



# **DECOLONIAL FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE AND 'BICYCLES FOR DEVELOPMENT': USING BICYCLES TO COMBAT SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY, AND ENCOURAGE GENDER-SENSITIVE CLIMATE ACTIVISM IN NICARAGUA**

## **POLICY AND ORGANIZATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EIGHT YEARS OF RESEARCH INTO BICYCLES-FOR- DEVELOPMENT**

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# Executive Summary

Bicycles are increasingly being recognized as powerful tools for advancing gender equity and climate justice.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, bicycles have emerged as a distinct area of focus in the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) movement due to their cost-effective, uncompetitive, accessible, and sustainable nature; they can be integrated into everyday life, adapted to local contexts, and linked directly to both individual needs and broader social justice aims.<sup>1</sup> In turn, recent studies have also underlined that bicycles are uniquely positioned to respond to two interconnected challenges: the heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and girls.<sup>2</sup>

This policy brief presents the findings of recent research in Nicaragua, highlighting how bicycles have been used by self-identified women and girls to increase their mobility by: 1) improving their socio-economic circumstances through better access to education and economic opportunities; and 2) reducing exposure to precarious travel conditions associated with SGBV. Our research suggests women and girls who cycle in rural Nicaragua have been able to: challenge restrictive gender norms, participate in climate activism, and build supportive networks through community cycling initiatives.<sup>2</sup> These outcomes underline that bicycles are not only a mode of transport, but also a tool to support feminist climate justice efforts.

However, significant barriers remain for women and girls who cycle in rural Nicaragua. Poor cycling infrastructure, harassment, and rigid gender norms continue to constrain women's and girls' safe use of bicycles. Thus, to maximize the positive impact of bicycles, policymakers and practitioners should focus their efforts on: 1) securing investments in contextually grounded bicycle-friendly public infrastructure; 2) supporting women and girls with continued access to bicycles; 3) developing and delivering technical curricula to support training women and girls' as mechanics, enhancing their ability to repair and maintain their bikes; and 4) employing decolonial feminist climate justice approaches which are focused on incorporating the lived experiences of climate injustices into BFD programmes and policies.

## Introduction

### Gender and Climate Change

Recent studies have demonstrated that the individuals, communities, and countries who have contributed least to the causes of climate change are also those who will be most vulnerable to its impacts.<sup>3</sup> Climate justice exposes how the human impacts of climate change are profoundly unequal, intertwining environmental violence with the interconnected crises of climate, social, and economic social inequality.<sup>4</sup>

Experiences of climate change cannot be understood in isolation from wider socio-economic and cultural contexts. Climate vulnerability intersects with ethnicity, class, age, and race, meaning that marginalized groups often face compounding burdens.<sup>5</sup> For instance, while elite and urban populations may frame climate change as an existential threat requiring urgent attention, rural and marginalized communities often identify immediate concerns such as food security or health access as more pressing, with climate concerns perceived as multipliers of these other, more immediate threats.<sup>6</sup> This example highlights the importance of alternative approaches, such as decolonial feminist climate justice, which more boldly consider the differentiated and complex experiences of climate change among marginalized communities – particularly among women and girls in the Global South.

### **Box 1: Decolonial feminist climate justice**

Decolonial feminist climate justice foregrounds the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and climate change. It challenges the assumption that climate change is the singular or primary concern for all communities, recognizing that to treat it as such is often a privilege.<sup>2</sup> A decolonial feminist climate justice approach requires centering the voices of marginalized groups, acknowledging their everyday struggles, and connecting these to the structural injustices fueling both the climate crisis and gender inequality.

## **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Mobility Justice**

The gendered dynamics of climate change are well-documented.<sup>5</sup> One particularly acute area of concern is SGBV, which is defined as “abuse against individuals based on their gender identity, expression, or perceived gender”.<sup>7</sup> Globally, approximately one in three women have been subjected to SGBV in their lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

Climate-related crises exacerbate risks of SGBV in multiple ways. Environmental degradation and extreme weather events often increase women’s dependency on precarious mobility (e.g., traveling longer distances for food, water, or healthcare), expose them to unsafe public spaces (e.g. remote or unlit areas at night), and heighten physical vulnerabilities during food shortages.<sup>1,9</sup> Limited transportation options further compound these risks, as unsafe or unreliable mobility infrastructures restrict women’s ability to move freely and securely.<sup>10</sup>

Addressing mobility justice – defined as equity in the mobility of individuals such that everyone is able to move freely and securely regardless of identity<sup>11</sup> – is, therefore, a crucial tenet in supporting survivors. Without addressing the gendered inequalities of both mobility and climate change, the structural conditions that enable SGBV will persist, leaving women and girls disproportionately exposed to violence while limiting their capacity to pursue climate-resilient livelihoods.

## **The Use of Sport and Bicycles to address SGBV and Climate Injustice**

Sport has been widely promoted by the United Nations, various non-governmental organizations, academics, and practitioners under the banner of ‘sport for development and peace’ (SDP).<sup>12</sup> Here, sport is touted for its ability to help achieve socio-economic, environmental, and peace objectives, in both the Global North and South.<sup>12</sup>

However, while the work of SDP organizations has been successful to some extent, it has not been without its critiques and shortcomings. For example, SDP programmes which promote competitive sport as a means for individual economic and social progression have been described as complicit in the neoliberal, capitalist development agendas which are synonymous with inequality.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, SDP programmes which are more generally focused on climate justice and sustainability have been critiqued for their inability to engage participants beyond an educative level, whereby they are limited to ‘teaching kids about climate change’ rather than enabling deeper, structural engagement with environmental stewardship.<sup>14</sup>





Bicycle-focused programmes, on the other hand, have demonstrated the potential to move beyond these critiques. Bicycles expand everyday mobility for their users, helping to mitigate the factors and inequalities that underpin both SGBV and climate vulnerability.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, ‘bicycle for development’ (BFD) studies have found that the daily use of bicycles can increase place-based environmental stewardship by upholding a physical culture that is more directly correlated to peoples’ ecological surroundings.<sup>2</sup> And finally, when bicycles are distributed without conditionalities, they embody a positively unstructured SDP approach that empowers individuals and communities to decide how best to use them.<sup>15</sup> This contrasts with top-down models that perpetuate colonial and gendered development dynamics. Taken together, bicycles have shown unique potential to address both gender inequality and climate change.

## **Bicycles for Development in Nicaragua**

Nicaragua is one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world, ranking 49th on the Global Climate Risk Index.<sup>16</sup> It also faces high rates of SGBV due to the a prevalent ‘machismo’ culture which perpetuates rigid, patriarchal gender dynamics.<sup>1</sup> These issues are deeply interconnected: environmental violence exacerbates the conditions that lead to SGBV, disproportionately harming women and girls. Simultaneously, Nicaraguan climate change discourse often positions women as primary agents of environmental care and climate action, placing an unequal burden on them while reinforcing patriarchal norms.<sup>6</sup>

Within this context, bicycles have been employed in Nicaragua as a feminist climate justice tool to enhance women’s mobility, independence, and support networks, while also sparking their climate activism.<sup>17</sup>

Recent BFD research in Nicaragua has focused on the intricate ways that bicycles can be used to address the intersecting issues of gender inequality, SGBV, and climate change.<sup>2</sup> The following are a series of research outcomes in relation to these key areas of concern:

### Box 2: Grassroots bicycling movements in Nicaragua

While In recent years, a number of NGOs have been using bikes to promote feminist climate responsibility in Nicaragua through their work with women and girls. For example, Comisión Mujer Joven (Young Women's Commission) (CMJ, Nicaragua) started working with bicycles through a series of annual bicycle rallies as far back as the 1990s. During these rallies, participants would each hold up slogans that spoke to the gendered or climate-related issues they were facing in their own lives, such as 'We prevent sexual and gender-based violence!', 'We pollute less!', or 'Handle garbage properly!'

These events demonstrate a history of locally-driven, bicycle-focused efforts to improve women's rights, promote gender equality, and address SGBV and climate injustice in Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup>

- **Empowerment through mobility.** Bicycles have helped improve women and girls' mobility, enabling them to independently access education, create economic opportunities, and reach wider social support systems.<sup>1</sup>
- **Gender Norms.** The increased use of bicycles by women and girls has challenged local notions that 'bicycles are for boys.' Despite facing insults over their sexuality while riding bikes, women and girls in Nicaragua have felt empowered to continue using them, reporting feeling confident that they are challenging the harmful stereotypes.<sup>1,2</sup>
- **SGBV.** Bicycles have helped women and girls avoid precarious situations in which they would otherwise be at heightened risk of experiencing SGBV and harassment. For example, their journeys to/from school are shortened by bicycles, helping them avoid/pass through areas of perceived risk.<sup>2</sup>
- **Climate Activism.** Bicycle-centric community groups have provided a platform for women and girls to engage in climate activism. Individually, BFD participants have reported feeling empowered by their own climate-friendly behaviours (i.e. sustainable transportation via bicycle), and have since put up signage in schools and public spaces to promote pro-environmental behaviour among their community members<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the numerous potential benefits detailed above, the recent research in Nicaragua also highlighted some prevalent challenges that BFD programmes have faced, including:

- **Lack of investment in bicycle-friendly infrastructure.** The safe use of bicycles in Nicaragua is overshadowed by the low quality of bicycle-friendly infrastructure. This includes a lack of lighting along remote roads, poorly/un-paved paths, and weather-vulnerable bicycle surfaces. In fact, women and girls cited the deteriorating road conditions – exacerbated by natural disasters and changing climates – as one of the main barriers to their safe use of bicycles.<sup>2</sup>

### Box 3: Digital Participatory Action Research

One recent BFD research project in Nicaragua utilised Digital Participatory Action Research (DPAR) methods to document the experiences of women and girls. DPAR methods included photovoice, arts-based approaches and socio-spatial mapping (geographic information systems [GIS], sketch maps, etc.). Together, these methods were employed to ignite the co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants, as well as to more accurately and accessibly represent the experiences of women and girls who have been using bicycles frequently.<sup>18</sup>

The results of DPAR in Nicaragua were twofold: first, the digital outcomes (photo collages, GoPro footage, maps, and a documentary) were used to promote and leverage funding for the local BFD organization's work. Second, the DPAR methods were fundamental in the decolonial feminist climate justice approach, whereby the 'BFD participants' were included as co-researchers, thus controlling the narratives over their own involvement in BFD and more accurately situating the relevant outcomes, challenges, and barriers within the local context.<sup>18</sup>

- **Instances of harassment and rigid gender norms.** The majority of BFD participants reported being harassed while riding a bicycle. While bicycles can reduce women and girls exposure to areas of perceived risk, framing safety as a matter of 'avoiding' risk through bicycle access is problematic because it responsabilizes women and girls for navigating structural violence, can constrain their freedom of movement, and leaves the underlying drivers – unsafe infrastructure, harmful social norms, and persistent lack of accountability – unchallenged.
- **Access to Bicycles.** Women and girls have discussed the ownership of bicycles as being a point of contention within patriarchal households, whereby men are usually owners of the bicycles and, therefore, have priority access to them. Furthermore, both men and women reported a lack of resources and technical expertise to maintain and repair their bicycles.<sup>1</sup>
- **Perpetuation of the gendered perception of climate action.** Recent BFD studies highlight a continuing challenge: women and girls' use of bicycles often reinforces gendered expectations of climate action, as their increased mobility and visibility in climate activism can unduly shift the burden of addressing climate change disproportionately onto them. Additionally, women and girls reported a greater sense of responsibility in the roles they felt they had to play in climate justice actions, even as global, capitalist patriarchal processes continue to be at fault for the ongoing climate crisis.<sup>2</sup>



# Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, NGOs, and practitioners:

1. Invest in gender-sensitive cycling infrastructure. Develop safe, lit, and accessible roads and/or bicycle pathways to enhance security for women and girls, and to avoid discouraging bicycling as a common mode of transport.
2. Implement and expand programs that improve women and girls' access to bicycles and spare parts, with particular emphasis on ensuring their ownership and control over these resources.
3. Establish and distribute technical curricula that provide equal opportunities for women and men to learn bicycle maintenance and repair.
4. Adopt decolonial feminist climate justice approaches to BFD. Design, implement, and evaluate BFD programs through intersectional, participatory methods that engage local participants as knowledge producers and resist reinforcing gendered burdens.





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