



## A troublesome transport challenge? Working round the school run

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### ABSTRACT

Transport policy and practice could be challenged by the future of women's mobility if it means an increasing reliance on the car. The paper examines the contextual relationship between the journey to school/childcare and the journey to work undertaken by eleven women who work part-time. It considers what the problems these women face in managing their time-space commitments and argues that time is the central problem. Transport can be a solution and a further problem in negotiating the competing time needs of work and family schedules. The research indicates the role ICTs, notably the mobile phone, play in mitigating individual transport problems, thus solutions to the problem of women's time may not be sustainable.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the everyday *context* of transport and information and communication technology (ICT) use for women who combine parenting and part-time work. The paper reports on research that investigated how transport problems are articulated by individuals and the potential for innovation with ICTs to emerge from such transport problems (see also [Line et al., 2010](#)). Conceptually, women's mobility appears to throw up various challenges and questions around issues of economic and environmental sustainability and social equity, which [Hanson \(2010\)](#) argues have yet to be fully debated. She presents a statistical picture of women's mobility as *generally* being more environmentally and economically sustainable than men's because fewer women travel by car, and the distances they travel are less than men undertake. Hanson argues that framing these practices as a potential sustainable trajectory is in tension with the concept that "mobility is empowering...[thus]...more mobility especially for women, is a good thing" ([Hanson, 2010:9](#)). Her conclusions suggest understanding the *context* in which everyday mobility is conducted will move forward the debates of gender and sustainable mobility. Building on this argument, the *context* of mobility is central to this paper, specifically to understand how individuals identify and articulate transport problems that they face, and identify any innovative or creative responses that may constitute a move towards more sustainable practices.

The research stems from a broader investigation into ICT-based *user innovation* (i.e. 'bottom up' innovation by users of the transport system, as opposed to top-down innovation from Government

or the commercial sector) as solutions to transport problems<sup>1</sup> (see also [Line et al., 2010](#); [Lyons et al., forthcoming](#)). The aim of this research was, firstly, to understand how individuals identify transport problems; secondly, their relationship with ICTs as solution tools; and thirdly, the opportunity for innovation (see [Line et al., 2010](#)). Based on the evidence in the literature, as outlined below, women who work and have children often have complex time-space needs and constraints, which gave rise to the assumption that women juggling work and home-life might be affected by transport problems such as road congestion, public transport reliability, safety, etc., that might prompt an innovative response. The authors recognise that women who have children are not always the main carers of children; women *and men* (as parents, grandparents, other relatives and other carers), who combine childcare responsibilities with either full or part-time employment, may also experience similar circumstances described in this paper. Nevertheless, in considering the potential for innovative action and social change, women are the largest single group that work part-time in combination with childcare from whom useful understandings of transport 'problems' can be drawn that may have wider societal benefit.

The paper focuses on the journey to and from work via school or childcare provider, using the findings from eleven qualitative diary-interviews with women, who identified themselves as mothers who work part-time with a strong interest in using ICTs. It is concerned with how the women identified problems, and how these were managed with everyday mobility tools (i.e. mode of transport and ICTs). The implications of the findings discussed in this context raise some questions both for academic and policy research about the future sustainability of women's mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ideasintransit.org> for further information.

## 2. Contextualising ‘problem spaces’: understanding women’s mobility in the UK

In this section the paper contextualises current issues associated with women’s mobility that underpin the assumptions about women’s mobility problems, indicated above, and how these intersect with the objectives of the research.

Transport, and increasingly ICTS, impact on the way individuals and households select, organise and manage a range of different activities – work, leisure, social events, shopping, education, health care, etc., across time and space (see for example, Dobbs, 2007; Jarvis, 2005; Skinner, 2005; Schwanen, 2007; Schwanen and Kwan, 2008; Turner and Grieco, 2000; Rosenbloom, 1992). Women’s mobility is often identified as more problematic than men’s mobility, as often they need to manage more complex space–time commitments with limited mobility options (Hamilton et al., 2005). In general terms, statistical evidence captures the gender differences in the UK travel patterns and trends. These include: (i) women make more trips than men but are more likely to use public transport and walk than men; (ii) more men than women travel longer distances (including by rail) and men are more likely to travel by car or bicycle than women; but (iii) more women now hold a driving licence and have greater access to a car as the main driver than in the past (Hamilton et al., 2005; DfT, 2010). While women have a greater opportunity to drive, in one car households it is usually the man who has priority use of the car, whereas in two car households similar percentages of men and women are classified as the main driver (Hamilton et al., 2005). Two or more car households have grown considerably in number in the UK to 35% of all households (ONS, 2010). However, while the statistical evidence demonstrates gender differences, there remains a need to understand the social context (Hanson, 2010).

Women’s time–space commitments are often more complex because generally women are more involved in managing domestic responsibilities than men (ONS, 2006). Domestic responsibilities directly impact on employment opportunity in terms of the time budget available for work and commute, and the need to be accessible to home should an emergency arise (e.g. a child becoming ill at school), thus women tend to work closer to home than men and are less likely to take work that requires international travel (Blumen, 2000; Dobbs, 2007, 2005). In the UK, women contribute more to domestic activities and childcare than men (ONS, 2006). Nearly 70% of the whole female workforce has dependent children (ONS, 2008). Women are much more likely to work part time than men (about 25% of women and about 4% of men with dependent children) (ONS, 2010). Generally, mothers who work are responsible for dropping off/collecting children at school or other childcare; and school hours, for example, limit the times at which the onward/return commute can take place and potentially reduce the travel time budget for the commute. Also women are more likely to incorporate other activities such as shopping with these trips (trip chaining) (Hamilton et al., 2005).

Transport availability will affect the spatial context of the home–school–work relationship and women’s employment opportunities, notwithstanding the likely impact of their partner’s/husband’s employment choices on where they live, etc. (Greed, 2008; Dobbs, 2007). As Hamilton et al. (2005) note, public transport services (timings, routes, and cost) may further diminish the opportunities for women to combine childcare with work. Thus, the car is often considered as providing women with greater freedom and empowering choice not only for employment but in their social lives too (Dobbs, 2007; Greed, 2008). As such, the car can be understood as an enabler for social equity, but at the same time it is a challenge for sustainability (Hanson, 2010).

Choosing a more sustainable mode may be outweighed by the practicalities of everyday life, although there is some evidence that women may choose more sustainable modes for the sake of future generations (Hjorthol, 2001) which connects with other research that suggests women are more likely to have an environmental conscience than men (for example Mohai, 1992; O’Connor et al., 1999). Gelissien (2007) suggests that gendered attitudes towards the environment arise from gendered socialisation that include a mothering or caring dimension, and such ‘caring’ about future generations that could include grandchildren is evident in Hjorthol’s research. While ‘caring’ is often perceived as gendered, caring and travel behaviour is part of a more complex set of context driven social relations than just about the environment (Murray, 2008).

The complexity of caring and travel choice also shapes the travel to school decision (Murray, 2008; Dowling, 2000). ‘The school run’ is indicative of a potential ‘problem space’ identified by transport policy because of the increasing numbers of children being driven to school; and mothers who drive children to school are often criticised by the media (Greed, 2008). In the UK during 2008, 43% of primary school and 21% of secondary school children travel to school by car; and 48 percent of primary school and 40% of secondary school children walk<sup>2</sup> (ONS, 2010). Underlying the modal choice for journey to school are concepts of safety/risk and health/fitness, social expectations, time for social interaction, and time availability (Barker, 2009; Laurier et al.; Murray, 2008; Skinner, 2005; Dowling, 2000). Thus, the school run exemplifies the tension between social context and making sustainable choices.

In summary, the literature that quantifies gender differences – whether in household duties or transport patterns provides a base line for understanding gender differences, but looking in depth at *the context* in which transport decisions are taken and gender identities are performed demonstrate the complex relationship between gender and transport (Hanson, 2010). In taking forward these debates this paper accepts that household structures are heterogeneous, and that constructs of gender are complex. Therefore, it is concerned with the strategies deployed by women who combine part-time work with childcare in order to manage the challenges of complex time–space relationships while also performing a caring role for their children.

## 3. Methodology

The research was an exploratory investigation of the social context of everyday travel and ICT use that utilised a qualitative methodology involving one-day ‘creative’ diaries and follow-up interviews (see also Line et al., 2010). Three groups of people were targeted who potentially could face particular challenges in relation to organising and managing their daily activities and travel, including ‘mothers who work part time’<sup>3</sup> – the group focused upon in this paper.

The recruitment was purposive in that it emphasised that participants should have an interest in using ICTs (across the groups), but as this was exploratory research with a small group of women it did not intend to actively represent different household compositions, nor exclude any. An advert for participants was placed in the online forum ‘NetMums’<sup>4</sup>, and a second advert was placed in a primary school in South Gloucestershire. A press release was issued by the authors’ university to further promote the research. This resulted in the recruitment of 11 women to participate in the research, all of whom lived in the Bristol–Bath area. Table 1

<sup>2</sup> Average distances to primary school being 1.6 miles, and secondary school 3.4 miles (ONS, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The other groups were ‘mobile professionals’ and ‘students living away from home’. These other groups did not purposefully exclude parents.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.netmums.co.uk>

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