



PEDAL PROGRESSION? CRITICALLY EXAMINING TORONTO'S CYCLING POLICIES AND BICYCLE FOR DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES

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

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Executive Summary

Built and natural environments have the potential to support outdoor movement and physical activity, such as bicycling¹. Cycling is viewed as a desirable, fun, and eco-friendly mode of transportation that offers numerous economic, health and social benefits to individuals and cities^{2, 3}. The Bicycle for Development (BFD) movement and scholarship positions the bicycle as a tool to promote developmental goals, such as gender equality, and as a possible catalyst for social development^{4, 5, 6}. While cycling rates and the number of cycling trips in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have increased, and there has been growth of BFD organizations within the City of Toronto, systemic and structural barriers, such as safe infrastructure, still remain less accessible across genders, identities, and marginalized communities². Moreover, we still know very little as to how BFD organizations can address mobility challenges related to gender inequities and how such organizations foster safe and accessible transportation, given the (in)accessible and politically contested cycling policies^{6, 7}.

In response to the absence of sustainable and equitable cycling policies, the City of Toronto has created and launched ‘The Official Plan,’ which includes policies and frameworks for safe and accessible cycling, with a focus on making Toronto a livable place for all residents⁸. The Official Plan is based on a previous policy, titled the Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears, which was established in 2001, and (cl)aims to be built upon a diverse range of principles and goals that will contribute to the city’s development by 2051, including creating a sustainable city through access, equity, and inclusion⁸.

In relation to the existing literature, this brief presents the findings from a critical policy analysis of the City of Toronto’s cycling policies (e.g., The Official Plan – Chapter Two: Shaping the City and Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears), as well as an environmental scan of 10 BFD non-government organizations (NGO) across the GTA. Hence, the objectives of this policy brief are two-fold: 1) to examine if the City of Toronto’s cycling policies promote gender diversity and inclusion; and 2) to examine how BFD organizations address and respond to gender-based inequalities, systemic racism, and oppression given municipal policies.

Introduction

The Current Era of Cycling

In recent years, the number of Canadians cycling in urban areas has been on the rise, especially in the post-pandemic context⁹. Indeed, in many cities, “cycling has emerged as a viable and accessible mobility option to change the current mobility paradigm that dedicates large investments toward motorized transport”⁹. Despite the rise in cycling over the years, several disparities persist including systemic exclusion in cycling². Furthermore, Doug Ford’s provincial government vowed to appeal a court decision that deemed the government’s proposed bike lane removal law “unconstitutional”¹⁰ for putting people at an “increased risk of harm and death”¹⁰.

Recent studies indicate that self-identified women, including both cisgender and transgender individuals, are disproportionately affected by systemic inequities in cycling, contributing to a widening gender gap within urban cycling rates¹¹. Despite the numerous health and social benefits of cycling for women, women cycle at lower rates compared to men¹². This is attributed to the numerous and intersecting barriers that women experience in mobility, such as being vulnerable to violence and caregiving responsibilities^{12, 13}. A significant cause of gender

inequality in cycling is due to the surrounding infrastructure¹⁴, including a “male bias” that has been woven deeply into the “fabric of cities around the world.”¹⁵ While the desire to cycle in safe conditions – which includes less interaction with motor traffic – is consistent across both genders, this desire or need is more prominent for women, as they are more vulnerable to harm¹⁴.

A decolonial feminist approach to mobility justice can serve as an effective tool to actively address the gender inequities that perpetuate incidents of violence and discrimination through cycling, as these approaches foreground lived and complex experiences of movement. Additionally, we argue that policymakers must understand the social processes related to gender and marginalized communities^{16, 17}. Doing so would allow for more equitable and sustainable cycling policies.

Box 1: Decolonial feminism and mobility justice

Decolonial feminism is useful for challenging Eurocentric discourses that have oppressed gendered and racialized communities within society and institutions^{7, 18}. This approach considers the intersections and critiques of race, colonial and capitalist gender oppression as socially lived transformations¹⁹. Taken together, a decolonial feminist approach to mobility justice reveals how colonial-capitalist structures can hinder an individual's or groups, especially those who are marginalized, gender diverse, etc., ability to navigate their communities.

Gender, Cycling and Mobility (In)justice

Mobility justice begins with the idea that movement is fundamentally political and that all politics are mobile, characterized by multiscalar and overlapping dimensions of how power and inequality shape the control and governance of movement, the production of unequally mobile subjects, and the envisioning of a justice-driven mobile future²⁰. Achieving cycling safety as a form of mobility justice involves considering how systems of power such as automobility, patriarchy, and racism influence cycling safety and how these forces interact with place across different scales²¹.

A mobility justice framework may also help us to understand sport, recreation and leisure practices by pinpointing who has access to these practices, how they are governed, and the broader implications of access to bicycling infrastructure, and critically examining who has access to sustainable forms of mobility (and who might thus disproportionately benefit from this access). Historically, in the Global North (and some parts of the Global South), bicycling has represented women's freedom. Gender equity in cycling means creating infrastructure that meets the needs of women, trans, and non-binary people. Women (including cis, trans, and non-binary people) face unique mobility challenges such as harassment and caregiving. Safety concerns include inadequate infrastructure and safety measures that deter marginalized community members from bicycling, combined with cultural and social norms (e.g., gendered norms driven by patriarchal systems in particular contexts), may result in challenges to promoting mobility justice practices vis-à-vis cycling^{12, 22, 23, 24}.

Box 2: Key Focus Issue

Access to and the benefits associated with cycling are not equally distributed within society (e.g., the City of Toronto). Particularly, women, immigrants, people of colour, low-income communities, etc., are often excluded from (safe) cycling due to the lack of infrastructure (e.g., bike lanes) and/or policies that meet their needs and protect their rights². As the gender gap and unsafe cycling conditions increase, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities and identities, our research examines how the principles of mobility justice are upheld within the City of Toronto's cycling policies and within BFD organizations that (cl)aim to address these disparities.

Methodology and Research Questions

Our research employs a three-fold methodology for data collection and analysis: (1) an environmental scan of BFD organizations within the GTA (n = 10); (2) Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR)²⁵; and (3) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)^{26, 27} we used these methods to examine two identified City of Toronto cycling policies and then applied those findings to BFD programs to evaluate their capacity to address gender-based inequalities, systemic racism, and oppression within their programming.

Grounded in decolonial feminist theory and mobility justice frameworks, the following three research questions guided this work:

1. How, if at all, do Toronto's cycling policies promote gender equity, diversity, and inclusion?
2. How do BFD programs in Toronto contribute to lessening, augmenting, and/or exacerbating gender-based inequalities?
3. How do BFD programs address equity, systemic racism, and oppression?



In addition to offering policy recommendations, this policy brief delineates three discourses that illustrate the implicit language and underlying meanings sustaining and legitimizing mobility injustice within the policy documents (see van Leeuwen, 2009), and examines the subsequent implications for the programming of BFD organizations.

Findings and Analysis

Discourse #1: Prioritizing ‘Safety’ - More Than Just Bike Lanes

The term ‘safety’ was used consistently between both policy documents (i.e., The Official Plan and Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears). In these texts, safety was framed primarily around improving bikeways and developing new cycling infrastructure to increase accessibility and protect cyclists. This framing aligns with the objectives of ‘Vision Zero’, to eliminate in traffic-related deaths and injuries affecting cyclists²⁸.

Rather than prioritizing the creation of safe cycling environments, the Toronto Official Plan – Chapter Two: Shaping the City emphasizes ‘shaping the city’ by implementing initiatives that support various municipal sectors, including social development, employment, economic and urban growth, transportation, and sustainability. In relation to transportation and sustainability, the report notes that the City of Toronto will promote safe cycling through the creation of new and improved cycling infrastructure, including bike lanes. However, the report does not address how the development and growth of the municipal sectors may perpetuate unsafe cycling conditions. Specifically, the plan overlooks the intersectionality of cycling safety, and that safety for cyclists is more than providing accessible bike lanes. Safety also requires recognizing the multiple dimensions that place vulnerable identities in precarious conditions²⁹.

By contrast, the second policy document, the Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears, serves as the foundation for most of the City’s recently developed cycling initiatives⁸. This report focuses on increasing bike trips and reducing the number of bicycle injuries and collisions, but does not engage with equity issues impacting vulnerable and at-risk populations; thereby diminishing what ‘safety’ is supposed to look like.

While the idea of improving safety is significant and supports gender equity perspectives, both policy documents leave unaddressed the specific safety measures that will be implemented to protect vulnerable populations who use cycling as their means of transport. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased women’s economic insecurity and poverty, compelling many to rely on low-cost transport, such as cycling²⁹. However, these systems, including cycling infrastructure, have been catered towards males, thereby placing women and other vulnerable identities at risk²⁹. While implementing safety measures cycling transportation systems is critical, is it even more essential to adopt safety measures that address harassment and violence, which the policies fail to address.

Although BFD organizations operate within municipal policies that fail to address multiple dimensions of safety, the environmental scan revealed that various BFD organizations strive to create safe (transport) spaces within, through, and around their programs. While these organizations have made efforts to address gender equity, racism, and discrimination, they have at times also indirectly exacerbated gender-based inequities. A recurring theme in the environmental scan was the role of resource allocation in perpetuating these disparities. For instance, BFD programs like ‘Bikes without Borders’ often experience large backlogs for bike requests, and are unable to fulfill all applications, at times having to close applications until further notice. Inefficient resource allocation can therefore marginalize individuals from under-resourced communities by limiting their access to transportation. This highlights a paradox within BFD programs; while they aim to empower and provide mobility, resource constraints often force them to deny support to those seeking it. Additionally, the policy

documents reviewed do not specify any funding provisions to financially support BFD organizations, further limiting their capacity to meeting community needs.



Discourse #2: A ‘One-Size-Fits-All’ Approach

The idea of developing an accessible and sustainable cycling transportation system that allows all individuals to benefit was a common theme across both policy documents. Key phrases that appeared consistently across these two documents included, ‘people of all ages’ or ‘people(s)’. While both policy documents use discursively inclusive language, these phrases or descriptive terms are vague and can be misleading and illustrates the neutrality of language²⁷. This type of phrasing assumes that all citizens, regardless of race or gender, living within the city have the same needs. Still, such phrasing is misleading, because marginalized and vulnerable populations have unique experiences that are not similar to more privileged populations. In turn, such wording encourages creating a coherent cycling transportation system that is centred around the ‘dominant’ group and undermines the needs of disadvantaged social groups within society.

For example, both policy documents, the Toronto Official Plan – Chapter Two: Shaping the City, and the Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears, assumes that simply increasing bicycling infrastructure and adapting a standardized guidelines to active forms of transportation will inevitably create sustainable and equitable communities. And yet, both these policies fail to consider why are there barriers to cycling and the challenges to mobility faced by marginalized and stigmatized communities in the first place. The idea of assuming a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to mobility and sustainability is indeed problematic, and both policy documents fail to address gender-, race-, and class-based accessibility issues. Specifically, forthcoming research demonstrates how mothers who cycle are vulnerable to gender-based violence when on their bikes³⁰; and how sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) significantly constrains women’s and gender diverse individuals’ mobilities, especially in urban environments where perceived and actual risks shape access to public spaces, transportation, and community engagement³¹. Further, Black and Brown cyclists are at heightened risk of police violence due to systemic racism^{32, 33}. Thus, bicycling safety policy must also attend to systemic violence, that targets Black, Brown, women and transgender cyclists^{31, 34}. Overall, discursively neutral language presents various problems as this perspective also disregards

addressing societal barriers faced by individuals who rely on cycling as their everyday means of transport and assumes that barriers can be ‘fixed’ by creating more infrastructure. Thus, this contradicts the policy’s goal of creating accessible and sustainable cycling transportation systems.

The environmental scan found that BFD organizations stray away from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach by creating gender-responsive transport methods and infrastructure to improve the safety and security of women, girls, and gender-diverse populations³⁵. One particular BFD organization stands out for its addressing of the intersection of gender- and race- based access to cycling. ‘Hijabs and Helmets’ provides a cycling space for Muslim women, a community who are targets of Islamophobia. Addressing race-based inequality within cycling infrastructure is crucial, given that Black and Brown cyclists are often depicted as ‘violating’ public spaces³⁶. Racialized cyclists also use bicycling to resist systems of unequal racial power, such as through using bicycles to build community and deliver mutual aid³⁷.

Four BFD organizations in Toronto identified from the environmental scan address gender-based inequities that promote women empowerment through organizing workshops that foster skill development, independence and challenge socially constructed gender roles. For instance, organizations such as Charlies Freewheels, BikePOC, and Women’s Cycling Network conduct bicycle repair workshops specifically for women, trans, and non-binary people. The programming not only provides safe spaces within the historically male-dominated cycling culture³⁸, but also makes bicycling more affordable when cyclists can maintain their own bikes³⁹. BFD programs and initiatives allow such spaces to be cultivated through creating new social connections and overcoming societal barriers. Community rides hosted by BFD organizations can foster community-based spaces and empower cyclists through social connections. Scarborough Cycles, for example, offers women and community members a space learn fundamentals of the bicycle while addressing the challenges of accessing a bicycle⁴⁰.



Discourse #3: Rethinking Urban Spaces – An Approach to Decolonization

Both policy documents, The Official Plan and Toronto Bike Plan – Shifting Gears, aim to transform urban transport and cycling by creating new infrastructure and improving existing facilities. However, this development approach is rooted in neoliberal views that frame urban cycling spaces primarily as sites for economic growth. Cycling spaces, instead, should be approached through an intersectional lens that centres gender, oppression and lived experiences into development. Achieving this requires ‘decolonizing’ urban cycling spaces, acknowledging the needs and demands of Indigenous populations and addressing inequities embedded in existing infrastructure. Furthermore, urban cycling spaces should be informed by diverse identities and not only be formed by Western or Eurocentric perspectives⁴¹.

Neoliberal and political influences around urban and economic growth and sustainability has led to an urgent demand for the city of Toronto to integrate into the rapidly advancing global economy⁸. In turn, policymakers and governments risk neglecting the lived experiences of equity-owed communities when developing mobility policy that prioritizes urban development and economic expansion^{42, 43}. At the same time, the environmental scan reveals that various BFD NGOs respond to gender-based inequities in diverse ways. Taken together, we suggest that gender-responsive mobility infrastructure may play a vital role in addressing gender inequalities and improving the safety and security of women, girls, and gender-diverse populations when trying to access social and economic opportunities³³.

Recommendations

Bicycling policies must address the intersections of gender-, race-, and class-based violence within bicycle safety plans. The following policy recommendations are drawn from the findings shaped by decolonial feminism, critical policy analysis and critical discourse analysis, that serve as a starting point for governments, policymakers, and NGOs.

For Government, Policymakers, and Donors:

- NGO funding agencies should prioritize BFD organizations that deliver equitable programming. This may include workshops for women, trans, and non-binary cyclists, as well as programming that serves cyclists who are Black, Brown, low-income, and/or youth.
- Establish a mobility justice advisory council comprised of representatives from BFD NGO's, equity-deserving community members, city planners, and researchers. The advisory council should guide urban mobility decisions through equity and grassroots perspectives.
- Donor and development agencies need to improve their support to meet the demand that BFD organizations have in providing and allocating bicycles to participants of these organizations. Donor and development agencies should collaborate with BFD organizations to enhance bicycle access and affordability within the City of Toronto.
- Government officials and policymakers should consider incorporating the lived experiences and realities of mobility and movement, particularly for historically marginalized communities and identities, into their policies.

- Government officials and policymakers should use accessible language within their policies. This should include better foregrounding the intersections of gender, oppression and movement.

For BFD NGOs

- BFD organizations should continue to create and improve their programs to foster accessible and safe spaces for all genders and social groups. That is, it is essential to continue to develop programs that incorporate the complex lived experiences of their participants.
- BFD organizations should also work with government and policymakers to determine how BFD programming and contribute to increasing accessible movement within the overall city.



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