



## How Gender Affects Mobility and What That Means for Bicyclists

Megan E. Heim LaFrombois, Auburn University

Cities across the United States are increasingly planning for and developing bicycling infrastructure, including bike paths, bike lanes, bike racks, and other specialized traffic structures. While reducing traffic congestion and incentivizing eco-friendly transportation practices are worthy goals, a further exploration of the experiences of bicycle riders reveals issues that traditional city planning practices may not take into account.

In the *Chicago Streets for Cycling Plan 2020*, then-mayor Rahm Emanuel stated, “My vision is to make Chicago the most bike-friendly city in the United States...by identifying a 645-mile network of onstreet bikeways that will encourage all Chicagoans to ride their bikes.” The plan may have been for “all Chicagoans,” but the reality is that U.S. women bicyclists have much lower participation rates than men cyclists. Women represent about one-third of all recreational cyclists and one-fourth of all commuter cyclists nationally, and only 20 to 31% of bike commuters in Chicago. White men, in particular, are the majority of cyclists in most major U.S. cities. So, why are bicycling rates so skewed towards men? Moreover, who exactly benefits when cities like Chicago make significant financial investments in bicycling infrastructure?

Since its US debut in the late 1800s, the bicycle has been a source of liberation and empowerment for many women, offering them greater mobility. The bicycle has also been used as a way to control and regulate women’s behavior and movement. While gender expectations have evolved over time, many patterns persist today. An examination of the gendered nature of public space is essential to understanding and addressing these patterns as we plan our cities today.

### DEMANDING AND NEGOTIATING PUBLIC SPACE

Bicycling requires a public presence. It makes visible the connections between bodies and behaviors in public space. In interviews I conducted as part of my research, women cyclists in Chicago regularly mention issues related to aggressiveness as barriers to bicycling. These topics rarely come up with men, and when they do, it is in gender-neutral ways (e.g. aggressiveness of drivers towards bicyclists in general). In particular, women cyclists argue that bicycling requires the “demanding” of public space. Women are socialized to believe that they should either take up as little public space as possible or should not be in it at all. As such, when bicycling, women feel the need to make a claim to space, as if they are not naturally entitled to it. Similarly, women cyclists note how bicycling is an aggressive activity and how being present and visible in public space requires aggressiveness, while noting that they are not traditionally socialized to be aggressive, especially in public spaces.

While women cyclists are challenging gendered ideologies about who can use public space, they are also constrained by them. Many express discomfort, at least initially, with taking on aggressive behaviors that they have not been socialized to do so throughout their lives.

What is more, women cyclists understand their use of and regulation within public space as being constrained by the realities of street harassment and safety concerns. Women cyclists often mention being much more aware of the spaces they are in and the spaces they need to travel through in order to get to their destinations. Many report being yelled at, catcalled, and threatened by drivers and others in public spaces.

These experiences reinforce the idea that public spaces are not neutral 'containers' in which activities take place; rather public spaces are shaped by social relations and power structures. Based on my research, being present and visible in public space is articulated differently by women cyclists than it is by men cyclists. Women cyclists speak of a need to aggressively and assertively 'demand' their space in public; while at the same time, the spaces that they do create are constantly challenged through harassment or other types of conflict that stoke gendered fear. Concerns about personal safety in public spaces, in turn, can act as constraints to women's mobility.

Women often fill multiple, gendered roles at home, work, and elsewhere. The burden of filling these roles can prevent women from bicycling and hinder their mobility, in general. For example, research has shown that women are often expected to accomplish a wide variety of unpaid tasks to ensure they and their families have their basic needs met. The women cyclists I spoke with argue that because they perform multiple duties for their households, bicycling is often not a realistic transportation choice. It is simply not possible to drop the kids off at school, go to work for 8 hours, pick the kids up from school, stop at the store, and then return home to prepare dinner all while on a bicycle. Women bicyclists also note how being pregnant or having small children with them affect their ability to bicycle, most notably due to safety concerns.

## **MOVING TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE PLANNING PRACTICES**

On the one hand, bicycling has helped women challenge traditional gender roles that discourage women from being mobile in public space. On the other hand, gendered bicycling patterns and the restricted use of public space have persisted. Women cyclists feel the need to demand and negotiate public space – aggressive and masculine behaviors, which social norms typically discourage women from performing.

Ultimately, my research finds that women cyclists themselves are making connections between the personal and the political, the private and the public; are planners and public officials who make decisions about our cities doing the same? As cities scramble to create more bicycling infrastructure, greater awareness is required of how gender ideologies affect mobility and mobility choices. In particular, planners and other policy makers should focus on:

- How different groups understand and negotiate public space;
- What constraints these different groups face;
- How gender roles and the related unpaid labor affect women's mobility choices; and
- What strategies women and other groups have already developed to address these barriers.

Moving forward, city residents, including those not traditionally represented as bicyclists, need to be involved in the planning process. While the case of bicycling is illustrative, planners and public officials should work to understand the gendered implications of all aspects of their work, and seek to create cities that are accessible to all their cities' residents.

Read more in Megan E. Heim LaFrombois "(Re)Producing and Challenging Gender in and through Urban Space: Women Bicyclists' Experiences in Chicago," *Gender, Place, and Culture*, 26, 5, (April 2019): 659-679.