



ARTICLE FROM THE BOOK:

**Cyclists & Cycling Around the World – Creating Liveable and Bikeable Cities**

Edited by Juan Carlos Dextre, Mike Hughes & Lotte Bech

Published by Fondo Editorial, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2013

ISBN: 978-612-4146-55-8

## Socio-Economic Impact of the Cycle – A gendered social perspective of cycling in India

By Dr. Anvita Arora, Managing Director and CEO of Innovative Transport Solutions (iTrans)

### Background

The cycle and its many variants like the three-wheel passenger cycle rickshaw and goods trolleys, and the four-wheel vendor carts are an important mode of transport in Indian cities. Bicycle use in medium and large Indian cities varies from 7-15% in large cities to 13-21% in medium and small cities. Its high ownership, low cost and easy use attributes make it a desirable mode of transport for students and low income workers. A large amount of utility cycling is present in Indian cities because the bicycle is the most affordable form of transport available to low income households.

Most of the medium and large cities in India have about 56% to 72% trips which are short trips (below 5km trip length), offering a huge potential for bicycle use. The close vicinity



Girls cycling to college in a small city of Raipur (They cover their face against the sun and pollution)  
Photo: Gerhard Menkoff



Pictures of the cyclists in India, delivering furniture, kerosene and milk!

of academic institutions (mostly 3-4 km), easy ridership, no license requirement and no fuel requirement are all factors which make it an attractive mode of travel for students. Parking facilities, safety and ease of travel are some of the most important factors which seem to govern female bicycle ridership. One of the reasons for the small share of bicycle trips in large cities is the presence of hostile conditions for cyclists.

## Who is cycling?

The picture of a cyclist in India is not of a athletic young male on two wheels weaving aggressively through the traffic in full cycling gear or going for a weekend ride through the green countryside for health. The cyclist in India is service provider from the formal sector (postman, electricity line repairman) or the informal sector (gardener, domestic worker, mason, security guard). The cyclist is a delivery man – delivering milk, restaurant food, mineral water, cooking gas cylinders; a street vendor – selling vegetables, groceries, sweets.



Conflict on the left (slow moving)  
lane of the road

Even the cycle is not always the two-wheeled bicycle. It is often adapted to 3 or 4 wheels to carry passengers (passenger rickshaw), to ferry goods (goods rickshaw), or to sell stuff (vending trolley). A cycle is not only a means of transport to access livelihood, it is a means of livelihood by itself.

### Conflict for space

The manner in which the road space is shared is a reflection of the power and identity struggles of the society. The fact that the big SUV is offended if a small car overtakes it, the car pushes the motorcycle, and the motorcycle runs the cyclist off the road is the kind of road user behaviour that acknowledges the marginal position of the cyclist in the order of things. The cycle is in conflict with all other modes of transport including pedestrians for space on the road, some conflicts leading to lowered speeds and abuses but some leading to the death of the cyclists.

## Gender and poverty dimensions of mobility

Understanding of gender issues in the transport context is of vital relevance, since women are estimated to account for 70% of those living in poverty worldwide (UNDP, 1995). The growing literature on women and transport has also clearly shown that they tend to have different travel needs deriving from the multiple tasks they must perform in their households and in their communities (Greico and Turner, 1997). Low-income women tend also to be much less mobile than men in the same socio-economic groups. They are more dependent on walking and tend to have less access to any bicycles or motorcycles in a household. Social restrictions hinder women's mobility in many cultures (Gopalan, 1998). Efforts to increase the mobility of poor women may face stiff resistance from those who feel threatened or offended by such direct empowerment of women (UNDP 1998). Sexual harassment (and worse) in streets and on public transport is a common occurrence. Since many more women than men are the care-givers of frail or elderly people, people with disabilities and of children, the transport problems of these disadvantaged groups also impact disproportionately on women. Poverty, of course, compounds each of these disadvantages.

Accessibility is a major barrier to the upliftment of women, especially in a country like India where the socio-economic constructs ensure that women are the last persons to have access to the mode of transports in the households or money to travel. Added to this, the indifferent public transport services and the safety risks that women incur on the streets ensure that women are unable to travel to access their primary needs of health, education and livelihood.

Sustainability can only be achieved by preserving diversity. Development experience world-wide shows that gender based policies become all inclusive. If the mobility policies too are gender-centered they will target the mobility of the entire society. This can be equated with the UN education slogan 'educating one woman will educate the entire family'.

A research study (Singh & Anand, 2001) showed that women's greater domestic responsibilities coupled with their weaker access to household resources have significant consequences for their transport and travel status. The women of lower income households experience greater transport deprivations as compared with men. Women were to be found as the users of the less expensive and slower modes of transport when their intensive household schedules (women are time-poor as compared to the men) would be better served by access to faster modes. The survey results indicate that women spend more time traveling on slower modes – the faster and more flexible modes being more expensive. Their time-poverty forces them to look for work at shorter distances from their home thus decreasing their choices and opportunities. The survey results illustrated that women lack mobility in the city due to gender-based restrictions,

inferior access to transport means, high dependence on low quality public transport, lack of availability of affordable modes of travel, and that lack of mobility is inextricably linked to poverty of women in so much that:

- It is *caused* by their poverty (of both time and resources)
- It becomes the *indicator* of their poverty (as illustrated by their work force participation and the nature of jobs they are able to access)
- It *causes* their poverty (by becoming a disabling factor to their access to livelihood)

The study also showed that while the bicycle was the mode of transport for the poor, where distances exceeded walking limits and bus fares were too expensive in relation to their income, not one woman bicycled to work. The women constituted 25% of the working population and mostly walked to work or used buses even though the fares were too high.

### Why do the women not bicycle?

**Patriarchy:** Patriarchy is an overarching concept influencing local power relationships and cultures. It is therefore directly related to the gendered division of labour in both modern and traditional societies, with the household (or family) unit as the central perpetuator of the societal system. Men, in their superior power position within the household hierarchy, tend to appropriate the most efficient means of transport for themselves. In this interpretation, cars, motorcycles, bicycles or animal carts are mainly seen as household assets and resources over which men, as the most powerful members of the household, would obviously seek to maintain control. Given the lower levels of overall motorization in less developed countries, power struggles are more likely to occur even over non-motorized forms of transport.



Woman cycling on the side of a truck on unpaved shoulder  
Photograph by IDS, 2005

Young girl cycling back from work on a hot afternoon in Panjim, Goa to avoid peak hour congestion later



**No dignity for the cyclists:** Bicycles, in India, are invisible modes driven by people who are invisible in the city. So government policies and plans do not provide space for cyclists on the roads. Over the last few years, however, efforts are being made by organizations such as TRIPP, IIT, Delhi to redesign road spaces to include the non-motorised. They have done a lot of work in sensitising the planners and the policy makers toward the need and importance of the non-motorised modes of transport. However, what is difficult to combat is the low image of the bicycle. Bicycles are the mode of the poor and cyclists are captive riders in India – that is, they have no choice. So issues of equity and dignity are closely linked to the bicycle use on our roads.

**No space on the road:** The reality today is that cyclists have no space on the roads, especially in the bigger cities. They are forced to compete for space with larger, high speed motor vehicles (refer figure 1) increasing their vulnerability to accidents and road rage. Since there is no legitimate space for the cyclists, some men on the bicycles may be to adapt to aggressive/defensive driving to survive (though their exposure is no less), women find it tougher to undergo this struggle on a daily basis.

**Gender biased infrastructure design:** There is very little infrastructure existing for cyclists in general in Indian cities and it is all designed for the anthropometrics of young male cyclists. Women cycling with children and shopping bags may need more width of the track and safe space at parking areas where they can unload children and bags comfortably. They would have longer acceleration times and need longer leads at green phases of the signals.

**Uncomfortable bicycles:** The male cycles, more easily available in the market, especially second-hand, are completely unsuitable for women. If they are wearing skirts or saris



Girls cycling in Alwar on an unsafe intersection. They would rather cycle then subject themselves to the harassment of bad public transport

then it is impossible for them to ride them. The cheapest ladies bicycle is more expensive than the cheapest male bicycle. If the household wants to buy bicycles they will buy the male bicycles that all the males in the house can use rather than a ladies bicycle which a man will never ride on for fear of ridicule.

**Harassment and abuse of women:** The entire transport infrastructure of our cities, be it the badly lit subways, unusable overhead bridges, absurdly high sidewalks, uncomfortable bus shelters, badly lit walkways, roads in a state of disrepair; all contribute to a very hostile street environment for the women which actively disables their mobility. Cycling in these badly lit roads with potholes is an invitation to jeering comments and abuse for the women on the road. In fact, as is with the car drivers (the behaviour of male car drivers towards their female counterparts), male cyclists will always try to overtake and ridicule female cyclists, to establish their dominance on the road.

## Experiences from the field

In 2005, with the Institute for Democracy and Sustainability (IDS), we concluded a year-long study on the bicycle users and non-users in the city of Delhi. Of the total of 2000 people interviewed across Delhi, 1000 people were interviewed from the low-income working class section of the populace, and of them only two bicycle users were women. Amongst the non-users several of the women knew how to bicycle and had bicycled in their home towns or villages, but they stopped cycling after migrating to Delhi.

This argument is borne out by the fact that there is a higher percentage of women bicycling in smaller cities and towns (which have higher share of both male and female cyclists). Alwar, a small city in North India, with a population of less than 3 million, claims

to have an 80% share of bicycling. Figure 6 shows girls cycling in an arterial street, a common sight in Alwar.

In the year 2005-2006, under the aegis of a fellowship from the Environment Equity and Justice partnership (EEJP), we conducted a small pilot study in a low-income settlement in South Delhi amongst a group of domestic workers. These women had the unique characteristic that they bicycled to work. The studies showed that they had been taught bicycling by their husbands so that they could go to more apartments and do housework rather than wasting time in walking or money in taking the public transport. The survey results showed that the increased mobility had increased their income and hence their bargaining power in the households and the community. It had given them more confidence and freedom to work and educate their children. The study tried to understand the problems and barriers these women face on the road and in the community. Box 1 is the transcription of an interview with a domestic worker, Uma Muniyan who bicycles to work. Her narrative highlight several issues raised in this paper.

#### **Interview of Uma Muniyan**

Be it morning or evening or the afternoon – the major intersections in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi see a continuous stream of small groups of women – some on the bicycle and some on foot. One of these women is Uma Muniyan, a Bengali woman of 30 years. She is originally from Hoogly in Bengal. She still finds it difficult to speak Hindi fluently and rides her bicycle to work wearing her sari.

She says “I have been working for the last year as a maid-servant. I used to walk to work earlier and was very tired by the end of the day. The flats of Vasant Kunj are far from Shankar camp (the informal settlement where she lives) and there is no public transport system connecting them. We are forced to use personal vehicles. There is no option but to walk or bicycle. We do not earn enough to buy a scooter. So, for us, the best option is to buy a bicycle. That is the reason I bought a bicycle 3 months back.”

“Why did you not buy a bicycle before this?”

“Because of lack of funds. Today I work in two flats, earlier I worked in only one. My husband, Swadesh Muniyan, cleans cars belonging to the flat-owners. He also earns 1000-1500 Rupees (1USD= 55 Indian Rupees) a month. I earn 1300 rupees a month – 700 from one place and 600 from the other. So, we have to really plan our savings and expenditure”



Uma Muniyan

"What does the bicycle mean for your future?"

"Earnings increase with owning a bicycle. The bicycle makes it easy to work in 2-3 places. If the flats are located far apart, then too it is not difficult to manage. On foot, even working at one place leaves one very tired at the end of the day."

"Do feel any hesitation or discomfort in cycling?"

No, I do not feel any hesitation. Though, men still do not like to see women cycling, but the circumstances pressurize the men to teach their women to cycle. They know that if we work at more flats, we will be able to earn more, and a bicycle is necessary for that."

"Did you learn bicycling after coming to Delhi?"

"No, I learnt to bicycle at a very young age. The learning at that time is helping me now."

"Being a woman, do you face any problems while bicycling?"

"No problem at all. The ladies cycles are comfortable to ride on even with saris. With regard to the safety of women on the roads, the bicycle has very little to do with it. Men who make abusive comments will keep on doing that – whether the woman is on foot or on the bicycle or on a bus. While working in these flats we have to be alert – who knows what is there in anybody's mind."



Domestic worker doing her household chores like fetching water on the bicycle

The increasing urbanization is leading to changes in lifestyle for the families. In traditional joint families there was always somebody staying at home, especially women. So some people went out for jobs and business and the rest helped with the household chores. Now the situation has changed completely and both men and women are so busy with their jobs and businesses, that they do not have time to do their household chores like washing clothes and utensils, getting vegetables and milk from the market etc. They then need these maid servants, who help to make their daily lives comfortable and convenient.

These maid-servants come from far-off areas of the country and often belong to the very poor and tribal sections. Some of them live in the houses they work for. However, most maid-servants (like Uma Muniyan) work part-time. They work in one or more households. Usually they work for 2-3 hours in the morning and 2-3 hours in the evening. Most of these maid servants live in the slum settlements and, according to their affordability, distance from home to work, availability of transport etc., decide on which mode to use to travel to work. The bicycle empowers them with independent mobility, freedom of choice and enables them to better their economic status. Apart from access to livelihood, the bicycle gives them efficiency in handling their daily chores too.

**Anvita Arora**

anvitaa@gmail.com or anvitaa@itrans.co.in