

Women and Cycling: A Canadian Picture

This report reviews literature on women and cycling, focusing on the Canadian context. It is intended to help planners and policy makers understand women's experiences with cycling as they work to support women cycling. This piece likely reflects the experiences of cisgender women, given there has been less research documenting the experiences of gender diverse people around cycling. We recognize that intersectional identities like class, age, race, and citizenship impact women differently and, where possible, highlight these distinct experiences.

Background

Women are underrepresented in cycling in Canada, comprising 34% of people commuting by bicycle.¹ The proportion of women cycling in Canada is much lower than in countries with strong cycling cultures, such as Germany and the Netherlands, where women and men have similar rates of bicycle use.²

Importantly, in cities where more people cycle, more women cycle². One study found that in cities with cycling rates over 7%, women and men cycle at similar rates, whereas in cities where cycling rates are below 7%, women cycle 50-60% less than men.³

Women cycle for a plethora of reasons, including practicality, sustainability, pleasure, and health⁴. However, women face barriers to cycling due to concerns around personal and child safety, poor cycling infrastructure, and gendered caregiving responsibilities.⁴ Below, we look in depth at central themes in women and cycling - personal safety, infrastructure, gendered responsibilities and realities, and gender as a bodily performance - and provide evidence from both academic literature and public reports. We then identify the importance of intersectional analyses on women and cycling and end with a call for policy makers to consider women in neighbourhood and policy design.

Actions to Support Women in Cycling

- Prioritize protected bicycle infrastructure that separates riders from motor vehicles
- Provide and plan for diverse bicycle design: bicycles with cargo space for transporting children and goods, and/or e-bikes, and ensure these are affordable and accessible
- Expand research related to cycling and identity
- Promote gender-based approaches in cycling planning and in the evaluation of cycling investments



"...when physical activity is an incidental, "nonathletic" habitual part of everyday life that does not require additional exercise time, women are more likely to achieve physical activity parity with men"¹⁶

How to Improve Gender Equity in Cycling

All women deserve to be safe, comfortable, and accepted while cycling in cities. Municipalities play a large role in creating more cycle-friendly cities for women. Building protected cycling infrastructure can enable women to feel safer while cycling⁹. Thus, cities can move toward gender equity in cycling by ensuring there are networks of protected bicycle facilities that will connect people to the places they need to go including shopping, childcare, and recreation opportunities associated with mobility of care.



“Failure to establish road rules that protect cyclists, to enforce the limited rules that do exist, and to impose appropriate penalties for traffic violations that threaten or injure cyclists also contributes to hostile cycling conditions that constrain female cycling”¹⁶

Additionally, women and their myriad of lived experiences must be included in technology, program, and infrastructure design. Diverse bicycle design for women and mothers with children is necessary for creating more equitable cities, alongside the promotion and accessibility of e-bikes and traditional bicycles with carrying

capacity for children and groceries.¹⁶ Cycling culture should be assessed by local governments, including social norms and rhetoric around cycling, types of bicycles and clothing being used, distance and speed of cycling trips, and locations and purposes of trips.¹⁶

It is important to note that the promotion of cycling can be contentious. There is a risk that cities focused on sustainability and urban development may simultaneously exacerbate gentrification and displacement of low-income and racialized communities.¹⁴ City planners and policymakers must consider the social, economic, and historical implications of cycling design and provide time and resources for ample community feedback on cycling infrastructure & its equity considerations.¹⁴

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