



MOBILITY JUSTICE AND GENDER EQUITY IN UGANDA

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

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Executive Summary

In the past twenty years, bicycles have gained increasing recognition from international development and aid organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for their potential to contribute to a range of social aims. While bicycles have a long history of being used for means beyond simple transportation, such as playing a role in women's emancipation in both Global North and Global South contexts, mobility justice scholars have brought attention to how cycling is one form of transportation that is enmeshed within systems of inequality and power relations. Women in particular have been the focus of various NGOs distributing bicycles to enhance mobility as well as the target of UN policies and non-motorized transport policies in certain nations. While such policies and programs are well-intentioned, the lived experiences of women who use bicycles and the social and cultural contexts that enable and/or impinge on their mobility has been insufficiently reflected on. Programs and policies focused on women and bicycles must consider a range of broader social and political factors in order for the benefits of cycling to be accrued. In this policy brief, we use research from studies focused on bicycles-for-development (BFD) from the past eight years to draw attention to the interconnections between mobility justice and gender equity in Northern Uganda. It argues that for mobility justice and the benefits of bicycles to be achieved, tax exemptions on bicycles, infrastructure investment, and workshops on bicycle mechanics are needed.

Introduction

Mobility Justice and Gender Equity: What role does mobility play in gender relations?

Mobility justice refers to the analysis of people's movement and challenging of systems of inequality in order for individuals to be able to move freely and safely regardless of identity.¹ Mobility justice requires an assessment of how transportation can be more accessible, affordable, and sustainable for all, particularly for those who are marginalized due to intersecting identities such as gender, class, and race.² Of particular note is that mobility is deeply gendered both in the Global North and Global South, with the need to consider how existing gender norms, social and cultural environments, and gendered divisions of labour play a role in the (im)mobility of women.^{3,4,5}

Bicycles for Development: From the global to the local

Bicycles for development (BFD) is a nascent movement made up of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, governments, international organizations, and communities promoting and utilizing the bicycle to achieve community, domestic, and international development goals.⁶ Globally, hundreds to thousands of organizations around the world seek to use bicycles to promote mobility justice, aiming to address systems of inequality for particular individuals and groups who have been marginalized in transportation systems. Some of these organizations operate on a global scale by collecting, recycling, and shipping bicycles often from the Global North to other NGOs and communities in the Global South, where they are distributed to individuals to be used for their own mobility.⁷ Other organizations operate on a local, community-scale, receiving bicycles from international donors and other BFD NGOs to provide to particular groups, such as women. Many of these organizations seek to provide bicycles to individuals and groups living in rural areas, as public transportation options are either limited or non-existent, and motorized transport is too costly, resulting in people walking as their means of transportation.⁸ As such, bicycles are seen as a way to enhance people's mobility, provide an affordable means of transportation, and – while challenges remain – have been associated with a range of potential benefits.^{9,10,11,12}

How are Bikes Acquired? Governmental regulations and taxes

Depending on the country where bicycles are being sent, BFD organizations must navigate government regulations that can facilitate or inhibit their aims to provide bicycles to communities and other NGOs.¹³ Executives from organizations who have been sending bicycles as far back as 1991 to countries such as Ghana, Ecuador, and Uganda have faced challenges regarding importation such as clearances for shipments of bicycles to enter the country, as well as high import fees on bicycles while decreasing import fees on motorized transport such as cars.¹³ In many Global South nations, particularly within Eastern Africa, cars are often prioritized when it comes to transportation planning and infrastructure, although a large portion of the population use non-motorized transport.¹⁴ This can be seen in several countries such as Uganda, Ghana, Zambia, and Nigeria. High taxes on the importation of bicycles limits the ability of BFD organizations – both global who are sending bicycles and those local who receive bicycles and distribute them to communities – to get bicycles to those who need it most.¹³

Bicycles for Development, Mobility Justice, and Women: What are the implications?

In a range of contexts and throughout history, bicycles have been found to hold benefits for individuals, groups, and societies. Generally speaking, bicycles can contribute to environmental sustainability,¹⁵ peace,¹⁶ and health objectives.¹⁷ Studies have also found that BFD organizations and their programs can lead to the use of the bicycle to enhance one's personal mobility, skill mastery (e.g., mechanical skills), and self-learning.^{10,18} Additionally, use of and engaging in the actual act of cycling can challenge cycling identities, construct safe spaces for marginalized populations, and disrupt gender norms.^{19,20} Investments in providing bicycles and bicycle programs to individuals and communities historically excluded in transportation planning and systems, such as women, can thus have significant payoffs for individuals, families, and societies. The following implications are primarily drawn from multiple studies into BFD and women in Northern Uganda:

- **Enhancing access to healthcare services, markets, and education.** Using a bicycle can enhance women's access to a range of services and activities, such as travelling to markets, attending community events, taking children to school, and travelling to healthcare. One study indicated that bicycles were important for women to travel long distances to health centres for regular health check-ups, the collection of medication, as well as other health treatments including sexual and reproductive health services.²¹
- **Saving time and costs for other activities.** Having a bicycle saves time and removes additional costs of transportation, such as travelling to markets using public transportation or renting a bike. In rural communities, such as in Zambia, using a bicycle for travel can save up to 4.2 hours per week.¹²
- **Women's agency, solidarity, and respect.** Beyond the increased mobility and saving of time, the bicycle both facilitates and plays a role in: 1) the self-organization and solidarity of women in/through bicycle savings groups; 2) fostering respect within households and their communities; and 3) increasing the autonomy of women to pursue livelihood activities.²¹

Box 1: Northern Uganda: The bicycle's impact for women living with HIV

Many BFD organizations seek to provide bicycles to women living in rural areas, with some specifically striving to distribute bicycles to women living with HIV. As a woman living in rural Northern Uganda with HIV, women face varied forms of discrimination and marginalization, including that others within the community who know of their diagnosis may act exclusionary towards them, and patriarchal systems of inequality influence gender norms that primarily place women in domestic roles and as caregivers. The bicycle seeks to address some of these challenges:

“Before I got the bike, I had very many challenges. For example, I didn’t have a bicycle to take me to the health centre. When I get sick, I didn’t even have a bicycle maybe to send someone for water or go and pick for me meds. And when I was diagnosed with HIV, there was no one who would listen to me at home, and I didn’t have friends. People saw as if I was a burden and I didn’t have anything. So no one was willing to support me.”



Whilst there are various positive implications of bicycle provision, there are also several negative implications and unintended consequences reported in research regarding BFD programs:

- **Increased responsibilities.** While owning and using a bicycle may challenge certain gender norms (e.g., freedom of movement for women), receiving bicycles has been reported to potentially reproduce and increase the burden on women as primary caregivers and to do income-generation work.⁹ Thus, the provision of bicycles through BFD programs must carefully consider existing hierarchies of privilege and gender roles so as to address broader structural inequalities.
- **Bicycles cost and breakdown.** Research has reported that bicycle breakdowns and maintenance and repair costs can be high within Global South contexts.¹² Additionally, purchasing a bicycle can be expensive, especially for low-income communities. Within Uganda, costs can range from UGX400,000 to UGX 4,000,000 for bicycle purchase, and UGX 5,000 to UGX 50,000 for bicycle repairs, depending on the damage. In most cases, bicycle breakdowns are related to a number of factors, including: 1) riding on poor roads; 2) limited mechanical skills to repair bicycles; and 3) a lack of spare parts that are costly to import.¹³

- **Theft, harassment, and/or use of the bicycle by others.** Using bicycles in rural areas has been reported to be constrained by existing gender inequalities and patriarchal systems. In Uganda, some bicycles provided through BFD programs are used by male family members rather than women, the intended recipients of the bike.⁹ The free provision of the bicycles has also led to theft or harassment based on jealousy from other community members.²² Women also face sexual and gender-based violence while cycling.¹⁹
- **Infrastructure challenges.** The absence of bicycle shelters in public spaces (e.g., markets) contributes to frequent theft, while limited access to spare parts and repair workshops undermines reliability and long-term use.¹³ Persons with disabilities face additional exclusion due to the lack of customized bicycles and inclusive cycling infrastructure.²³ Poor road conditions and the absence of dedicated bicycle lanes result in frequent breakdowns and safety risks, deterring wider adoption and undermining mobility justice efforts.¹³

Box 2: Unintended consequences of bicycle provision.

While bicycle provision to women in rural contexts of Northern Uganda may enhance mobility, it may also lead to unintended consequences for women. Due to the high cost of bicycles and limited accessibility to transport in some of these communities, theft of bicycles may occur. One woman said that, “There are many cases of theft of the bikes, basically because there are few bikes within the community, and there’s also writing on the bike that makes signals to the community that the bicycles are given for free. So the men get jealous and they steal the bicycles so that the women remain without.” Providing bicycles without overcoming unintended consequences requires explicit strategies and policy directions to ensure bicycles can be used by women for their needs without harassment and/or violence.

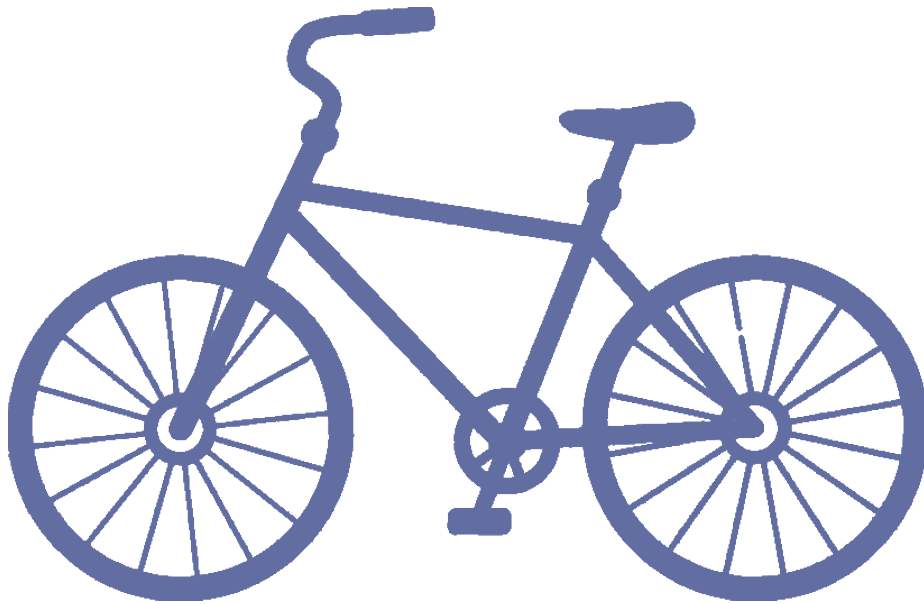
Recommendations

For Government

- Countries should create tax waivers for bicycles and bicycle parts that are given to priority groups such as women and other marginalized populations to increase bicycle access in rural areas. Additionally, providing tax holidays on bicycles to priority groups such as women and students should be considered.
- Non-motorized transport policies in Global South countries, particularly Eastern Africa where walking and cycling is prominent, should prioritize and invest in bicycle inclusive infrastructure projects, including constructing dedicated bicycle lanes, upgrading roads commonly used by cyclists, establishing secure bicycle shelters in public areas (e.g., markets and schools), and expanding access to well-equipped bicycle repair shops.
- Infrastructure should also include disability friendly structures for persons with disabilities, to ensure cycling is a viable, inclusive mode of transport for all.

For Donors, NGOs, and Development Agencies:

- NGOs and development agencies focused on mobility justice, gender equity, and the promise of the bicycle should establish bicycle repair workshops to reduce maintenance and repair costs of bicycles in rural areas.
- Bicycle donors and BFD organizations should not avoid countries because of taxation, since those countries often include individuals, groups, and communities who are in most need of bicycles and BFD programs. Instead, they should consider alternative strategies such as cost sharing options with bicycle recipients and/or sending money to purchase bicycles in local contexts.
- Bicycle donors and BFD organizations should not only send bicycles to local communities without further involvement and/or follow-up. Greater consideration is needed to visit and engage with the projects they have supported. This can strengthen their ability to build on the use of bicycles for mobility justice and support their work by working with and building local bicycle advocacy initiatives.
- In offering bicycles, donors and BFD organizations should give priority to identified marginalized groups. For example, in Northern Uganda, women who have the heaviest burden of providing care to families with limited support from others would benefit the most from enhancing their mobility. Additionally, bicycles that are donated and/or provided to individuals and groups should also be accompanied with spare parts to reduce high maintenance costs and increase the availability of bicycle parts for repair.



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