

»» Transport Systems: Gender Matters!

No 6, 23 March 2017



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Safe and affordable transportation is vital for modern societies and economies to function, especially where labour is divided. However, the design of transport vehicles and routes can have significantly different effects on men and women – a fact which is far less widely understood.

Men's and women's travel needs are very different

Women's travel needs differ from those of men – sometimes drastically. This is mainly a result of their contrasting social and economic roles. For the most part, necessary travel for men takes the form of a regular route between home and work. Women's movement patterns are far more complex, a fact which is not limited to developing countries; they include destinations such as formal or informal sector work, childcare, places of education, visits to health facilities, shopping, or family visits. Frequently, women also have to transport larger amounts of luggage, such as bringing items to or from shops.

If these patterns were plotted visually, men would be recognisable by fairly long and linear movements. Meanwhile, women's movements would produce multi-sided shapes involving shorter paths, but with greater variation; these would often form chains, one after the other.

Local public transport in many areas is primarily geared to commuters, meaning it is of limited use for female movement habits, as women are often not formally employed. As such, women often need more time to meet their travel needs and have to accept routes and means of transport that are unsafe and more physically demanding.

The way women travel is also different from men

There are clear, gender-specific differences in the use of transport vehicles and routes. To some extent, this is the result of different travel needs between men and women, but it also stems from the broader social and economic environment and societal norms.

Essentially, women in most developing and industrialising countries are much more dependent on footpaths than men. In many cases, tight household budgets cause women to make even longer journeys on foot (or to avoid making journeys at all).

However, cultural acceptance and personal safety are also common and critical criteria for women and girls in their travel decisions. In some countries, it is almost impossible for women to travel unless in male company. This can be observed in societies with a strong patriarchal influence, but also comes as a result of self-imposed travel restrictions due to a perceived lack of safety (e.g. limiting journeys in the dark or through districts with high levels of crime and violence). For instance, in India, more than 50% of women in employment report having safety concerns on their way to work.

Even when households have a private motorcycle or car, these predominantly tend to be used to serve the man's travel needs. The proportion of women with a driving licence is under 15% in many countries.

Consequently, women frequently have restricted access to means of transport, limiting both the number of routes they can take and their choice of places to go.

Gender-sensitive design of transport systems is crucial

Due to the gender-specific differences analysed above, it is important that the perspective of gender is considered in the design of transport systems. This starts with assessing the different travel needs of men and women – and with deciding which needs ought to serve as priorities. These factors have direct consequences on the means and routes of transport under consideration. Road construction benefits motorcyclists and motorists (who are predominantly male), whereas expanded, well-lit walkways and safer road crossings benefit pedestrians (predominantly female).

It is often possible to loosen restrictions on women's mobility with relatively little effort by way of small adjustments to transport systems' design. For example, special women-only sections on trains can be created, separate toilets at stations or stops installed, women's taxi systems established, etc. Indeed, these changes could bring about further action to promote gender equality in partner countries, such as providing women and girls with improved access to basic government services (schools, health services), administrative bodies, occupational training and employment opportunities. ■