



## Bicycle lessons, activity participation and empowerment



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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the impact of bicycle lessons for immigrant and refugee women on bicycle use and activity participation. Especially non-Western immigrant and refugee women have been identified as one of the population groups most likely to experience accessibility problems and, subsequently, transport-related social exclusion. The bicycle offers considerable potential to increase the mobility of these women. Hence, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, governments and non-governmental organizations have set up bicycle lessons for immigrant and refugee women. The paper discusses the impacts of these lessons on their bicycle use and activity participation. It draws on a quantitative survey and a series of in-depth interviews among non-Western immigrant women in Amsterdam. The results show that the impacts of the bicycle lessons vary. Some participants use the bicycle for everyday purposes, while others still face constraints preventing bicycle use for regular errands. The impacts on activity participation are limited. At the same time, the lessons have substantially improved women's feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the need to travel increased as societies became organized around motorized transport, and especially around the car. Ever since, researchers have studied and discussed the consequences for people that are unable to drive a car for legal, financial or physical reasons (Schaeffer and Sclar, 1975; Wachs and Kumagai, 1973). From the end of the 1990s, this debate has been linked to the role of transport in the process of social exclusion (Lucas, 2012; Hine and Mitchell, 2001) and, more recently, fairness in transport provision (Martens, 2012), based on the understanding that accessibility problems can be both a cause for, and a result of, social exclusion (Farrington and Farrington, 2005). In contrast to the more static descriptions of poverty focusing on material welfare, social exclusion underscores that disadvantage is the result of a process that prevents particular (groups of) people to participate in activities considered normal in society (Church et al., 2000; Rajč, 2003). This insight has resulted in the coining of the term transport poverty. In line with the distinction between poverty and social exclusion, transport poverty refers to a lack of

resources; when the concept of resources is broadly conceived, transport poverty occurs if a person has a lack of access to key opportunities, such as employment, education, health and social support networks (Lucas, 2012; Martens and Golub, 2012; Meert et al., 2003). Transport-related social exclusion, in turn, can be the result of transport poverty and occurs if *systematic* problems of access to opportunities lead to significant *impacts* on a person's life, such as unemployment, deterioration of health, or social isolation (Kenyon et al., 2002).

Over the past ten years, a substantial body of evidence has developed, providing a largely qualitative understanding of transport poverty in a number of Western countries, such as the UK (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003), Spain (Cebollada, 2008), France (Wenglenski and Orfeuil, 2004), Canada (Páez et al., 2010) and Australia (Currie, 2011). This body of research suggests that a substantial share of the population experiences some form of transport poverty. In a Western context, women from ethnic minority groups have been identified as one of the population groups most likely to experience accessibility problems and, subsequently, transport-related social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Hine and Grieco, 2003; Sanchez et al., 2004; SCP, 2006). They often face multiple disadvantages, such as low education levels, low incomes, limited access to private vehicles, and poor social networks. These disadvantages largely derive from informal institutions, such as gendered social norms about responsibilities for childcare and domestic work (SCP, 2006; World Bank, 2012).

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A recent study from the Netherlands, exploring the role of the bicycle in limiting transport poverty (Martens, 2013), suggests that the bicycle may well play a role in improving the mobility of these women. The bicycle is particularly attractive as a means of transportation for women since their average travel patterns, compared with those of men, tend to consist more of short distance trips and trip chains, due to their roles and obligations outside and inside the household (Rosenbloom, 1989; Lehner-Lierz, 2003). Trip chaining may be impossible by public transport, due to discrepancies between personal and transport schedules, and access to private vehicles can be limited, compared with men (Turner and Grieco, 1998). Because of its convenience for short distance trips and its flexibility enabling easy trip chaining, as well as its low costs and the absence of legal barriers for its utilization, the bicycle may offer women more options in combining their obligations.

Several studies and statistics show, however, that in almost any country in the world women cycle less than men. Factors that influence cycling rates among women include a lack of safe cycling infrastructure and personal safety concerns, a lack of bicycle facilities such as bicycle storage, the unavailability of bicycles and accessories suited for women with children, and concerns around appearance after cycling (Lehner-Lierz, 2003; Garrard et al., 2008, 2012; Porras et al., 2011; Van der Kloof, 2013; Pucher and Buehler, 2012; Arora, 2012; Hajinikitas, 2001; Bonham and Wilson, 2012). Studies on transport and gender have also shown that cultural constraints may prevent women from cycling or even traveling all together. Women's frequent and distant travel may be associated with promiscuity and therefore discouraged (World Bank, 2010; Porter, 2011). These gendered mobility patterns can prevent women from fully participating in society.

In addition to these cultural factors, an important but often overlooked factor inhibiting bicycle use is a person's inability to ride a bicycle in traffic conditions. Like driving a car, riding a bicycle requires training and practice. In countries with a tradition of cycling, like the Netherlands or Denmark, children are usually taught how to ride a bicycle by their parents or caregivers (Slutter, 2013; Van der Kloof, 2012). This way of acquiring cycling skills is by no means universal, neither in countries with a cycling tradition nor in countries lacking such a tradition. In countries with a high share of bicycle usage, a good number of children from ethnic minorities grow up in households without adults able to ride a bicycle in traffic. Learning how to cycle is not an obvious part of growing up in such a setting. In countries with low levels of bicycle ridership, many adults have never learned how to ride a bicycle.

For these groups in both countries, organized bicycle lessons, provided outside the common household setting, are a way to acquire the necessary cycling skills to use the bicycle for everyday purposes (see e.g. the Bikeability program in the UK, cycling schools in Belgium, the CAAC safety training in the US and Escuela BiciMujer (Women's Cycling School) in Chile). Against this background, the goal of this paper is to assess the role of cycling lessons in averting transport-related social exclusion by analyzing the impact of these lessons on the activity participation of immigrant and refugee women in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we describe the use of the bicycle in the Netherlands and Amsterdam, with a particular attention for the role of the bicycle among different ethnic groups. In Section 3, we provide a description of the bicycle lessons as they have been provided to immigrant and refugee women in Amsterdam since the early 1990s. We then present a framework that enables us to analyze the impacts of cycling lessons on activity participation (Section 4). Then, in Section 5, we present the results of two studies on the impacts of cycling lessons on participants' activity participation. We end with conclusions and a brief discussion (Section 6).

## 2. Cycling, gender and ethnicity in the Netherlands and Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, the bicycle is a mainstream mode of transport and, for many people, an integral part of everyday life (Kuipers, 2013). Of all daily trips, 27 percent are made by bicycle, a figure that has remained relatively stable over the last decades (Pucher and Buehler, 2012). The bike is mainly used for traveling short distances up to 5 km, particularly for shopping, commuting and trips to schools and sports facilities. In recent years the distances traveled by bicycle have increased, due to spatial concentration of facilities and increased distances between home and places for work, education and other facilities (Planbureau, 2010).

Although there is little difference in the overall levels of bicycle use between men and women, there are clear differences when ethnic background is taken into account (Table 1). Bicycle use is relatively low amongst non-Western immigrants in the Netherlands, especially among women. Instead of using a bicycle, they tend to travel more on foot or by public transport (Harms, 2008; Kennisinstituut, 2012). In recent years this has gradually changed as bicycle use has increased amongst this group to an average of 20% of their daily trips in 2012. Although this is still significantly less than native Dutch women (28%), it shows that the

**Table 1**  
Use of the bicycle in terms of trips and travel distance for 2012, by ethnic background.

	Number of trips			Distance traveled in km		
	Total	By bicycle	Bicycle share	Total	By bicycle	Bicycle share
Total	2.64	0.71	26.9%	30.46	2.63	8.6%
Women	2.74	0.78	28.5%	25.57	2.44	9.5%
Men	2.52	0.64	25.4%	35.49	2.83	8.0%
Ethnic group						
Native Dutch total	2.69	0.75	27.9%	31.57	2.79	8.8%
Women	2.82	0.84	29.8%	26.66	2.61	9.8%
Men	2.56	0.66	25.8%	36.57	2.97	8.1%
Western immigrants total	2.51	0.65	25.9%	28.75	2.21	7.7%
Women	2.57	0.70	27.2%	22.38	2.10	9.4%
Men	2.44	0.60	24.6%	35.83	2.33	6.5%
Non-Western immigrants total	2.29	0.49	21.4%	23.40	1.82	7.8%
Women	2.31	0.46	19.9%	20.72	1.48	7.1%
Men	2.28	0.52	22.8%	26.66	2.18	8.2%

Source: Dutch National Travel Survey (adapted).

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