



Women adjusting their sails: The role of motility in women's livelihood strategies in a fishing village in Tamil Nadu, India

Fazeeha Azmi[†]  and Ragnhild Lund

Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

Correspondence: Fazeeha Azmi (email: faseehaazmi@pdn.ac.lk)

This article draws on research conducted in a fishing village in southern India to examine the ways in which middle-aged women in a precarious socio-economic position used mobility and immobility strategies to improve their livelihoods, both inside and outside of fisheries. Kaufmann *et al.*'s (2004) work on motility is applied to show how the mobility decisions and livelihood needs and plans of five women (occupying different socio-economic positions) were influenced by socio-economic structures. The study shows that the women's mobility decisions allowed them to improve their socio-economic positions and reconfigure their gendered identities in the local village, outside the fishing sector. Motility (which encapsulates socio-spatial mobility) empowered these women by allowing them to move out of the increasingly precarious small-scale fisheries industry. We argue that the concept of motility provides a useful analytical framework for understanding mobility, and we use the women's narratives to exemplify this claim.

Keywords: women, mobility, immobility, motility

Accepted: 22 April 2022

Introduction

The livelihoods of women in Indian fishing villages are increasingly being challenged due to modernization, mechanization, environmental changes, policy changes and gender ideologies (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2018; Azmi *et al.*, 2020; Hapke, 2001; Hapke & Ayyankaril, 2018; Ram, 1991). The uncertain and precarious work in fisheries created by these processes has increased the vulnerability of women engaged in post-harvest fisheries work. Despite this situation, some women continue to seek economic opportunities in post-harvest work, while others—predominantly middle-aged women—are managing to achieve livelihoods outside the fisheries sector. For the majority of the latter group, access to non-fisheries livelihoods is not easy, due to their age, marital status and gendered social identity. Alex (2019), exploring the changing economic roles of Kerala fisherwomen, documents how religious ideologies and caste identities have forced Hindu women to withdraw from fish marketing and move to other sectors. Indeed, patriarchal gender norms continue to sustain social oppression, even in the modernized fisheries sector (Alex, 2019).

Studies have shown that mechanization has improved some women's lives in the fisheries sector, though not many. Hapke (2001) argues that the mechanization of fisheries in Kerala has helped some women move from household-based production to market-based production. However, not all women have been able to reap the benefits

[†]Current affiliation: Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

of mechanization, due to caste and class (Hapke, 2001). On the other hand, Rubinoff's (1999) study on fishing communities in Goa showed that, in general, mechanization has opened new opportunities in fish marketing and processing. Christian fisherwomen have benefitted from mechanization significantly more than their Hindu counterparts, highlighting the differing gendered identities of fisherwomen in this region. Although the Christian fisherwomen have been able to move up the social class hierarchy, it has not effected any changes to their inherited caste identity. Hence, although female fish vendors have been able to demonstrate significant class mobility, female fishers are still confined to lower caste positions (Rubinoff, 1999).

Based on their study in Cuddalore, Rao and Manimohan (2020) claim that, although capitalization of the traditional fishing sector has led to opportunities for some, it has increased precarity for others—especially small-scale fishers. They argue that, although some changes are providing women with opportunities in fish vending and auctioning, the majority of local women still face marginalization (Rao & Manimohan, 2020). Azmi *et al.* (2020), drawing on a study conducted in the same village, claim that mechanization has increased the availability of fish, and women in better social positions are more readily able to access this fish, as well as the market outside the village. They argue that social positions and the mobility of women fish vendors are important for overcoming the challenges created by various processes of mechanization.

In Cuddalore, women's engagement is moving from the fishing sector to the village, due to changes in education and increased connections with outside states and countries (e.g. Gulf countries). In this paper, we address the (im)mobility strategies used by middle-aged women involved in non-fisheries employment to improve their livelihoods. We draw on Kaufmann *et al.*'s (2004) concept of 'motility' to capture the ways in which these women strive to improve their social and economic positions, in order to achieve new livelihoods and improve their well-being. We conceptualize 'spatial mobility' as geographical (im)mobility that contributes to a change in status; and 'social mobility' as transformation in social positions within the community. Hence, motility is linked to gender norms, economic status/class, and caste. Holding that these middle-aged women are active agents, we ask: Why are these women engaged in (im)mobility livelihoods outside fisheries, and how do their actions enhance their well-being and reconfigure their gendered social identities? By focusing on these questions, we contribute to the discussion of 'how gender constitutes mobility patterns, experiences, hierarchies, and motivations', which has been identified as an understudied topic in mobility research (Cook & Butz, 2018). After providing a brief overview of the theoretical literature on mobility, immobility and motility, we introduce our methodology and explore the above questions.

Mobility, immobility and motility

'Mobility' is defined as the large-scale movement of people, objects, capital, ideas and technology, or the local everyday movement of people, material and non-material things (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Academic scholarship on mobility holds that it is a social and geographical phenomenon located in time and space (Adey, 2006; Cresswell, 2006; Flamm & Kaufmann, 2006; Hanson, 2010; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004; Khumya & Kusakabe, 2015; Lund, 2013; Panda *et al.*, 2013); hence, it should always be contextualized (Lee, 2017).

Gender is an important influential factor in women's mobility decisions (Hanson, 2010), though it does not necessarily translate to women's empowerment.

Hanson (2010) and Lee (2017) assert that, although feminist scholars see mobility as essential for women's empowerment, both mobility and immobility can either empower or oppress women, depending on the context. Thus, Lee (2017) emphasizes the importance of looking at mobility beyond the simple context of gender, arguing that one should also consider other forms of identity (e.g. age, marital status, class) and their intersections with mobility. In this paper, we consider caste as a significant form of identity, as class is understood as an economic marker. Recent scholarly work on mobility confirms this claim and, in our work, we try to capture these intersections in the narratives of the women we analysed.

Cook and Butz (2018), based on their studies in a remote Pakistani village, address the question of how gender relations are established mobility contexts, and how and why such relations shape gender relations in these specific socio-economic contexts. Importantly, they argue that 'gender constitutes mobility patterns, experiences, hierarchies, and motivations', and that these elements require further exploration in the scholarly literature. However, they acknowledge that some research in the Global South has contributed to filling this research gap. For example, Khumya and Kusakabe (2015) used the concept of mobility to study the context-specific relations between livelihood, mobility and gender in their study on the gendered impacts of road development.

Mobility's entanglement with power (Hannam *et al.*, 2006; Lund, 2013) is central to its relationship with difference. Hannam *et al.* (2006: 3) note that certain places and technologies enhance mobility and immobility, simultaneously; this generates different manifestations of mobility, based on ethnicity, gender, age and class. Within the context of this research, we acknowledge that mobility, as a gendered phenomenon, is 'embedded in, and interacting with, the household, family, community and larger society' (Kusakabe *et al.*, 2015). Confirming this claim, Lund (2013) argues that mobility, which relates to the capacity to move, can be identified as two sides of the same coin: as Khumya and Kusakabe (2015) also endorse, mobility is not only about the capacity to move, but it is also about the ways in which people act out their motility. This idea is very relevant to our conceptualization in this paper.

Kaufmann *et al.* (2004) also underline that motility is not simply about moving, but also about the capacity to be mobile (both spatially and socially); hence, motility can be 'not actually involved in moving', but simply reflect the capacity to move. Kaufmann *et al.* (2004) and Flamm and Kaufmann (2006) consider motility both a capital and a new form of social inequality. This leads them to contemplate that access to motility as capital can be constrained by various factors, resulting in inequalities. For example, Kusakabe *et al.* (2015) demonstrated how the motility of women can be constrained by social norms and resources. Of relevance, Kaufmann *et al.* (2004: 749) define motility as 'the capacity of entities (e.g. goods, information or persons) to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances'. Thus, access, competence and appropriation represent essential components. Access is identified as the form and degree of mobility constrained by options (e.g. transport, communication) and conditions (e.g. socio-economic position, geographical location). Competence is identified in relation to physical ability, required skills and organizational skills. Appropriation is described as choice, which can also include non-action; it is shaped by needs, plans, aspirations, and understandings, and relates to strategies, motives, values and habits. In this paper, we use the concept of motility to show how the women we studied applied strategies of mobility to achieve well-being and sustainable livelihoods, and

thus demonstrate agency in situations of vulnerability (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004; Flamm & Kaufmann, 2006; Kusakabe *et al.*, 2015).

As the preceding discussion has shown, motility is connected to the capacity for socio-spatial mobility. The way in which people use motility to be (im)mobile depends on their access, skills and expectations. Hence, motility is not simply about moving, but about the capacity to move. Our argument is influenced by the above understanding of mobility, immobility and motility. In this paper, in order to explore the ways in which women engage in (im)mobility livelihoods outside fisheries, we use the concept of motility. In doing so, we attempt to not only illustrate actual mobility, but also to understand the constraints, opportunities, aspirations and consequences of mobility and immobility. We also use the concept of motility to underline women's ability to be (im)mobile, demonstrating that mobility is indeed shaped by socio-economic conditions (access), skills/agency (competence) and aspirations of well-being (appropriation).

Methods and context

The present research was conducted in a fishing village in the district of Cuddalore, on the southeast coast of India, over a period of three weeks in April/May 2017, as part of the project 'Migration and collectives/networks as pathways out of poverty: Gendered vulnerabilities and capabilities of fishing communities in Asia' (cf. the acknowledgement below). The project aimed at generating a critical understanding of the changes taking place across fishing communities in Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka. The study locations included six villages in the districts of Cuddalore and Kanniyakumari, in Tamil Nadu, India. For the present study, the researchers worked in the district of Cuddalore, where they examined the mobility-based well-being pursuits of fisher female heads of households in the village—a village that had been significantly affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and one of the first villages to have witnessed the changes triggered by modernization and motorization in fishing (Rao & Manimohan, 2021). The research methods included participant observation and informal interviewing with community members, as well as in-depth interviews, which was the main data collection tool.

The study village was one of 46 fishing villages in Cuddalore. To ensure confidentiality, the name of the study village is not disclosed here. The selection of the study village was influenced by the objective of the larger research project, related to variation in fishing sites (i.e. inland, marine) and activities (i.e. mechanized, artisanal, motorized), as well as changes in local migration patterns (i.e. overseas, seasonal, interstate, distress, displaced) (Lund *et al.*, 2021). Out of a total 2024 households in the study village, 1335 (66 per cent) constituted fishing households, with a population of 5368 in 2010 (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, 2012). The majority of the villagers were Hindu and spoke Tamil.

The fishing village community belonged to the *Pattinavar* fishing caste, which is further divided into the *Sinnapattinavar* and *Periyapattinavar* sub-castes. The caste system influenced the organization of fishing in the village. The majority of the fish labourers and fish vendors were *Sinnapattinavar*. The small number of *Periyapattinavar* were mainly large trawler boat owners, who were responsible for the village *Panchayath* (smallest administrative unit in India). *Periyapattinavar*, the traditional elite, also controlled the harbour association that managed local fishing activities (Rao & Manimohan, 2020). Though small in number, they were a powerful group. *Periyapattinavar* women did not engage in fish vending, and they were thus economically

different from the *Sinnapattinavar* fish vendors. Indeed, caste difference impacted not only livelihood options in this village, but also the ability to move and act. The women who were engaged in non-fishing income-earning activities were engaged in floriculture, migration to Gulf countries, manual labour and snack making. They were also affiliated with the so-called 'most backward castes' (MBC) of *Vanniyar* and *Dalit*, and their houses were located on the outskirts of the village, in filthy surroundings with poor sanitation and a lack of good roads. The spatial distribution of the houses showed a clear, physical separation from the high caste settlement.

The modernization and mechanization of fisheries (since the 1960s) and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami altered local fishing in many ways. Historically, fishing in the village was carried out with small crafts called *kattumaram* and a variety of equipment, including beach seines and lift nets, in geographically demarcated fishing zones (*paadu*). Since the 1960s, the government of Tamil Nadu has promoted the use of mechanized boats, based in new harbour locations. The study village was one of the first to adopt mechanized boat fishing, and both mechanized boat fishing and small-scale fishing continue to exist.

The village was also one of the worst tsunami-hit villages in Cuddalore. The post-tsunami reconstruction of fisheries induced a high capitalization of fishing equipment, particularly with respect to ring seine fishing and motorized and mechanized boats, which drastically changed the organization of fishing (Rao & Manimohan, 2021). The new equipment was donated to the village by NGOs and the government. While some of this assistance went to *Periyapattinavar* fishers, the majority of *Sinnapattinavar* were deprived of such opportunities because they were lower caste fish labourers who did not own boats. Furthermore, Rao and Manimohan (2021) claim that the motorization and expansion of trawler fleets increased competition in the traditional fishing sector. Thus, the post-tsunami reconstruction of the fisheries sector altered the socio-economic organization of fishing in the village, creating and increasing inequalities on the basis of gender, economic position and caste. Although the post-tsunami developments provided some opportunities, many were forced to withdraw from fishing and related activities, which weakened their livelihood options.

In the village, women's post-harvest fisheries labour was important for the fish market. The women involved in such activities were generally old, and the majority were widowed, divorced or separated. They engaged in fish vending as a family survival strategy. During our informal discussions, the women claimed that opportunities for small-scale fishers were declining in the village, due to increased mechanization (which intensified after the tsunami). Many fish vendors were affected by these changes, as they had less access to fish from local fishers. In particular, women who worked as fish vendors, fish cleaners and fish auctioneers were seriously affected. The fish caught by local fishers were either not sold to them or only available to them after the fishers sold to external buyers. Hence, the women engaged in post-harvest fisheries work were forced to either work in the village (which was less profitable) or buy fish from the local fish market (which was outside the village and not easily accessible). Their ability to sell fish both inside and outside the village was influenced by their age, marital status, household structure and economic status. The impacts of the above effects were felt along caste lines, too, making (im)mobility a gendered process. Women from wealthier fishing families—and generally from higher castes—stayed home and looked after their families or engaged in non-fisheries livelihoods, as modernization and mechanization released them from unpaid work in fisheries.

During the post-tsunami livelihood reconstruction programs, village women were given training to improve their entrepreneurial skills in alternative (non-fisheries) livelihoods, such as tailoring, hairdressing and the manufacture of toilet cleaning powders. However, during our informal discussions, the women reported that, although this training had attracted many women during the recovery process, trainees had not achieved sustained benefits. Rather, they struggled to access capital to start a business, and found it difficult to market their products and access raw materials. Thus, many of the women who underwent skills training could not use their new skills to enhance their livelihoods in the village.

We conducted in-depth interviews with five middle-aged women engaged in non-fisheries employment, both inside and outside the village. We identified these women as middle-aged on the basis of the local age of marriage (between 31–37 years old). Informal discussion with villagers provided useful contextual information that helped us to understand the general situation of our informants. Further, the qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, qualitative surveys and pilot project that were conducted as part of the larger research project contributed additional information about the study area (Lund *et al.*, 2021). Our informants were approached through snowball sampling, to encourage the recruitment of local women from different socio-economic positions. Table 1 illustrates their socio-economic backgrounds. We conducted in-depth interviews with each informant at their workplace or home, with each interview lasting 60–90 minutes. During the analysis, interview notes were read for potential themes and patterns.

We turn now to explore how the interviewed women responded to changes in their village and tried to enhance their livelihoods in an environment characterized by uncertainty.

Findings

In the following, we present our findings in two parts. First, we document how and why the middle-aged women who were analysed as part of this research engaged in (im)mobility livelihoods. Second, we explore how the women's choices affected their socio-economic positions. The following section presents the personal narratives of the women, highlighting their mobility decisions.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Respondents	Age	Caste	Marital status	Education / other skills	Employment
1	35	Most Backward Caste (MBC)	Divorced	Grade 3 / sewing, making soap, making garlands	Housemaid
2	36	Chinnapattinavar	Widowed	Grade 8 / making snacks and ice cream	Snack vendor
3	31	Vanniyar	Married	Grade 10 / worked for an NGO and mineral water company	Garland maker
4	34	Chinnapattinavar	Unmarried	Grade 8 / worked for a papadam company, sewing	Boutique owner
5	37	Chinnapattinavar	Married	Grade 4	Money lender

Source: Fieldwork in Cuddalore, April 2017.

Setting out to be (im)mobile

Research in Indian fishing communities has shown that migration is becoming an important livelihood strategy in response to economic transitions, globalization, poverty and declining resources (Azmi *et al.*, 2020; Hapke & Ayyankeri, 2018; Rao & Manimohan, 2020). Among our participants, three women were directly engaged in mobility livelihoods. Respondent 1 worked as a maid in Malaysia for an Indo-Malaysian family. Her boss and his family travelled frequently between Malaysia and India, and she had a very flexible contract that allowed her to visit India every two months, along with her employer's family. When she was in India, she spent most of her time with her family. She was divorced and her two daughters were looked after by her brother and his wife. When asked about her decision to work as a maid in Malaysia, she stated:

Before marriage, I worked in a soap factory in town. After marriage, the factory administration terminated my job and I found new work in town, through a friend. I worked as a maid for five years, but my husband did not like it and asked me to quit. I could not quit the job, as he was not employed and was addicted to alcohol. I have two daughters and siblings to look after. Considering my situation, my boss arranged maid work in his daughter's house, as she travels to India often for their business. I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to build a house, educate my daughters and escape from my husband's torture. I have been working in Malaysia for the last three years. They gave me money to build a house. I send money to my brother to take care of my children (Respondent 1, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April, 2017).

Respondent 1 took the decision to work outside fisheries and outside the village, even before her marriage. Her decision was influenced by her family poverty and her aspiration for a better life. On the other hand, her decision to move to Malaysia for a contract job was influenced by her need to build a house and educate her daughters. She also felt that it would help her escape from her husband.

Respondent 2, who was a widow and worked as a snack vendor on the beach outside the village, told a different story about her decision to work outside the village and fishing. She stated:

I want to give my children a good life. It is not simply about having rice for three meals a day. I have never worked in fishing. My mother worked as a fish vendor. However, after she became a widow, she started to sell ice cream and cool drinks on the beach next to our village. She earned a good income. I also supported her business. After the tsunami, we lost our stall. The government banned the sale of cool drinks on the beach. We lost our business. My mother got a house under the tsunami housing scheme. She gave that house to me after I became a widow and she is now living with my sister. Through her friends, I learned to prepare snacks. I can prepare different varieties of snacks now. I have a good number of customers. They also helped me get a cart shop on the beach. One of my relatives helped me to get the widow fund from the government. I used the money to buy a scooter, which makes my travel to work easy (Respondent 2, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

Respondent 2 used her skills to create a good life for her family, engaging in snack vending with the help of her mother and her mother's friends. Her narrative shows how she used social networks to enhance her livelihood through a mobility strategy: her networks enabled her to learn how to make snacks and find a place for her business on the beach. This shows her ability to respond to changing policy environments. She made a wise decision to buy a scooter, as this enabled her sufficient spatial mobility to expand her business. Although the village had a good bus connection with the town,

the scooter made her travel easy and gave her more independence. Thus, Respondent 2 provides a good example of competency in strategizing and organization.

Among our informants, Respondent 3 had comparatively higher educational qualifications and work experience outside the fisheries sector, as she had worked for a mineral water company and an NGO. She was not from the village but moved there after her marriage. She had met her husband at the mineral water company where she had previously worked—and he had also worked, as a driver. Her husband's family was involved in fishing and, after returning to the village, her husband started to work as a fish labourer until they had their first child. At this point, he ceased work and developed an addiction to alcohol. Respondent 3 was the only one in her extended family who worked. She made garlands at home and sold these doors to door, in the village and in town. Although she had liked working at the NGO before her marriage, her family—and especially her husband—did not allow her to work there anymore. Rather, her husband insisted that she work as a fish vendor in the village. She did not want to do this work, because she did not have other family members to look after her two young daughters; her husband was an alcoholic, and her father-in-law was bedridden. She mentioned:

The good life of my family is the good life for me. I want to educate my daughters [...] I go [from] door to door with my children selling flower garlands outside the village. Next year, my eldest daughter will start school. I will have to change my schedule according to her school schedule [...] I have also talked to the NGO regarding my willingness to re-join. If both my children start school, I can work again in the NGO [...] I do not want to be involved in fisheries work as I have a better chance of finding a job outside fishing (Respondent 3, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

Respondent 3 emphasized her daughters' future and education as her reason for engaging in a mobility livelihood. In addition, she did not want to work as a fish vendor because she considered it low-level work, given her education and experience. As an educated woman with experience working at an NGO, she had a relatively good social position in the village. People approached her for help with completing forms and writing official letters. For this reason, she had developed a good network of neighbours who supported her with childcare and money, when needed. Her decision to not work as a fish vendor—and to instead work as a garland seller—suggests that she was using her motility to find work that was socially acceptable for women like her. Her decision was also influenced by her view of women fish vendors. Of note, a lack of employment opportunities for village women with educational qualifications and experience influenced her mobility decision, beyond her views on fish vending and her plans for the future.

Choosing immobility

Two of the respondents lived in the village and engaged in non-fisheries livelihoods. Respondent 4 was a 34-year-old unmarried woman living alone in the village, running a boutique. Her sister lived next door to her and was very helpful with her business. When asked about her decision to leave work at the *papadam* factory and instead run a boutique, she explained:

My mother was a fish vendor and my father a fish labourer. I was working in a papadam factory. We lost our parents due to the tsunami. During that time, my sister was married and living with her family next to our house. As our houses were damaged, we got new houses after

the tsunami. My sister did not like to send me to the papadam factory for work. I took a sewing course that was freely offered by an NGO after the tsunami. But this is India [...] you can buy clothes for very low prices. I stopped sewing as it did not give me a good income. With my little savings, I started a small business. I am too old to get married now. I want to work outside the village, but if I go to work as an unmarried middle-aged woman, villagers will gossip. It will not be good for my sister's family either [...] she has young daughters who are about to be given in marriage [...] my sister is very helpful in my business. I call the shops in town to place my order [...] She carries the things from the shops when she returns from town after selling fish. I help her look after her daughters and cook (Respondent 4, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

In the above narrative, it is clear that, although Respondent 4 had a mobility option and was engaged in a mobility livelihood prior to her parents' death, she had decided to run a shop in the village due to her social position as a middle-aged, unmarried woman. She also wanted to be independent. Her decision was further influenced by her concern for the future of her sister's daughters. The village expected unmarried, middle-aged women to have some protection, and the mobility of such women outside the village was not socially acceptable. This situation confirms that agency is context-specific, determined by an individual's position in society and shaped by cultural norms. On the other hand, Respondent 4's narrative confirms that individuals exercise their agency within the limits imposed by society. As she purposely chose to be immobile, she used her agency to mediate mobility (action) through her sister.

Although Respondent 4 had skills, she saw them as unpromising. During our fieldwork, we came to know many women who had undergone training in dress making through post-tsunami livelihood rehabilitation programs. However, in India, garments are inexpensive due to the neoliberal economy and globalization, and this presents a challenge for the tailoring industry. Respondent 4's decision to run a shop shows not only her personal desire to be independent and her respect for her sister's family, but also how local responses are made in response to national and global economic changes.

Among our informants, Respondent 5 belonged to the wealthiest and highest caste. Although she identified with her husband's caste, she was originally *Chettiar* (the money lending caste). Her husband was a boat owner with approximately 20 employees. She had two sons and a daughter, all of whom studied in colleges in Madras. She supported her husband in his work, acting as a money lender. Her house had not been affected by the tsunami, and it was one of the few houses in the village with modern facilities. When asked why she chose to stay in the village and engage in money lending, she replied:

Both of us [herself and her husband] come from good families. My husband had two boats before the tsunami. After the tsunami, we lost one and the other was damaged. With the compensation money, we bought a good one and, after that, our situation improved fast. We bought a house in Chennai for our daughter. We plan to give it to her as a dowry. Now all of our children are studying in Chennai. I do not want to stay permanently in Chennai. As my children are not at home, I thought I could engage in a business. But I do not have skills or experience. Before the tsunami, I used to dry the unsold fish. Some women came to buy dry fish and sell in the town. But now, people from outside come to buy fish and we do not have any fish left. I can't stay at home without doing anything. Although we are in a good position in the village, we need more money to support our children's education. Finally, I decided to start money lending as a business. This is the only business I can do from home without going out of the village. It gives me more time to attend to other work at home. I do not want to

leave the village, because it is our life. I do not think I will be able to go out of this village to work or live, as I cannot start my day without praying to Kadal Amma [mother sea] (Respondent 5, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

Respondent 5 gave many reasons for engaging in money lending. Although she was in a better position than the other four women, like them, her decision had been influenced by her efforts towards livelihood enhancement: she wanted to pay for her children's education. Her narrative shows that women from well-off families who are in a better social position (married) can apply strategies of immobility to enhance their livelihood. It also confirms that powerful and wealthy fishers benefitted more from the post-tsunami situation. Women were affected differently, leading to increased social inequality. While women from boat owner families who belonged to the highest caste were able to withdraw from post-harvest fishing activities and benefit from more free time, women in fish vending from poor families did not experience these benefits. Furthermore, in the post-tsunami context, fish caught in the village were sold to external buyers or directly transported to the fish market in town. Thus, village women lost access.

As women from better-off and higher caste families stopped spending time on the beach after the tsunami, they had plenty of time with which to engage in other activities. Respondent 5 spent time with her children outside the village (during their exam periods), ran a business and engaged in daily household chores. She only took up work as a money lender to bring in extra income (also influenced by her lack of skills). Her narrative shows that her desire to be in the village, despite her capacity to be mobile, related to the value she assigned to the sea. At the same time, the informal interviews that were conducted as part of the larger project revealed that, due to post-tsunami development, some women from better-off families became burdened with household responsibilities as they withdrew from direct involvement in post-harvest fishing (cf. conversation with a principal researcher, 2018). Hence, their mobility was confined to a few places in the village, if any at all.

Reconfigured social identities of gender

The above cases illustrate how both mobility and immobility altered the gender relations of our respondents. Respondent 1 had a sense of autonomy and empowerment—gained, she felt, through her work in Malaysia. Having travelled several times between Malaysia and India with her boss's family, she described:

After going to Malaysia, I feel more powerful. I would not have got this by working as a fish vendor. I know many things [...] I can travel alone [...] Some villagers who never cared about us when we were starving and criticized our family for allowing me to work in a soap factory are coming to borrow money from me or borrow my jewellery [...] more importantly, my children feel they have a strong mother (Respondent 1, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

Her narrative also reveals that her spatial mobility enabled her to attain a good social position, which she would not have otherwise achieved as a divorced woman engaged in fish vending. Moving to another country had provided her with a new set of experiences. Others in the village looked at her as an empowered woman who could travel, work outside their village and country, educate her children and build her own home. We were able to observe that her style of speaking and dressing, as well as her general attitude, differed from those of the other women in the village. Her economic

prosperity and resulting independence afforded her a higher social position, both in her family and within the village. In a community where poverty was intertwined with low caste affiliation, migration to Malaysia as a maid had helped Respondent 1 to accumulate money. With this money, she had been able to negotiate her economic position in the village, where social relations were closely connected to caste. She was frequently approached by women in the village to advise on money transfers, social media and the education of their children.

Hence, Respondent 1 was able to assert a new social position in the community, challenging the caste-based power structure of the village. Furthermore, within her extended family, she was able to provide financial support and advice about migration and recruitment. She wanted a brighter future for her daughters. She proudly claimed:

My daughters are going to good schools. I am happy that I was able to find work there. I did not want to become a fish vendor in my village as my mother did. We had a difficult past and I did not want to continue that life (Respondent 1, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

As the above account shows, Respondent 1 was trying to move away from her traditional caste and class positions. Through her migration, she had been able to raise the standard of living of her immediate family, demonstrating the relationship between mobility and economic mobility. Generally, the younger generations in the village did not want to continue their caste-based occupations—not only due to the challenging local situation but also due to the social changes they were witnessing (Rao & Manimohan, 2020). Educated youth and some middle-aged men had moved out of the village in search of non-fisheries-related employment, even finding employment in foreign countries (i.e. Gulf countries, Singapore, Malaysia). Mainly, they worked as contract workers and only occasionally returned to fishing. Rao and Manimohan (2020) note that mobility in the same village is contributing to an increasing divide among classes. Our study indicates that migration has led to new class formations across castes, whether or not these new formations are accepted by *Pattinavar*.

As a widow, Respondent 2 had not only become economically independent, but she had also moved socially in a village where widows were socially stigmatized. She thought that her economic position had lifted her social position, and she was happy about her social mobility:

As I am engaged in this work, I can save money. I have bought jewelry for my daughter. I also save money to give as gifts if I am invited to a wedding or puberty celebration. If you give a small piece of jewelry made of gold, it shows your social status. Although I am a widow, I am invited to weddings and puberty celebrations. However, I only go if they are for very close family members or neighbours. People also borrow small amounts of money from me. But I do not take any interest. Now, I am in a better economic situation, and I can get loans from the bank to improve my business (Respondent 2, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

As the above narrative shows, Respondent 2 indirectly contributed to her children's future social mobility. Spatial mobility had reconfigured her gender identity as a widow (as widows were generally treated as inauspicious) and empowered her economically and socially.

As an unmarried, middle-aged woman, Respondent 4 had faced many challenges prior to starting her shop. When asked about whether her choice to run a boutique in the village had changed her social position, she recounted:

My sister has struggled to arrange a marriage for me. Many marriage brokers have told me my horoscope is not good. She has been struggling for the last eight years to arrange a marriage for me. I understood it would not happen and I should do a job without becoming a burden. Now I feel independent. People trust me and I lead an informal loan group to support poor women. Once you become a burden to others, it destroys your self-confidence (Respondent 4, pers. comm., Cuddalore, April 2017).

Respondent 4 felt her social position as an unmarried, middle-aged woman changed when she started her business. At that point, she achieved a good economic position and was able to create savings in the form of money and jewelry. Due to her strong leadership qualities, she had been able to take responsibility for a local loan group. Although her unmarried status had previously been a topic of local gossip, when she passed the age of 30, the villagers stopped gossiping. However, she was not able to take a job outside the village, due to gender norms that constrained her mobility. Nonetheless, villagers approached her for loans and recognized her leadership and organizational skills. This allowed her to not only reconfigure her gender identity, but also feel empowered.

Motility through access, competence, and appropriation

As the analysis has revealed, the five study respondents showed different motility levels, on the basis of their access, competence and appropriation. Kaufmann *et al.* (2004) note that these three components are embedded in socio-economic, cultural, political, and structural processes and dependent on individual choice. Our respondents were in different socio-economic positions, although they all identified as middle-aged women. They had made (im)mobility decisions to support their families and themselves, within a context of changing economic, social and political environments. Motility was a key factor in their decisions, which confirmed their agency and resulted in feelings of empowerment. At the same time, their socio-economic positions influenced (and often limited) their ability to exert agency and reconfigure their gender roles. The discussion that follows explores this aspect in more depth, highlighting the ways in which access, competence and appropriation influenced the (im)mobility decisions of these women, reflecting their motility.

In terms of access, the village, while located only 10 kilometres from Cuddalore town, lacked a good public transportation network. The women used public transportation when it was available, but at other times, they used three-wheelers and shared the transportation cost. The cost of hiring three-wheelers was not affordable for all of the study respondents. However, this did not represent their main mobility constraint. Communication was decent for the interviewed women, as all owned a mobile phone, which they used for business communication. This reduced their travel time and cost of transportation, making their work easier (Respondents 2 and 4). Mobile phones also strengthened their family and social relationships (Respondent 1). In terms of social position, for example, Respondent 4 negotiated her mobility through her sister. Her social position in the village—as a middle-aged, unmarried woman—did not support her mobility. To protect her family's reputation, she did not want to challenge the villagers' social expectations or become the subject of village gossip. Although she was spatially immobile and uninvolved in direct mobility, she showed tremendous potential for uplifting her socio-economic position.

Respondents 1 and 2, despite their social positions as a divorced woman and widow, respectively, avoided the social order of the village by accessing livelihoods outside the country and village. Doing so empowered them and enabled them to achieve better socio-economic positions than would otherwise have been possible through fish vending. They gained new identities from their social and spatial mobility. They were also able to develop good networks, which facilitated their access. In the case of Respondent 3, although she was involved in a mobility livelihood outside the village, she was not satisfied with her work. She had the ambition of using her skills and education to access a better job, which she expected would enable her to achieve better social recognition. However, her mobility towards this job was conditioned by her responsibility as a mother and daughter-in-law.

Respondent 5, although located in a comparatively better position than the other women in terms of mobility, did not want to engage in a mobility livelihood outside the village. Her choice confirms that, although mobility may be defined as the capacity to move, such capacity can result in either mobility or immobility. Respondent 5's choice was influenced by her economic position (which allowed her to engage in money lending) and the value she assigned to the sea. This supports the claim made by Adey (2006: 83) that mobility 'means different things, to different people, in differing social circumstances'.

Competence is another important component of motility. In our study, all of the women aside from Respondent 5 had competence and skills related to non-fisheries livelihoods. This laid the foundation for them to seek mobility livelihoods. Kaufmann *et al.* (2004) note that competence is multifaceted and dependent on access and appropriation. This interconnectedness is very clear in the case of Respondent 4, who gained competence through her social networks. Similarly, the competences of Respondents 2, 3 and 4 enabled them to seek mobility livelihoods outside the village. However, their mobility choices were different, confirming that mobility is not simply about the capacity to move. While Respondents 2 and 3 engaged in non-fisheries mobility livelihoods to enhance their families' livelihoods, Respondent 4 engaged in a non-fishery immobile livelihood in order to safeguard the reputation of her sister's family. Again, as Kaufmann *et al.* (2004) note, the mobility choice can involve action or non-action.

Our respondents' narratives illustrate the ways in which mobility is shaped by needs, plans, aspirations, and understandings, which determine strategies, motives and habits. Likewise, our previous work on female heads of households employed as fish vendors and fish auctioneers in the same village confirmed that mobility is important for ensuring women's well-being and livelihood (Azmi *et al.*, 2020). Improvements to well-being and livelihood, in turn, are experienced as empowering.

All our respondents reported that livelihood enhancement was an important driver of their mobility decisions, though not simply connected to material improvement. Respondent 1 stated that a good life is more than simply having rice three times a day. In other words, she did not want her family to live a hand-to-mouth existence. Respondents 2 and 4 highlighted the importance of their children's education for their mobility decisions. With respect to Respondents 4 and 5, their decisions were influenced by their definitions of livelihood enhancement (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004): while Respondent 4 considered family reputation the central reason for her immobility (underpinned by her need to live as an independent woman), Respondent 5 linked her choice to an attachment to the sea.

Our respondents' narratives reveal that mobility and immobility are closely linked with gendered social and economic positions, above and beyond personal aspirations of livelihood

enhancement. By engaging in (im)mobility livelihoods, our respondents increased their socio-economic positions and resisted the caste hegemony. Thus, both mobility and immobility can be used to empower women and improve socio-economic positions.

Conclusion

The above discussion applied the concept of motility to explore the (im)mobility decisions of women engaged in non-fisheries livelihoods in the study village. Drawing on our fieldwork, we showed that women in the study village applied mobility and immobility strategies, both within and outside fisheries and the village, to enhance their livelihoods. These strategies were enacted within the context of changes in the fisheries sector due to mechanization, modernization, policy reform and post-tsunami development.

Our previous work in the same village showed that mobility was inherent in the lives of female heads of household (FHHs) involved in fisheries and related work. We documented how women fish auctioneers used their power and agency to expand and strengthen their market links and benefit from the same process. However, for young FHHs, especially, mobility was restricted by familial and social expectations, as well as household responsibilities. Facing the same socio-economic conditions, the women in this study engaged in (im)mobility livelihoods outside the fisheries sector not only to escape poverty, but also to enhance their livelihoods and reshape their gendered social identities, related to caste and economic position.

In the fishing village we studied, recent social, political and economic changes have resulted in decreasing livelihood opportunities, forcing FHHs to seek employment outside the village hence increasing their motility. Our research confirms that caste, class and gender in fishing communities are intertwined and create different opportunities and social positions for different women, which again influence their motility.

Our study also shows that, although mobility-based livelihoods are an important option in many fishing communities, such livelihoods are not equally accessible to or practised by all. In their decisions about mobility, our respondents were influenced by social, cultural, and economic conditions and their personal expectations and needs regarding livelihood enhancement. Thus, we applied the motility concept to show how FHHs strategized by being (im)mobile in their search for well-being and sustainable livelihoods, and thereby showed agency and experienced empowerment in situations of vulnerability and precarity. Our results confirm that motility can mean 'not actually involved in moving', yet having the capacity to move. This is because motility is dependent on both actual mobility and the context and personal circumstances that shape (im)mobility practices.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that it is possible for women to transcend differences of economic position/class, as our respondents' (im)mobility decisions were successful in enhancing their livelihoods, and these decisions were characterized by necessity and/or choice. However, it seems more difficult to transcend boundaries of caste—a cultural framework that is deeply embedded in Indian fishing communities. From an early age, caste determines livelihood options, means of empowerment and ability to move and act. In our study village, the two castes lived separately and were differently positioned to overcome hurdles.

The three components of access, competence and appropriation—associated with the concept of motility proposed by Kaufmann *et al.* (2004)—can help us to gain deeper insight into the ways in which social hierarchies (e.g. caste) are maintained;

and how people's agency (and thus their opportunities for livelihood enhancement) may be both enabled and constrained by social and cultural norms. Although our sample of in-depth interviews was small, our findings illustrate the agency of the women we studied. These women were able to move away from traditional employment in fisheries and empower themselves in other sectors.

Our study adds to the literature on the concept of motility to study mobility, which may or may not involve actual physical movement. In our paper, the concept of motility is articulated around access, competence, and appropriation. Our study confirms that motility cannot simply be linked with mobility, but it is also a choice or necessity influenced by the constraints and agency of women who are placed in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. We reiterate that different actors have different potentials for mobility which could be transformed or not transformed into actual movement. Motility thus enables exploring agency and contextual constraints in particular mobility contexts. We argue that the concept of motility provides a useful analytical framework for understanding mobility, and we use the women's narratives to exemplify this claim. Our study will facilitate future research on im(mobility) decision of individuals using the concept of motility, acknowledging contextual diversities.

Acknowledgements

This work is part of the project 'Migration and collectives/networks as pathways out of poverty. Gendered vulnerabilities and capabilities of fishing communities in Asia' funded by the Research Council of Norway, headed by Professor Ragnhild Lund, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, in partnership with researchers at the Asian Institute of Technology (Thailand), the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Sri Lanka), the University of East Anglia (UK), the Cambodian Institute for Research and Rural Development and Fisheries Management Resource Centre (FishMarc) (India). The copy-editing assistance was provided by Valerie Appleby and practical help in the field by FishMarc.

References

- Adey P (2006) If mobility is everything then it is nothing: towards a relational politics of (im) mobilities. *Mobilities* **1** (1), 75–94.
- Alex DR (2019) Woman as honor, man as reformer: transition of women's work roles in the Hindu fishing caste of Kerala, India. *Women's Studies* **48** (8), 862–81.
- Aswathy P, Kalpana K (2018) The 'stigma' of paid work: capital, state, patriarchy and women fish workers in South India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, **19** (5), 113–28.
- Azmi F, Lund R, Rao N, Maniomohan R (2020) Well-being and mobility of female-heads of households in a fishing village in South India. *Gender Place and Culture* **28** (5), 627–48.
- Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) (2012) Marine Fisheries Census (2010), Part II, 4: Tamil Nadu. Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Kochi. Available at: http://eprints.cmfri.org.in/9002/1/TN_report_full.pdf (accessed 14 May 2018).
- Cook N, Butz D (2018) Gendered mobilities in the making: moving from a pedestrian to vehicular mobility landscape in Shimshal, Pakistan. *Social & Cultural Geography* **19** (5), 606–25.
- Cresswell T (2006) The right to mobility: the production of mobility in the courtroom. *Antipode* **38** (4), 735–54.
- Flamm M, Kaufmann V (2006) Operationalising the concept of motility: a qualitative study. *Mobilities* **1** (2), 167–89.
- Hannam K, Sheller M, Urry J (2006) Mobilities, immobilities and moorings. *Mobilities* **1** (1), 1–22.
- Hanson S (2010) Gender and mobility: new approaches for informing sustainability. *Gender, Place & Culture* **17** (1), 5–23.

- Hapke HM (2001) Petty traders, gender and development in a South Indian fishery. *Economic Geography* **77** (3), 225–49.
- Hapke HM, Ayyankeri DJMS (2018) Gendered livelihoods in the global fish-food economy: a comparative study of three fisherfolk communities in Kerala, India. *Maritime Studies* **17** (2), 133–43.
- Kaufmann V, Bergman MM, Joye D (2004) Motility: Mobility as capital. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **28** (4), 745–56.
- Khumya T, Kusakabe K (2015) Road development, and changes in livelihood and mobility in Savannakhet, Lao PDR. *Development in Practice* **25** (7), 1011–24.
- Kusakabe K, Lund R, Panda SM, Wang Y, Vongphakdy S (2015) Resettlement in Lao PDR: mobility, resistance and gendered impacts. *Gender, Place & Culture* **22** (8), 1089–105.
- Lee A (2017) Gender, everyday mobility, and mass transit in urban Asia. *Mobility in History* **8** (1), 85–94.
- Lund R (2013) Mobility in marginalized spaces: manoeuvring for survival among the Veddas in Sri Lanka. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift – Norwegian Journal of Geography* **67** (4), 200–9.
- Lund R, Kusakabe K, Rao N, Weeratunge N (2021) *Fisherfolks in Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka. Migration, Gender and Well-being*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Panda SM, Lund R, Kusakabe K, Yunxian W (2013) Gender, mobility, and citizenship rights among tribals of Khurda and Sundargarh, Odisha (India). *Gender, Technology and Development* **17** (2), 105–29.
- Ram K (1991) *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community*. Zed Books, London.
- Rao N, Manimohan R (2020) (Re-)negotiating gender and class: new forms of cooperation among small-scale fishers in Tamil Nadu. UNRISD Occasional paper 11. Available at: <https://www.unrisd.org/en/library/publications/re-negotiating-gender-and-class-new-forms-of-cooperation-among-small-scale-fishers-in-tamil-nadu> (accessed 6 January 2021).
- Rao N, Manimohan R (2021) Migration for capital accumulation: changing class dynamics among small-scale fishers on the Coromandel coast, Tamil Nadu. In Lund R, Kusakabe K, Rao N, Weeratunge N (eds) *Fisherfolk in Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka: Migration, Gender and Well Being*, 25–57. Routledge, London and New York.
- Rubinoff JA (1999) Fishing for status: impact of development on Goa's fisherwomen. *Women's Studies International Forum* **22** (6), 631–44.
- Sheller M, Urry J (2006) The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A* **38** (2), 207–26.