability approach (CA) since there is a need for a new approach to understand gendered mobility. The inter-disciplinary perspectives on mobility as a concept and how mobility

can be viewed as a ‘capability’ for women engaged in informal work are the core themes being dealt with in this book.

Re-conceptualizing mobility: a capability approach (CA) perspective

The capability approach emerged as an alternative approach⁹ to analyse human development and well-being. It focuses on the evaluation of ‘functionings’ or ‘valuable doings and beings’ and the ‘capabilities’ to analyse well-being. ‘Equality of resources falls short because it fails to take account of the fact that individuals need differing levels of resources if they are to come up to the same level of capability to function. They also have differing abilities to convert resources into actual functioning’ (Nussbaum, 2003: 35).

Capabilities refer to the set of alternative beings and doings that a person can achieve with his or her economic, social, and personal characteristics (Dreze and Sen, 1989). It refers to the ability of individuals to realize their potential as human beings. The capability approach recognizes the importance of gender as a crucial parameter in social and economic analysis and is complementary to, rather than competitive with, the variables of class, ownership, occupations, incomes, and family status (Sen, 1990: 123). As Sen noted, development analysis cannot really be divorced from gender categories and sex-specific observations (Sen, 1990: 124). I have used CA as the framework to analyse gendered mobility.

The capability approach is a normative framework for evaluation of individual well-being, a tool for social cost–benefit analysis, and to design and evaluate development policies in affluent and developing economies (Robeyns, 2003: 5). A person’s functionings and capabilities are closely related.

Functionings represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve and from which he or she can choose one collection. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various ‘doings and beings’, with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings. (Sen, 1993: 31)

The capability approach thus finely establishes the link between the resources that can lead to better outcomes in terms of well-being for individuals. The resources can be as varied as having health, education, and mobility as shown in Table 1.1.

Functionings, capability, and agency are the core concepts of Sen’s CA. In my work, the focus is on functioning and capability by examining gendered mobility associated with informal work and TM of women as capability which can enhance real freedoms and opportunities of women workers.

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Table 1.1 Mobility as Functioning: A Capability Approach

Resource	Functioning	Capability	Utility
Bicycle*	Mobility	To cycle	Happiness derived by visiting friends
Informal work ** (in this study)	Mobility (movement outside the household for work)	To be mobile anywhere without constraints, that is, transformational mobility	Self-esteem and enhanced freedoms; well-being freedom leads to autonomy in other dimensions

Source: *Example given in Alkire (2005) and **author's interpretation of mobility using capability approach.

'Capabilities, in contrast, to functionings, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead' (Sen, 1987: 36). Mobility associated with work for women can be viewed as functioning, while TM is capability which will open up various opportunities that can improve their agency as women and workers, which in turn improves well-being.

In the light of informal women workers in the micro-level fisheries sector, whether paid work and the mobility associated with informal work can be transformational and improve the autonomy of women in the socially progressive state of Kerala in India is the key question that this work seeks to answer. Even though mobility is perceived as directly contributing to autonomy, there is evidence that there are different types of mobility (with constraints and without constraints) as experienced by women in different domains.¹⁰ Transformational mobility (TM) is a new concept which I introduce and is defined as follows:

TM is the freedom and ability to move outside the household without constraints from others. It is autonomy in mobility which implies freedom of movement in the real sense.

It is a state of non-domination. Transformational mobility improves the sense of self-esteem and self-worth and can thereby contribute to household autonomy of women. As conceptualized, TM is a capability which is a state of non-domination (see Figure 1.1). The work mobility which is movement outside the household for work is deemed to result in household autonomy in general. My argument is that it is only TM that can lead to autonomy of women workers.

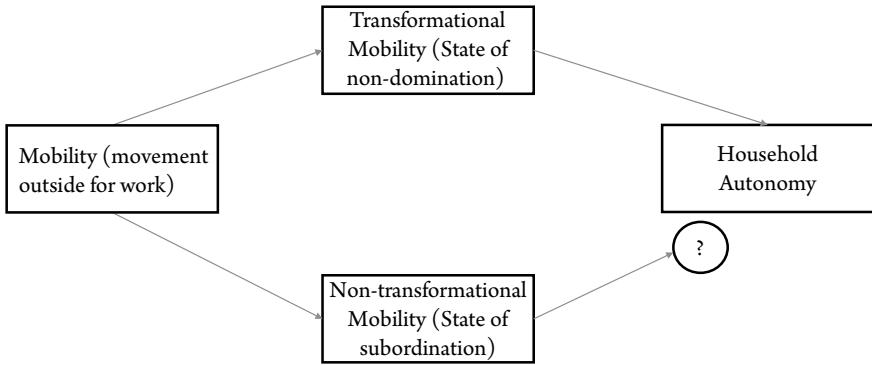


Figure 1.1 Transformational Mobility as Capability

Source: Based on author's conceptual map on mobility.

By introducing the concept of TM, I re-conceptualize mobility, and its domain of TM is construed as 'capability' by adopting the CA framework of Amartya Sen (1985, 1993, 1999). Under this framework, mobility becomes an enabling capability¹¹ through exposure to the outside world and improves the sense of self-worth and hence becomes 'transformational'.

Sen opines that the ability to move outside the house for paid work improves women's agency and thereby well-being (Sen, 1999). It is a positive freedom in the sense of exposure to the outside world, which improves the agency of women. 'Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations. They are not just abilities residing inside the person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment' (Nussbaum, 2011: 20). The 'mobility aspect' which is implicit in this proposition has not been researched upon in development and feminist studies.

The intra-household gender relations are to a great extent mirrored in the patriarchal production and social relations. These unequal relations get reflected in differential mobilities for women at multiple dimensions at the household, work, and society. The preference to work outside home may not reflect the realities and it may be due to the necessity of supplementing the income of the household that women come out to work. Considering the realities of the vulnerable in the Global South, it is unlikely that the preferences will provide a guide to each individual's subjective perception of good. Such dependence on preferences can be highly misleading as well. Sen's approach by taking capabilities rather than preference satisfaction and in the process eliminating vulnerabilities leads to a view in which both empowerment and liberty can be given due importance (O'Neill, 1992).

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Gender¹² is a fundamental tool with which to analyse the impact of ideologies in the structuring of the social and intellectual world, far beyond the events and bodies of women and men and is a central constituting element of the self, of a person's sense of being, as well as a classificatory principle for ordering the universe (Sardenberg, 2007: 52). Sardenberg (2007) further notes that a gender perspective makes it possible to reconcile singularity and commonality; gender makes sense of the substantiality of women and men cross-culturally and throughout the history.

The capability approach recognizes the importance of gender as a crucial parameter in social and economic analysis and it is complementary to, rather than competitive with, the variables of class, ownership, occupations, incomes, and family status (Sen, 1990: 123). Development analysis cannot really be divorced from gender categories and sex-specific observations (Sen, 1990: 124). Thus, CA enables an assessment of the impact of the nature of informal work and the mobility associated with work on the sense of self-worth and decision-making power of women. As CA is concerned with showing the cogency of a particular *space* for the evaluation of individual opportunities and successes, it will provide the framework to analyse mobility as capability and instrumental freedom which can enhance the decision-making power or autonomy of women.

Mobility, autonomy, and agency: examining the triadic relations

Mobility as positive freedom is intrinsically related to autonomy of individuals. Autonomy has intrinsic value to human life. The central idea that underlies the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law) as it was applied to the Greek city states (Dworkin, 1988: 12). Scholars have defined autonomy in multiple forms, namely personal autonomy, political autonomy, and moral autonomy. The moral autonomy of individuals conceived by Kant for the first time reflected the capacity for self-determination of individuals, wherein an individual has authority over one's own actions so that no external forces can influence the decisions or actions of individuals.

Autonomy is intrinsically valuable as it expands human potentials and people's opportunities to participate in social life and more autonomous people are in better position to expand the potentials (Castillo, 2009: 11). Therefore, autonomy reflects human well-being and is important as a means to promote human development. Dworkin conceives 'autonomy as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences,

desires, wishes and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives and take responsibility for the kind of person they are' (Dworkin, 1988: 20). The various definitions of autonomy show that autonomy is valuable for human life for guiding one's actions, for the well-being of individuals in society and for overcoming the barriers or constraints imposed on individuals by external factors.

Work is a social context where autonomy of persons can develop or can get destroyed. Work also has an impact on self-esteem and social status. For instance, Rawls (1996) contends that 'meaningful work has an important role in improving self-respect' and maintains that 'the lack of ... opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is destructive ... of citizen's self-respect'.¹³

Further, in his *Theory of Justice*, Rawls contends that opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect and that 'monotonous and routine occupations are deadening to human thought and sensibility' (Rawls, 1971: 529). Therefore, the lack of self-respect owing to the distorting influence of work on autonomy is an important standpoint which can substantially contribute to the understanding of women's autonomy.

A similar view point is echoed by Roessler:

Work is special, in the sense that it is not only instrumental but also formative and the formative character of work means that the work we do, and its organizational form, has an influence on how we live, on who we are, and how we see ourselves – and not only because of the different forms of the organization of work, but also simply because of the work we do ... if the formative influence of work distorts one's autonomy, then she will be less able to (autonomously) develop and maintain a healthy identity. (2012: 83–4)

Analysing the social context of work and its impact on autonomy in different cultural context can elucidate the interconnectedness of work and women's autonomy.

Autonomy of women is a much debated topic, and where patriarchal social structures impose impediments to the self-determination of women, autonomy of women is anathema in many cultures. In such cultural contexts, women themselves consider autonomy as something undesired for and beyond them, given their status as individuals in the society. Hence, I adopt the feminist's interpretation of autonomy, which is relational for women and which takes cognizance of the cultural and work contexts of women is important to analyse autonomy of women.

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Feminists have argued that the atomistic approach to autonomy ignores the social relationships and equates the male stereotyped traits of independence, self-sufficiency, and detachment from relationships as autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 39) and that autonomy in practice was mostly applied to men. They have suggested that women find autonomy to be a notion inhospitable to women, one that represents a masculine-style preoccupation with self-sufficiency and self-realization at the expense of human connection (Friedman, 2000: 35, in Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Therefore, a relational account of autonomy is necessary to understand autonomy of women in reality.

The relational approaches to autonomy analyse the specific ways in which oppressive socialization and oppressive social relationships can impede autonomous agency at various levels, that is, how the social norms and institutions, cultural practices, and social relationships play in shaping beliefs, desires, and attitudes of agents in oppressive social contexts and how the oppressive environments impair the development of competencies and capacities necessary for autonomy including capacities for self-reflection, self-direction, and self-knowledge (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 22). ‘Relational autonomy’ is the label that has been given to an alternative conception of what it means to be a free, self-governing agent who is also socially constituted and who possibly defines her basic value commitments in terms of inter-personal relations and mutual dependencies (Christman, 2004: 143). So, essentially, the relational approach will take a non-individualized view of autonomy and also focus on the social dynamics and social structures that influence the functioning of autonomous individuals.

It is the relational autonomy which is practical and applicable to women since women are socially embedded and are not atomistic individuals who pursue individual interests to attain self-determination. The role of women as daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother through her life stages to a great extent influences the decisions and actions taken by her, which reflect relational autonomy. The relational nature of women’s autonomy is evident in various pieces of scholarly work in the areas of demography, development studies, and sociology, which tried to unravel the dynamics of women’s autonomy.

The autonomy or decision-making power is closely related to the freedom of movement or mobility. The National Family Health Survey II (NFHS II) 1998–99 in India highlighted the role of cultural and economic factors in India that influence female autonomy. The mobility indicators used in the NFHS 1998–99 and the NFHS III (2015–16) reflect that though the percentage of women with access to money is above 50 per cent, because of the sociocultural context in India the mobility of women are constrained. More than 50 per cent of women require permission to go to market and

to visit friends and relatives. Therefore, having access to resources may not entirely reflect the autonomy level of women in a given context. There has not been much change over time since the NFHS III data shows that only 35 per cent of Scheduled Caste women are allowed to go alone to market, health facility, and places outside the village.¹⁴ There have not been studies which attempted to examine the constraints on mobility of women as a separate construct and examine the linkages between mobility and autonomy as capabilities for women.

Scholars in multiple disciplines have not examined whether mobility in work as a capability can transform and lead to higher levels of autonomy and the causal mechanisms which lead to better decision-making among women in informal work. The academic discourse on mobility across disciplines dealt with multiple meanings of mobility in terms of social, career, and physical mobility. Writing about gender differences in mobility can advance the dialogue between materialist political economy and critical social theory (Sylvey, 2004). Hence, I have attempted to link gendered mobility and autonomy to fathom the dynamics of their relationships.

Along with mobility, autonomy and agency are also closely related, which make them dependent on the sociocultural contexts. At a practical level, autonomy as a capability (feasible to be exercised) can be analysed in terms of three determinants: entitlements, agency, and multilevel structural contexts, which are to be studied individually and in interaction (Castillo, 2009). Entitlements are 'the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces' (Sen, 1984: 497). Access to physical, material, and other intangible resources determine the extent to which people can exercise their autonomy. However, the personal characteristics and circumstances define conditions of negotiation and constraints which are defined as 'entitlement relations' (Sen, 1982). Hence, the cultural and social contexts become key influential factors which enable a person to exercise or not to exercise autonomy.

The autonomy aspect is closely related to agency.¹⁵ Agency is defined as a person's ability to pursue and realize goals she has reasons to value, and it is one of the central concepts of CA of Sen (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009). An agent is 'someone who acts and brings about change' (Sen, 1999: 19). Sen defines it as 'agency achievement' and human agency is critical in promoting human development and well-being. Agency is a multidimensional concept and its conception goes beyond individual agency to collective agency as members of organizations, groups, and collectivities. To expand the capabilities set and to enhance the opportunities in a given setting, human agency has a critical role. Human agency can expand the well-being freedoms and can bring about changes that one has reasons to value. Moreover, human agency and freedoms

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are important ingredients for meaningful work.¹⁶ As work is an integral means for human flourishing, I examine mobility, autonomy, agency, and the triadic interrelations in the context of informal work and women.

Wellbeing freedom of a person will represent the freedom to enjoy the various possible well-beings associated with the different functioning n-tuples in the capability set. Acting freely and being able to choose may be directly conducive to wellbeing, not just because more freedom may make better alternatives available. Freedom has intrinsic importance for the person's well-being achievement. (Sen, 1993: 39)

The lack of institutional support from the state and workers' unions makes it all the more difficult for women informal workers to voice their issues. The gender relations together with the production systems which take advantage of the lower status of women trap the women workers in low-level 'capability traps'.

I have chosen the informal work setting to reflect on the burgeoning informal economy in developing countries, and some of them are linked to global production chains, which have become ideal locations where the triangular interactions of 'market, patriarchy, and capitalist production' reinforce each other and perpetrates exploitative wages and working conditions.

Deconstructing 'gendered mobility': inter-disciplinary perspectives

There has been much work on 'gendered mobility' in the context of migration across geographies, automobility,¹⁷ and work outside the households. However, scholars in mobility research in the discipline of geography have only examined the close links between spatial mobility and social mobility in the sense that geographical patterns of movement across countries or places affect the space of options and actions of individuals (Uteng, 2006: 436). Further, there have been explorations into the linkages between gender and transport patterns, work-trips, friction of distance, travel-activity patterns, and residential locations (Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Law, 1999). Earlier studies in demographics noted that the status of women which will get reflected in their ability to take decisions inside and outside the household in turn depends on differential access of men and women to resources which define the many possible male-female power differences (Mason, 1986). 'Men and women are typically unequal in a number of important respects, and the nature or extent of their inequality usually varies across these dimensions and according to