

Why Gender Matters

By Clarisse Cunha Linke, ITDP Brazil

The following is an edited version of a live talk given by ITDP Brazil Country Director Clarisse Cunha Linke at the Velo-city global cycling summit in Arnhem-Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in June 2017.

I saw more pregnant and elderly women on bikes in Holland in five days than I had seen in my entire life. At that moment, I realized the importance of the environment when it comes to women accessing transport in cities.

The streets were safe and designed for bikes. The public spaces were open and inviting, and the transport options were abundant. However, this is the exception, not the rule. In Latin America, women still spend hours out of their day traveling on poor-quality transit systems. Very few of them cycle, despite the majority of them having the desire to do so. Clearly women enjoy cycling and find it a good solution for their transport needs, as demonstrated in Holland. The problem isn't cycling in itself, but the environment. We live in spatially segregated cities, agglomerated in ghettos where private property matters more than lives. Where speed is still the synonym of efficiency, men thrive, and women are left behind. Simply put, cities are built in a way that makes them obstacles for women, not places that are safe, accessible, and vibrant.

While the lack of gender neutrality in city and transport infrastructure is widely acknowledged, women still do not have adequate access to public transport. Meetings with planners, decision-makers, and representatives from the private and public sectors rarely address the difference in experience between women and men when it comes to comfort and ability to move around their cities. The fact of the matter is, in today's world, we still imagine that women's experience regarding transport method selection and usage is the same as men's. We don't consider gender.

Particularly looking at Latin America, women have less access to transport modes than men do. Women need to travel more kilometers daily to meet the demands of their many roles, including paid work and unpaid work, including familial and community-based responsibilities. Recent studies in Brazil showed that women work five hours more per week than men in unpaid work, and they dedicate twice as much time to household-related activities. Dedication to unpaid work (two out of the three roles) affects the ability for women to experience financial growth. In fact, in Latin America and most other societies, low-income women hold all three of the aforementioned roles. These roles involve shorter and more frequent trips per day, normally during scattered and off-peak times. Men tend to make more linear trips fixed origin and destination points (normally home to work and vice versa). This coupled with their lack of income to use toward purchasing a car adds to women's reliance on public transport and cycling infrastructure, yet women have difficulty accessing public transit and do not cycle much at all.

Research conducted by São Paulo University shows that on average, less than 10 percent of women cycle. Research done by Ciclocidade in São Paulo also have found a low incidence of women cycling—a maximum of 15 percent in areas some areas, such as Paulista Avenue, and as little as 2 percent in less central areas. So how do we increase female biking in developing countries? A good way to start is to more specifically understand what makes the environment so undesirable



A survey in São Paulo, Brazil showed that women cite road safety as the main reason for not cycling, and that those who do cycle only consider it safe when using protected bike lanes.

In many low-income neighborhoods of Rio there are virtually no economic opportunities or services. Residents commute up to three hours per day in poor transit conditions.

to cycle in. We can look at this issue through the lens of Brazil, which can be applied to many other countries in the global south.

Cities in Brazil, and the global south as a whole, are designed to be spatially segregated. This means that poor women, who usually live far from public transport, are continuously excluded. In Rio de Janeiro, an average of 31 percent of the population is in the transit catchment area (a maximum of 1 kilometer from stations) but only 23 percent of the lowest income group is included, while 55 percent of the highest-income group falls in the transit access area. In many low-income neighborhoods, you can say that there are no economic opportunities or services—these are found in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro, where the poorest populations have to commute one to three hours a day to access them. That is one to three hours a day that women who live in these areas need to spend to perform at least one of their three roles. Many of them struggle to reach transit stations and then once there, they struggle with the quality



of the transit system itself. Moreover, there are no bike lanes or bike-shares in these areas to leverage good-quality urban design and convenient connections to transit systems.

Not only are cities spatially segregated and highly inaccessible, they are not safe. Cities are car-oriented and molded to protect private property, not people. Over the last 50 years, cities in Latin America have turned into bunkers where people hide behind walls, fences, and gated communities with cameras and barbed wires. There has also been an increase in the dichotomy between private and public space. While private space holds quality, comfort, safety, and convenience, public spaces are dangerous. This growing desire to protect private property and assets has actually created the inverse in the feel of the city by creating more hostile and dangerous environments. Cars act in the same way: SUVs and other large vehicles in particular are treated as defensive capsules against the dangers of the city. More people are afraid, especially women, as safety is one of their biggest daily concerns.

A recent study by ActionAid that included four Brazilian cities showed that 75 percent of female respondents

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have changed their route because they were afraid in a street without proper lighting and 70 percent have opted not to go out in the street in the evening because they were afraid of being harassed. What is even worse is that bus stops and walkways, among other areas including alleys and squares, are considered the most unsafe spaces by women. Another study from ActionAid showed that an alarming number of women in many other countries have been harassed on the streets. Topping the list is Brazil at 86 percent. Political and economic priorities are continuously going toward private space, creating a lack of trust and confidence in public ones and reducing the occurrence of spontaneity, flexibility, and vibrancy—



Images: Top - Danielle Hoppe, ITDP Brazil; Bottom - Stephano Aguiar

It is clear that we need to build cities that address the needs of women and men. These types of cities make sure that everyone has equal access to resources, knowledge, and technology, and that all individuals can flourish and make their own decisions on how to live their lives based on choice not limitations.



Events such as car free streets are much more gender balanced than everyday commute cycling, which is more male – dominated.

important factors that contribute to the positive aspects of urban living.

Lack of safety on the road also adds to the lack of comfort for women to bike. Cities are increasingly designed to be seen at high speed from inside a vehicle. These cities are harsh environments for women, as well as children, the elderly, and the people with disabilities. A survey in São Paulo also done by the NGO Ciclocidade showed that 76 percent of women who do not cycle indicated road safety as the reason why. For the ones who do cycle often, 60 percent of them find it safe or very safe only when cycling in dedicated infrastructure.

While Rio, cities in the global south,

and most of the world are not safe spaces for women, there are strides being made. In São Paulo, the construction of bike lanes boosted the number of total cyclists by 188 percent and created a dramatic increase in women cyclists. Transporte Ativo studies also show increases in women cyclists in Rio once infrastructure was implemented in Copacabana, and there was a 20 percent increase in women cyclists in Santiago, Chile (10 percent to 30 percent), after a six-year investment in infrastructure with dedicated funds. Increasingly, cities are also expanding the network, providing cycling infrastructure for the last mile and integrating it into public transport systems.

It is clear that we need to build cities that address the needs of women and men. These types of cities make sure that everyone has equal access to resources, knowledge, and technology, and that all individuals can flourish and make their own decisions on how to live their lives based on choice not limitations. For an individual and a community to flourish, a city needs to have improved access to health, education, economic opportunities, services, social engagement, and participation. Transport is the direct channel to access these things—it is the link to the city. It is the hope that by implementing features that make streets safer—such as reducing speed, decreasing crossing distances, improving lighting, and creating more open space, as well as improving public transport and bike infrastructure—these cities can exist. In order to build on improvements, cities need to start to listen to the needs of all its people, not just a lucky few.