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The mobility of women: a constrained freedom

By
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Mobility is one of the oldest freedoms claimed by women. Yet for a long time and still today, many women remain largely confined indoors and, here as elsewhere, they are very often under the control of men – even in societies that claim to be egalitarian. And for women, the experience of going out unaccompanied is a reminder that there is still much to be done. We might think that mobility is nothing but the reflection of a set of inequalities between men and women that are visible in other spheres and areas of society. But in fact, mobility is more of a factor that contributes to strengthening pre-existing inequalities, even though it could be a means of emancipation.

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The mobility of women left in the dark

A gender inequality that is still poorly recognized

We might think that mobility is nothing but the reflection of a set of inequalities between men and women that are visible in other spheres and areas of society. But in fact, mobility is more of a factor that contributes to strengthening pre-existing inequalities, even though it could be a means of emancipation. There aren't many known works in the French-speaking world and more specifically in France on these issues of gender and mobility. And few works have been introduced from the English-speaking world, where these issues have been comprehensively studied for a while now. And what is also worth noticing is that these works, which are few in number and poorly exposed, have had even less reach within professional fields among people who direct mobility policies. But recently, these issues have been put under the spotlight. There are currently large international movements raising awareness about women's status and their freedom to act, and in that context, mobility can be seen both as a symbol and also as a condition. And while this collective awakening about how women struggle in various spheres of society today may be a cause for celebration for all those interested in these questions, we may also wonder what issues are still left out of the spotlight and what paradoxes this collective awakening may still harbor. One thing is certain about issues of mobility, it's that just like in other areas affecting women, their mobility is subject to both the invisibilization of their specificities and the minimalization of what actually causes them. And by "a minimizing" I mean that it could also be seen as a movement that aims to discredit or undermine. The real challenge with regards to gender and mobility is really to make them visible, to bring them out of the dark and to do so in a complex, cross-disciplinary manner. This implies using many more entry points and observation scales in the research in order to reflect a reality that is infinitely complex.

The specific features of a constrained mobility

Let's take a slight detour into the data on mobility, given that major statistical surveys on the mobility of daily life reveal interesting findings regarding the specifics of women's mobility. Of course, for those who want to look at them, we always have access to the female-male variables in these statistical surveys. So there are places where you can look at the characteristics. What these surveys show is that women tend to make trips that are both shorter and slower, but also more complex and more constrained. Why more complex? Because we observed that women in different cities around the world and particularly in Europe - this is also true for France and especially the Paris region - women tend to string together several activities during their trips, while men make trips that are simpler. Typically, these are daily commutes from home to work, when it comes to trips observed during the week. And if the trajectory of women's roundtrips is more complex, it's because during these trips they are taking care of the logistics of daily life, and in particular, family life. And family needs to be understood in a broad sense, as women take far more care of the young and elderly, meaning they are also more involved in what goes on inside the home, causing them to perform trips during which they make stops without necessarily returning home first. What mobility surveys also show, and have shown for a long time, is that women favor specific modes of transport. So for example, in cities, we know that women prefer walking or taking the bus to other modes of transportation, and while this is evolving, they rarely use bikes, especially motorized bikes. So there is a possibility now of accessing results on characteristics and drawing a portrait of women's mobility. And these major characteristics hold true regardless of social background, regardless of geographical area, and also regardless of where women are in their life cycle, although all of these factors do have an influence and tend to accentuate the differences between men and women.

Incomplete statistical works

But what is striking is that these differences tend to be minimized in the research focusing on mobility, invisibilized once again, and this is really something which I would like to draw attention to: there are far too few interpretations of these data on mobility, which are therefore insufficiently exploited. But at the same time, what is also striking is that these data, while under-exploited, could also be better quality, given that they weren't initially produced for researching specifically these questions. And as early as the 1990s, researchers like Jacqueline Coutras, one of the first French researchers to truly study these questions in a focused manner, emphasized the importance of producing better data, i.e. data specifically researched to account for these phenomena¹. The need to produce better data is something that many feminist researchers agree upon, as they strive to conceptualize the dynamics of domination in daily activities and to include in research projects these questions of female-male and male-female domination. In particular, those who are interested in these questions try to show how statistics are not neutral and never produced from a purely disinterested standpoint. This is why it's important to make large statistics more explicit and more effective.

A necessary spotlight to raise awareness

Renounced mobility: an invisible piece of data

Personally, as a female researcher, I don't use mobility data much, instead focusing on other types of approaches, because these statistics will never reveal anything about something I see as being truly essential for thinking about women's mobility. They never reveal how mobility sometimes just doesn't happen for women, neglecting all these mobilities that women don't perform and that therefore aren't counted as travel. I'm thinking for example of all the evening trips that women will give up, either because they feel unsafe in some spaces if they are young, or because they have to take care of their children, making it more difficult for them to leave the home – but also on another scale, because women tend to give up some kinds of mobilities because it would take them too far away from home, such as international travel for instance. This kind of renunciation is of course not really present in

statistics, but it does have all sorts of consequences on women's access to employment and career development.

The importance of making a diagnosis

So this is partly where the real challenge lies - finding mobility where it isn't necessarily obvious, where it doesn't take place. And indeed, if we're trying to get away from quantified approaches in order to construct a new, more realistic and sensible portrait of mobility, it would be immensely useful to seriously take into account how women plan, anticipate and go about moving and travelling through different places, alone or accompanied. I'll say it again: women are rarely alone, or at least not enough compared to the freedom to be alone that men enjoy in the different spaces they can move about in.

Notes

1 Jacqueline Coutras, *Crise urbaine et espaces sexués*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1996.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Inequalities

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- Reducing inequalities

Theories

- Art & Science
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Anne Jarrigeon is a photographer-videographer and anthropologist who holds a PhD in communication sciences. She is a member of the City Mobility Transport Laboratory and lecturer at the Paris School of Urban Planning. Her work is at the crossroads of visual anthropology, semiotics and ethnology, and focuses on the practices and imaginaries of mobility.

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Video by Anne Jarrigeon



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