

(im)Mobile gendered identities: the relationship between mobility and identity

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Cities are places of contestation where individuals and groups act in specific ways to access resources and opportunities. Mobility enables individuals to access these different resources. This paper explores the impact of spatial mobility on changing identities of urban marginalized women (UMW) from the peri-urban areas of Delhi, India. It examines the relationship between mobilities and identities through relevant literature supported by a study extracted from an extensive ethnographic research on daily mobilities of UMW. Unstructured interviews and GPS path tracking are used as methods of data collection. The analysis of the acquired data presents mobility as an intertwined phenomenon with hidden links with socio-cultural elements and identity-making. Further, by focusing on the daily mobilities of UMW, this paper reflects upon the impact of gender (a result of the socio-cultural context) on identity transformation.

Keywords: *gendered identities; otherness; socio-spatial mobility; micro-geographies*

1 Introduction

The cities establish links with individuals and groups of people not only in terms of their geographical location but also play an essential role in their transformation with respect to their social, economic and political identity (Robinson, 2006; Simone, 2010). Cities are a composition of many things, which entails an assemblage of identities and social positions resulting from different cultures of the city's history and many social aspirations (Hopkins, 2009; Myers, 2003). Cities are places of contestation where individuals and groups act in specific ways to access resources and opportunities like land, services and being a part of institutions (Abbink, 2005; Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005; Freund, 2009; Lund, 2006).

Mobility is a fundamental human right that facilitates access to these resources. However, the emergence of new infrastructure and technologies (of transportation and telecommunication) enhances the mobility of some and creates constraints (immobility) for others (Graham & Wood, 2004). Spatial movement or displacement, which forms an important visible component of mobility,



impacts the construction of places and opportunities along with the formation of gendered aspects, social connections, spatially dispersed urban neighbourhoods, identities and aspirations (Sheller, 2004).

Through relevant literature and a study of daily mobilities of UMW from peri-urban areas of Delhi, India, this paper highlights mobility as an intertwined phenomenon with hidden links and meanings associated with socio-cultural elements and identity-making. Further, by focusing on the daily mobilities of UMW, this paper reflects upon the impact of gender (a result of the socio-cultural context) on identity transformation.

2 Research methods

This paper is a part of PhD research focusing on informal mobilities of urban marginalized women that emphasizes mobility as a capacity. For this paper, the relevant literature specific to the relationship between mobility and identities was studied. The participants for this study were identified through two methods, i.e., through snowballing and with the help of NGOs¹ working towards gender equality. Thirty-five UMW between 20-55 yrs of age were studied. These women lived in the peri-urban areas of Delhi and were employed either in full-time or part-time informal employment. Some participants worked as part-time domestic helpers in the neighbouring areas, a few worked as full-time beauticians in other affluent areas of Delhi, and others were associated with the NGOs². Mobile ethnography was adopted to study the daily mobilities of these UMW. A preliminary socio-demographic study was carried out to understand their household structure. This activity was followed by conducting unstructured interviews and GPS data collection with the help of Google Maps timeline through participants' mobile phones. These methods were adopted to understand the travel experiences of UMW during their daily mobility.

3 Context

Most migrant people who come to Delhi for job opportunities are settled in unauthorized colonies (informal settlements) in the peri-urban areas of Delhi. These unauthorized colonies have unintentionally become an essential part of the socio-spatial and economic system of the metropolitan region (Anand & Tiwari, 2006). The majority of these migrant inhabitants are working on temporary or casual day jobs. Several scholars suggest that the impermanent nature of their employment becomes one of the reasons for their vulnerability and, thus exclusions from access to resources (Kusuma et al., 2014).

Within Indian society, gender inequality is prevalent in different areas and levels. It needs to be understood from three main perspectives, i.e., cultural, economic and spatial (Gupta, 2017). Women in India are bound by various socio-cultural aspects, which result in multiple sacrifices, including giving

¹ A major part of the study was carried out by contacting two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with women or on issues of women empowerment in Delhi; namely, Cequin India and the Azad Foundation.

² This study does not focus on the religion of the participants. Considering the aspects of religion would lead towards additional complexities within the present context of the study. Therefore, these may be taken up as a part of future research.

up their independence. The presence of inegalitarian gender relations results in several kinds of exclusions that include not allowing women to participate in decision-making activities of the family, restrictions on mobility, denied access to material resources, and even facing acts of violence at home (Jejeebhoy, 2002).

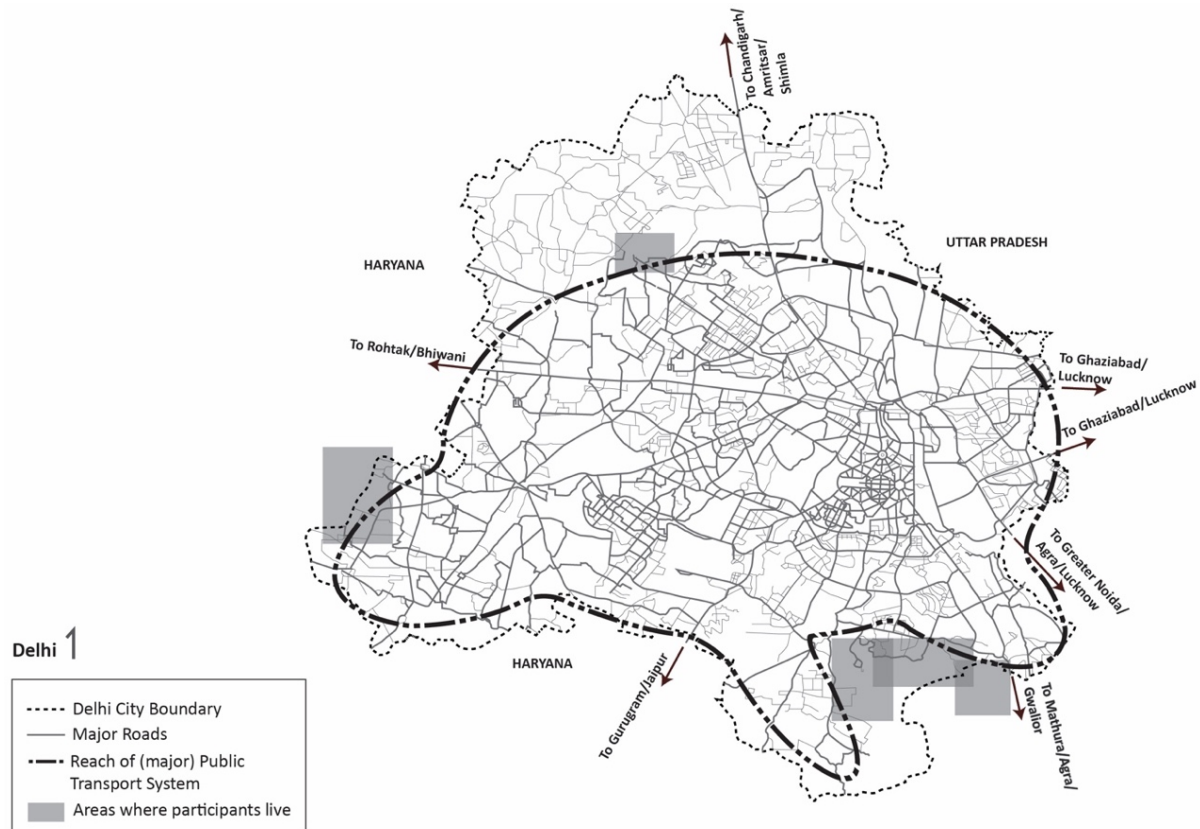


Figure 1. Context map of Delhi showing the area where the participants live. These areas lie outside the metropolitan region of Delhi and are beyond the limits of the planned transportation system.

4 Mobilities and identities

Kaufmann (2002) argues that all mobility has an influence on the identities of individuals and that the individual identities of people are created based on their respective mobilities. Kaufmann argues that spatial mobility acts as a driving factor that impacts people's social life and thus considers motility or mobility potential as an asset. Ziegler and Schwanen (2011) define mobility as overcoming any distance between a here and a there, which can be situated in physical, electronic, social, psychological or other kinds of space. Mobilities are mesh movement, meaning and practice (Salazar et al., 2017). This complex juxtaposition opens the dialogue toward the multiple effects of mobilities. Several scholars described mobility as a polymorphic and diversified concept that requires reaffirmation of theories related to culture, identity and transnational relationships (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Salazar & Smart, 2011). Urry (2000) advocated understanding mobilities from the social sciences perspective but beyond societies. He focused on the effects of networks of people, ideas and things to produce sociality and identity in a moving rather than static geographical space.

Mobility is not just mere motion but also a form of identity-making (Razack, 2018). Harvey (1989) explains the reason for considering space as a powerful factor that determines the nature of the

formation of any individual's lifestyle, ways of living, modes of displacement and production. According to Bakhtin (1990), all humans are embodied, that is, the body occupies a particular place in space and time that is unique to the body itself. These places, also referred to as micro-geographies, position the actors with respect to other actors and may generate multiple identities and roles for each of them (Kaufmann, 2002). With the numerous mobility options and daily requirements, the lives of people are defined by motion rather than static (Hein et al., 2008).

With the increased levels and new forms of mobility, various movement patterns emerge and integrate with ways of contemplating to create different identities through micro-geographies of everyday life (Cresswell, 2011). Thus, it becomes critical to investigate into daily activities of individuals for a better explanation of their mobilities. In the context of the daily commute to work, many studies highlight the nature of women's travel as compared to men (Fagnani, 1983; Fanning Madden, 1981; Hanson & Johnston, 1985; Hanson & Pratt, 1988; Villeneuve & Rose, 1988); however, there is not much research on the relationship between mobility and identities concerning UMW.

4.1 Connexity, reversibility and ubiquity: fundamentals of mobility

According to Kaufmann (2002), the fundamentals of mobilities are based on three processes, namely, 1) connexity, 2) reversibility of mobility forms and 3) ubiquity of actors. Connexity refers to the networks established by individuals with the help of advanced technology systems and is not due to spatial proximity (contiguity). Connexity allows different individuals to be a part of various spatial patterns at the same time and generates social integration by expanding the web of networks of individuals beyond proximity parameters (Badie, 1995; Couclelis, 1996). This aspect signifies the replacement of physical territories with the upcoming lifestyles adopted by individuals.

The second factor, reversibility, refers to the identities of individuals that are formed as a result of their mobilities. Besides increasing the movement of people between territories, spatial mobility also provides a means for detaching individuals from their local social environments (Kaufmann, 2002). Individuals create multiple identities through ubiquity (Bailly et al., 2003). This daily movement creates new identities by using the opportunities provided by mobility for better well-being. Reversible mobilities³ are characterized by a repetitive pattern that emerges during daily journeys. It is because of the repetitive nature of these reversible mobilities that the identities of individuals are created (Kaufmann, 2002). Public transport modes, where people travel with others, impact their identities compared to private modes like cars, where the individual becomes isolated from society (Whitelegg, 1997).

The third factor is ubiquity which represents the many identities that the individual creates by being present at different locations and acting at a distance. Enacting multiple identities in the same space

³Instead of migrating to their place of work, individuals travel long distances on a daily basis with the help of fast-moving transport modes and advanced tele-communication technologies (Wiel, 1999, Putnam, 2000). Because of their frequent return (on a daily basis) the individuals are connected to their place of origin (home or neighbourhood) and maintain their social networks. It implies that through the means of advancement in transport and tele-communications, the individuals preserve their original identities without having to construct new ones because of migration (Kaufmann, 2002). Hence, the speed of transport becomes important in this case which lays emphasis on the transport choice.

demands individuals to move from one role to another. According to Kaufmann (2002), spatial mobility and social mobility are interlinked with reference to ubiquity. At times ubiquity is also a symbol of virtualization of the society whose focus lies on the desires and aspirations of individuals in the context of the social realm. Within the understanding of spatial context, ubiquity attempts to cover the difference between the territories in the centre and those on the periphery (Kaufmann, 2002).

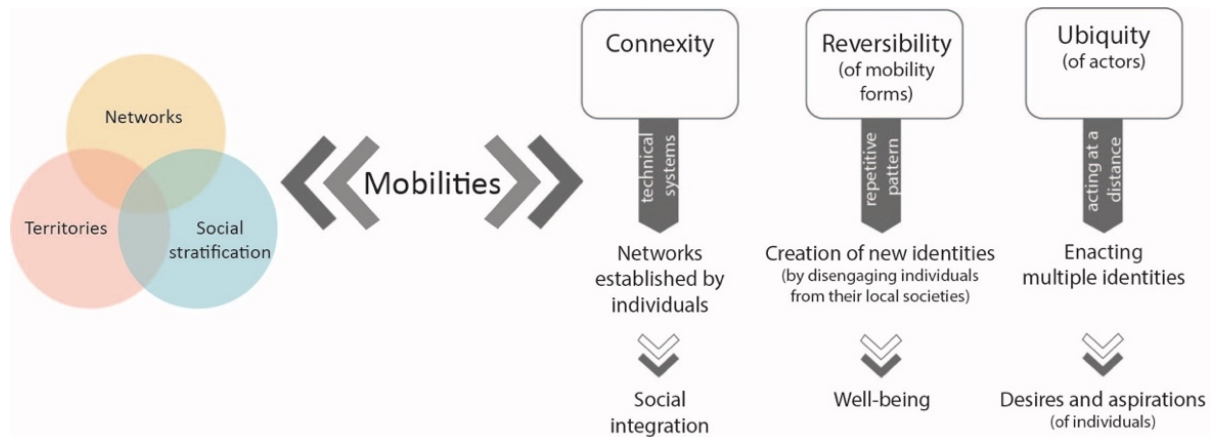


Figure 2. Connexity, reversibility and ubiquity as the core components of mobilities. Source: Adapted from Kaufmann (2002).

5 Research findings

The daily mobility of UMW is characterized by travelling long distances and therefore is accompanied by increased travel time and cost. In the absence of direct connectivity between their home location and workplace, UMW includes multi-modal trips within a single journey to accommodate spending less money on travel-related activities.



Figure 3. UMW living in informal settlements of Delhi use different modes of transport to reach their work locations. Source: Author.

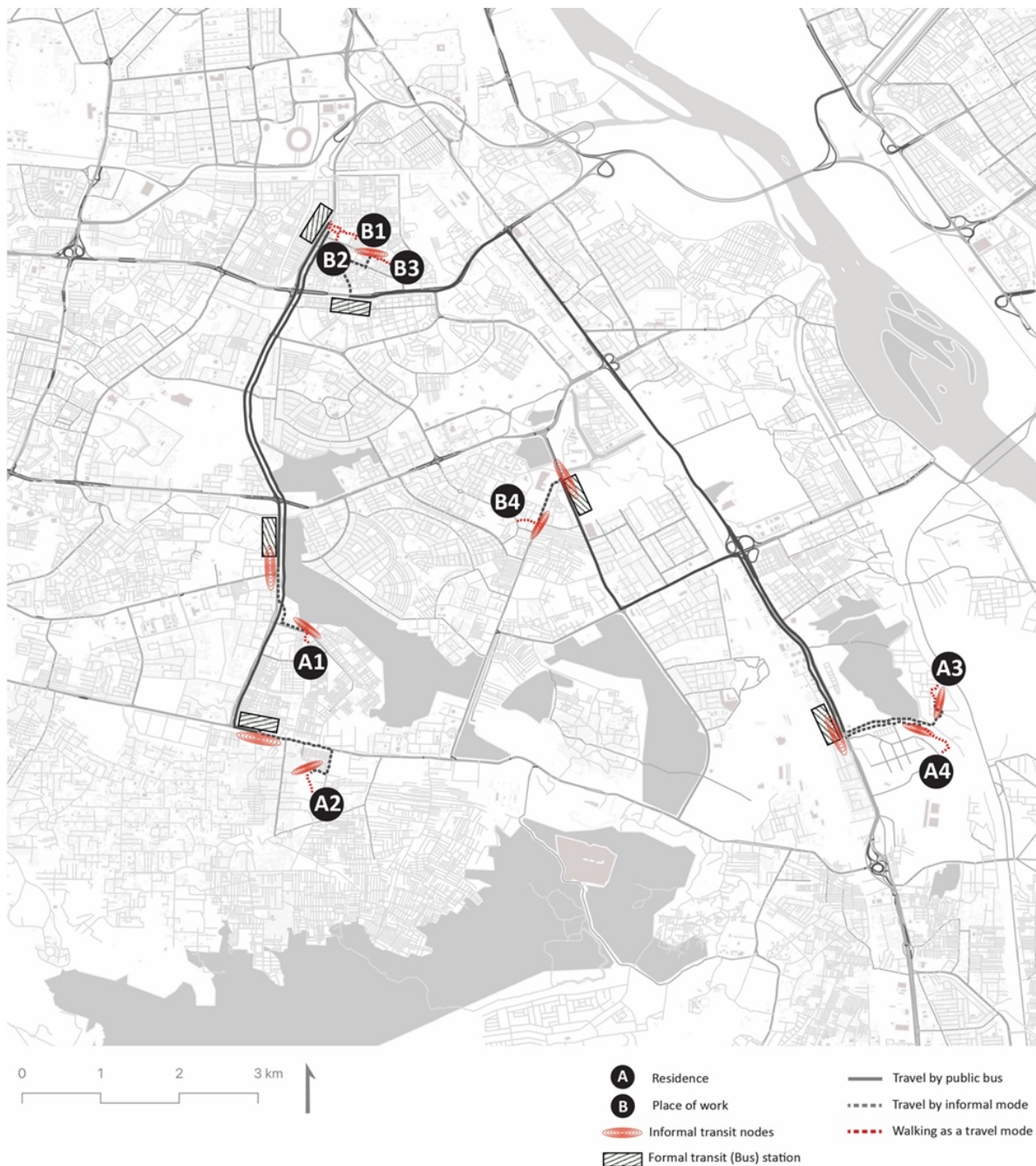


Figure 4. Map showing major public transportation routes connecting the place(s) of residence and the workplace(s) of the participants. The map also indicates travel performed by informal modes of transport and on foot, important nodes showing points of the interchange.

5.1 Earning respect

The initial understanding developed through mapping GPS data and conversations with the participants reveals that though these women travel outside of their home settlements, the choice of their work locations remains limited to specific areas within Delhi. This choice of work location may be due to better connectivity between their place of residence (informal settlement) and place of work through easily accessible transport modes. The conversations with the participants reveal that these UMW consider travelling an unsafe activity due to incidents of sexual harassment and eve-teasing. Therefore, other factors, such as the availability or presence of an accompanying person, such

as another woman travelling to the same location from within her home settlement, to make up for travel safety concerns, could also influence this choice of work location and, thus, mobility.

Through understanding the context of the study, it is noticed that the factors that exclude women from the socio-cultural environment and deny them access to basic resources lead towards experiencing a lack of respect.

“I worked as a mobilizer at Cequin and did a lot of work with Mahila Panchayat. It was just to prove myself, to do some good work. Some work that I can do requires hard work and gives me respect from others.”

Asma, 36, ASHA worker

5.2 Creating new identities

Thus, through mobility (by participating in socio-economic activities), these UMW temporarily disengage from their local social structure and travel to other locations to create new identities. Kaufmann (2002) mentions that spatial mobility is a means for individuals to escape by disengaging from their local societies and creating new identities. Many women aspire to create new identities through employment in urban city centre areas. The interview quotes below demonstrate some of the reasons the participants gave for travelling to other locations outside their home settlements.

“There are small beauty salons near my home. They are not very nice and pay less salary.”

Rinki, 21, beautician

“Near my house, the salary is low because the area is not nice and even the people are not that good.”

Ankita, 23, beautician

“I don’t want to work so close. I want to work somewhere far like Lajpat Nagar, Sarojini Nagar.”

Anam, 18, salesperson

These experiences shared by UMW indicate that these women aspire to work in more affluent areas to earn higher salaries. For this reason, they travel to specific locations that are better than their home settlements in terms of urban and social infrastructure. They associate their home settlements with not being a ‘nice area’. The informal settlement they live in is inhabited by people from the same socio-cultural and economic group. Because of being in contact with people of similar disadvantaged conditions and social structures, these women aspire to move to locations associated with an enhanced urban and social status to create new identities.

Nevertheless, by moving out of their society and having the tag of an upscale urban area attached to them, these women successfully enjoy an enhanced social status within their local communities (within their residential area). Here, it is critical to interpret the significance of social status. Through the study and understanding of the socio-cultural background to which these women belong, it is revealed that the prevailing socio-cultural factors impact social status and represent an individual’s position within the society which in this context gives importance to and lays emphasis on marriage (Gera & Hasdell, 2020).

"I do plan to do an MA after graduation. I can't say much when it comes to marriage."

Rubina, 23, full-time student

"I don't know if I will continue to work after my marriage. It depends on where my parents get me married and how my parents-in-law think. I will have to handle the household chores after marriage, so it may be difficult."

Rinki, 21, beautician

The above quote supports and highlights the expected change in the mobility of women and, thus the ability to participate in socio-economic activities with respect to their marital status. Through the analysis of the data and the context of the study, it is revealed that the mobility of most women diminishes after marriage. Therefore, socio-cultural factors impact the socio-spatial mobility and, thus social identity of these UMW.



Figure 5. Daily travel pattern of three participants who travel outside their home settlements to more established urban city centres for better employment opportunities.

5.3 Experiencing temporary freedom

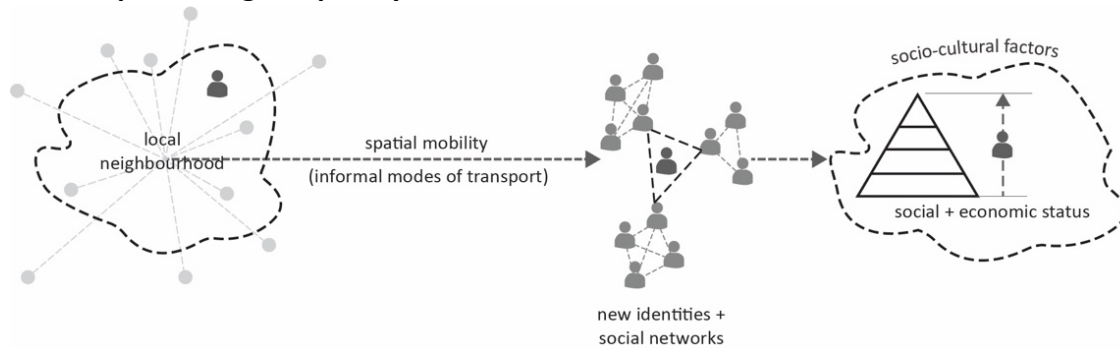


Figure 6. New identities are created by distancing or disconnecting from local ones for enhanced social status. However, the actual social mobility of unmarried UMW remains restricted due to existing socio-cultural norms. Source: Gera & Hasdell (2020).

Constrained by various norms from their community, these UMW aspire to temporarily withdraw or disengage from their communities to experience freedom from the socio-cultural environment. They desire to distance themselves from their local communities to an environment where no one knows their actual identity to make judgements based on their socio-cultural and family background. They look outside of their community for respect, freedom and to experience power (decision-making). Moreover, their inability to practice unmonitored mobility inspires them to move away from their community (temporarily) through the possibility of taking up employment at other locations. The ‘temporariness’ of the freedom associated with this aspect is significant in this scenario because it allows them to be connected to their community for support by maintaining their local identities (against others or the outside⁴ world) yet breaking away from it to experience their rights. This aspect aligns with the concept of ‘reversible mobilities’ by Kaufmann (2002), according to which repetitive movement of people enables multiple identities (discussed in section 4.1).

5.4 Motivations for attaining social status

Many women are socially excluded from their socio-cultural setting and thus look outside their community for opportunities to create new identities. Although this motivation is mainly driven by economic necessities, at the same time, it is also accompanied by earning respect and experiencing temporary freedom from their restrictive socio-cultural environment. The motivation of attaining a good social status encourages these women to move out of their society; however, it is seen to be restricted and impacted by fear of sexual harassment. Being socially excluded during their travel hugely affects their morale and motivation to participate in socio-economic activities. It is observed that incidents of sexual harassment lead to lowering confidence levels of women and self-exclusion from travel-related activities.

“One encounters many ill-behaved people. So, for this reason, very few people go on a bus.”

Chhoti Bitti, 33, driving lessons

⁴ Outside is referred to the people and socio-cultural environment that is different from their own and is guided by a different set of beliefs and norms.

“If the bus is crowded, no one likes it because someone may touch here and there. It is a bad feeling. It disturbs the mind. My mind goes crazy.”

Poornima, 23, pursuing driving training

To perform their daily mobility safely, these women prefer to travel in groups of two or more. They use their informal connections from within their home settlement or near their workplace to find other women who intend to travel in the same direction as theirs.

“Two of us go from this area. We meet in the morning at the nearby junction to travel ahead.”

Ritu, 24, social worker

Based on the findings it can be argued that these UMW move out of their local neighbourhood in search of respect and enhanced social status. Being employed in a better locality may lead to establishing new contacts with people from different socio-economic groups that may eventually help them to seek better employment opportunities and thus enhance their social status. However, even after travelling outside their closed communities, they either carry their network with them or create another homogenous local network (with other women working within the same urban area) comprising other women from a similar socio-economic group. The formation and continuation of a homogenous network impact transformation of their identities within the new socio-urban environment.

6 Discussion / contribution to the field

The study guides towards interconnected factors impacting mobility that encourage marginalized women to move out of their local socio-urban environment by participating in socio-economic activities. Creating new identities, experiencing temporary freedom and earning respect for themselves emerged as the three main factors that motivate UMW to participate in socio-economic activities and thus impact their (spatial) mobility. The study points towards an understanding that participating in socio-economic activities gives them an excuse to move away from the restricted setting and experience being themselves in a relatively unknown environment to create an enhanced social image.

Additionally, the research points out that participating in socio-economic activities facilitated by mobility gives them the means to earn respect for themselves by changing identities (temporarily). Thus, spatial mobility has an intertwined relationship with socio-cultural factors that have varying impacts on the identities of individuals. This study focuses on the mobility of UMW and highlights the gender-specific factors (arising from socio-cultural context) that may impact the identity transformation of individuals.

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