

Mobility as Capability

Mobility as Capability highlights accounts of women workers to capture the domains of gendered mobility, and challenges the exalted status conferred on women in the Kerala model of development. It contests and deconstructs the development discourse which considers women's work mobility as an indicator of autonomy and agency using the capability approach. The concept of 'transformational mobility' and its measurement introduced in the book advance the understanding of mobility, autonomy, and agency, and their intersectionality in the context of gender and work. Through an in-depth exploration of lived experiences of informal women workers, the author illustrates how patriarchal structures are shaped and reinforced by workplaces, markets, and the state. The central question is: can we steer development policies to facilitate collective capabilities for women where informal work arrangements are becoming the norm?

Nikhila Menon is an independent economist based in Japan.

Mobility as Capability

Women in the Indian Informal Economy

Nikhila Menon



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*To my late grandmother,
To my parents, parents-in-law, and my sister,
To all my teachers,
To Nandu, Prithu and Poorna – my pillars of support.*

Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1. Transformational Mobility as Capability	1
2. Reflections on Transformational Mobility, Autonomy, and Women's Work	16
3. Women in 'Kerala Model': Myths and Realities	35
4. Situating Informal Work by Women in Fisheries in Kerala	47
5. 'Measuring Mobility' of Women: Unravelling the 'Explicit' and the 'Implicit'	66
6. Pathways to Transformational Mobility of Women Workers: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis	93
7. 'Subordinating Self': 'Manoeuvring Patriarchy' among Women Workers	118
8. Self-Categorization, Group Identity, and Agency among Women Fish Vendors	136
9. Transformational Mobility: From Individual to Collective Agency of Informal Women Workers	153
<i>Bibliography</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	193

Tables

1.1	Mobility as Functioning: A Capability Approach	4
2.1	Household Models and Autonomy of Women	24
3.1	Human Development Index (HDI) and Its Components	35
4.1	Gender-wise Participation of Fisherfolk in Marine Fisheries, Kerala (2005)	48
4.2	Informal Sector: The Old and the New Views	50
4.3	Fishing Villages in Kerala	54
4.4	Profile of Informal Workers in the Sample	60
4.5	Profile of Peeling Work	62
5.1	Level of Permissibility of Mobility and the Domains of Mobility	68
5.2	Item Measure and Fit Statistics for the 'Scale of Permissibility of Mobility' of Peeling Workers	72
5.3	Category Fit Statistics for the 'Scale of Permissibility of Mobility' of Peeling Workers	73
5.4	Item Measure and Fit Statistics for the 'Scale of Permissibility of Mobility' of Fish Vendors	76
5.5	Category Fit Statistics for the 'Scale of Permissibility of Mobility' of Fish Vendors	77
5.6	Likert Rating Scale to Measure Mobility	88
6.1	Data Matrix for Model Outcome TM among Peeling Workers	94
6.2	Truth Table for the Outcome 'TM': 'Presence of High Mobility and TM' for Peeling Workers	96
6.3	Parsimonious Solution for Presence of Outcome for Peeling Workers	98

x Tables

6.4	Truth Table for the Outcome ‘~TM’: ‘TM Negated’ for Peeling Workers	102
6.5	Parsimonious Solution for csQCA Model Outcome ‘TM Negated’ for Peeling Workers	103
6.6	Data Matrix for Fish Vendors	105
6.7	Truth Table for the Presence of Outcome ‘High Mobility and TM’ for Fish Vendors	106
6.8	Parsimonious Solution for the Presence of Outcome for Fish Vendors	108
6.9	Parsimonious Solution for the Outcome (~TM) ‘TM Negated’ for Fish Vendors	111
7.1	Emergent Themes for Peeling Workers	124
8.1	Substantive Codes and the Emergent Themes from the Interview Data of Fish Vendors	139

Figures

1.1	Transformational Mobility as Capability	5
4.1	Stages in Seafood Processing Production Chain	56
4.2	Sample Design for the Survey	57
5.1	Hierarchical Categorization of Domains of Mobility	69
5.2	Person–Item Map of Peeling Workers	74
5.3	Person–Item Map of Fish Vendors	78
5.4	Mobility Ladder: Pathways to Transformational Mobility	80
5.5	Mobility and Autonomy of Informal Women Workers	81
5.6	Fish Vendors and Peeling Workers with TM and Their Autonomy Ladder Responses	82
5.7	Household Autonomy among Peeling Workers and Fish Vendors	84
7.1	Work and Gender Norms: Pathways to ‘Becoming Subordinated Self’	125
8.1	Group Identity: Emergence of Categories and the Core Category of Fish Vendors	141

Preface



During the past two decades, I have traversed between the worlds of policy making and academic research which has been an enriching journey. During these years as a policy maker and a researcher, I realized that, as Marcus Aurelius once said, *Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.* For the past one decade, there has been much talk about the Kerala model of development and the enviable status enjoyed by women in Kerala society. However, as a native of Kerala observing the rising crimes against women and other social issues, I always felt that the picture being portrayed is not the true story. There are numerous unheard voices of women and I wanted to explore and give voice to the lived experiences of

hard-to-reach informal workers in the fishing community whose traditional occupation in fisheries form an integral part of Kerala's coastal economy.

In the emerging and developing economies, globalization has facilitated engagement of women in productive spheres like the global production chains in informal sectors such as fisheries and have contributed substantially to economic growth. But it can be seen that the majority of women still continue to be at the lowest rung of such forms of production and remain as unskilled, low paid, and exploited workers. Why? It is of serious concern that women who constitute almost half of the population in India remain in wretched conditions, even in societies which otherwise rank high in human development like that of the southern state of Kerala. This book has challenged the exalted status conferred on women in the Kerala model of development by using informal work as the frame of reference. It urges policy makers and practitioners alike to evolve mechanisms to prevent marginalization of women in development processes, especially when traditional occupational systems break down with the advent of modernized systems of production.

In the extant literature on development studies, mobility of women in terms of moving outside the household for paid work is considered as an indicator of autonomy of women and is increasingly being propagated as means for empowerment and emancipation of women. This book also questions the feminist narrative of using 'mobility associated with paid work as autonomy enhancing' for women.

In this context, this book explores the multiple dimensions of gendered mobility by measuring mobility as a single construct and analysing whether mobility is a 'capability' for women workers which improves agency. It presents contrasting case studies of informal women in fisheries (*self-employed fish vendors versus women in seafood processing in export oriented units*) in the socially progressive state of Kerala to delve into the dimensions of mobility of women which have global relevance.

The book adopts the *capability approach*, which provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of mobility of women as capability. I have discussed the capability approach (CA) of Amartya Sen and its evaluative strength in unearthing the gender aspects of mobility. Through CA analysis, I introduce a new concept of *transformational mobility* to analyse mobility as capability of women.

For the technically minded reader, methodologically, the book offers an innovative scale method to understand and measure the domains of gendered mobility. However, the content of measuring mobility has been made reader-friendly and the technicalities are given in an appendix for the technique-oriented strong-willed readers.

The book is interdisciplinary in its approach, and is situated at the confluence of development studies, human geography, and sociological disciplines. For instance, for readers who are sociologists, I have used grounded theory to explore how women workers manoeuvre patriarchy, accept subordination, and still remain resilient in continuing struggles at home and workplace.

For the development economists and policy makers among the readers interested in mixed methods research, the book has interwoven mixed methods using qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to analyse mobility and autonomy of women workers which brings out the multiple pathways to autonomy of women reflecting the socio-cultural realities of the individuals.

The seed for this research was sown during my doctoral years at the Institute for Development Policy and Management (now known as Global Development Institute), University of Manchester. I am extremely grateful to Maria, Farhad, and the academic community of the University of Manchester, who nurtured and refined my thought processes. The valuable comments received from academics and policy makers at the Conferences of Human Development and Capability Association (2014) and the International Labour Organization (Regulating Decent Work [RDW] 2015) have immensely helped in refining this work.

I am indebted to the women peeling workers and fish vendors of Sakthikulangara village of Kollam district in Kerala, who without hesitation shared their life's struggles, perspectives on work, societal attitudes, and many other conversations which enriched me and this work. Without them, this work would not have been possible. Through this book, I am sharing with you, the readers, the resilience and lessons learnt from the personal narratives of women workers who are marginalized by the state and the market.

I am hopeful that researchers will find new perspectives on mobility, autonomy, and women's agency in the context of changing production systems reinforced by the state and the market to fit into traditional work systems, which can open up new areas for further research and can advance knowledge in gender and development studies of informal economies across the world.