

# **Gender Issues in Transportation: A Short Introduction**

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# Gender Issues in Transportation: A Short Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Seventy percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty worldwide are women, according to the UN 1995 Human Development Report. Transport-related issues such as access to jobs, markets and social/educational facilities play an important, but underappreciated role in perpetuating women's disadvantaged position in society. While there have been an increasing number of efforts to incorporate gender perspectives especially into the health, education and agricultural sectors, much fewer attempts have been made in the transport sector. This is particularly unfortunate since transport plays such a vital role in most women's daily routines.

Major differences in the basic mobility needs of women and men are grounded in the gender-based division of labor within the family and community. Men's stereotypical role in almost all societies is the one of the income-earning breadwinner, who leaves the house for work in the morning and comes back in the evening. Women, however, usually perform triple roles as income earners, home-makers, and community-managers. As a rule, they take shorter, more frequent and more dispersed trips during the day. Women also frequently carry shopping bulky loads and are accompanied by children or elderly relatives. Of course women usually do not get paid for these reproductive and community-related trips.

Existing transport systems are not adequately geared towards the needs of women. Rather, most systems are biased towards the travel needs of male breadwinners. In order to alleviate women's disproportionate transport burden in society, a variety of factors need to be addressed. Among the most important are access to modes of transport, the siting and routing of facilities and infrastructures, and the timing/frequency of services. The following will give a more detailed overview of the differences of male and female travel patterns.

## HOW DO WOMEN'S TRAVEL PATTERS DIFFER FROM MEN'S?

### Women do not have equal access to private motor vehicles

Access to motorized transport, is determined not only by economic means but also by cultural roles. All over the world, car ownership is associated with success, power and social status. Even in car-owning households, it is often only the men who get to drive. A study from Nairobi, Kenya revealed that while 24% of male heads of households used a car, only 9% of women heads did and a similar study made in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, showed 23% of trips to work made by men were made by car, but only 6% of the women's.

### Women Walk and Headload

The most predominant mode of travel for low-income women in developing counties is walking and headloading. Rural women in Africa transport at least three times more ton-kilometers per year than men. Even in urban areas, other transport modes are often not available to women, either because they are too expensive or located too inconveniently and far away.

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<sup>1</sup> A referenced and more detailed introduction to gender and transport issues is published in *Habitat Debate* under the title "Breadwinners, Homemakers, Beasts of Burden" [*Habitat Debate*, vol. 4:2 (Summer 1998), Nairobi: UNCHS]. Also take a look at Michael Bamberger's and Jerry Lebo's recent World Bank PREM note "Gender and transport," available on the World Bank web site ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

### **Women and Non-motorized Vehicles**

For many women in developing countries, cycles or animal-drawn carriages are the most accessible and affordable modes of transport available besides walking. A World Bank study on Dhaka, Bangladesh revealed that 35% of female commuters relied on cycle rickshaws as their sole mode of transport. So when the government of Bangladesh recently proposed to ban rickshaws from the streets of Dhaka, they were singling out not only the most environmentally-friendly mode available, but the one transport choice most essential and accessible women, thereby gravely affecting their mobility. Also, women are mostly passengers and not drivers. Overall, women's access to vehicles and services is actually often more constrained by socio-cultural conventions than by physical barriers. This is particularly true for bicycles, which represent a particularly attractive transport alternative for shorter and medium length trips with multiple stops. Unfortunately, it is culturally unacceptable for women in many societies to ride bicycles.

### **Women and Public Transport**

Women are also more dependent on public transport than men, especially when they are lower-income. Unfortunately, the off-peak and peripheral public transit routes on which many women depend for their travel to shopping or social facilities have much less priority than the radial commuter corridors going straight to the city center. Women's complex household and caretaking responsibilities usually force women to make multiple stops. This also often makes it much more costly for women to get around, since they may have to pay numerous single fare tickets during such a chained trip. Women are also disproportionately affected by the privatization of public transit, because bus companies operating under competitive market conditions are not very interested in serving the less lucrative routes and connections on which women depend, so this is where operators are most likely to reduce service, or cut it altogether. If service does remain, it is often at increased fare levels. In addition to this, privatization and/or licensing of public transit lines also reduces the possibility for integrated fare zones, again disproportionately affecting women who make more transfers and stops. Personal safety and the avoidance of harassment are also major concerns for women public transit users. Women are especially vulnerable to violent attacks or sexual abuse when transporting heavy goods and accompanying children, and this can be a major deterrent for women to use public means of transport. Finally, there are cultural constraints which often prevent women from properly accessing public transport. In predominately Muslim cities such as Dhaka, it is socially difficult for women to share crowded buses with mainly male riders because of the religious dogma of the *purdah*, or social seclusion of women.

## **INTEGRATING GENDER ISSUES INTO TRANSPORT PLANNING AND POLICY-MAKING**

Gender analysis needs to be incorporated into all transport planning, so that gender impacts are studied and considered before project implementation. Most importantly, gender analysis challenges the traditional, neoclassical analysis which looks at households as black boxes and assumes that household behavior reflects the preferences of all its individuals, regardless of the power structures and gender relations within these household units. In this sense, gender analysis is part of a general re-orientation of transport planning away from a focus on facilitating the movement of motorized vehicles to a people-centered perspective that starts with an analysis of the basic household mobility needs.

International development institutions are increasingly taking note of the need to better integrate gender concerns into transport projects. For example, the World Bank's new transportation policy acknowledges that "[t]o date, transport policies have been geared primarily towards the needs of men" and that "[f]ailure to consider ... possibilities for improving the lot of women often stems from inadequate analysis rather than excessive cost" (p78). The bank has also initiated a new Gender and Transport Thematic group that is presently carrying several case studies on gender concerns in both rural and urban transport projects. The initiative is working closely with several NGO that have traditionally been active on these issues, including the London-based IFRTD and the New York-based ITDP. Several other development institutions, such as the Swedish SIDA and the Canadian CIDA have also recently published policy and approach papers seeking to better integrate gender concerns into infrastructure lending, including transportation. The UK-based Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) has also supported several important gender and transport studies in Africa and India. It is to be hoped that the joined force of these various initiatives will finally give women's concerns the much needed attention in the transport sector that it deserves.