

Carriers Of Culture: Women As A Means Of Transport In Urban Accra, Ghana.

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Human transport is a routine African reality: both adults and children are carriers of transport burdens, loads which in the developed world are transported by motorised transport or delivered and removed by pipelines such as water, power and sewage. When men perform the transport function, they typically do so with the aid of technology such as carts and wheel barrows. Whereas women are substitutes for transport technologies - carrying loads on their heads or on their backs -, male transport activities incorporate transport technologies.

What explains this difference? Why are women used as a means of transport and men not? How do men acquire technology? And why do women not make use of the same technologies?

This short summary of research work conducted on the relationship between gender and transport in urban Accra, Ghana explores these questions and provides some answers. The research commissioned by the Transport Research Laboratory, UK under ODA (now DFID) funding was undertaken between 1993-1995 and the number of persons interviewed in the course of the research was in excess of 1,000.

Interviews with both male and female porters (kayayoo) revealed substantial cultural differences between the transport functions of male and female porters. The experience, satisfaction and problems of kayayoos (female porters) have to be explored within this context of clearly gendered transport activities.

Girl children represent a major component of the kayayoo 'community'. As with adult female porters, girl kayayoos rely solely on their own human energy in transporting bulky loads. The girl children are performing the same tasks in the same manner as adult women, with the qualification that very young girls are typically bearing lighter loads. In order to improve the working situation of girl kayayoos, it is necessary to identify what the barriers are to the use of technology by females. On the evidence we have collected, the barriers to technology appear to be more socio cultural than financial in character.

Kayayoos when starting in the business typically have to rent the head pan in which they carry the goods the cost of which is 70 cedis a day. Male porters hiring trolleys rent at 200 cedis a day. Trolley rental charges are distributed between teams of three to six boys and men who work the load together. The renting of a trolley greatly increases the weight and volume of goods that can be carried and thus the earning potential of the work group. Yet whereas men combine to rent and subsequently to own trolleys, women's portering operates on a more individualistic basis with each woman renting or purchasing her own

head pan even though combining into portering teams would permit the financing and use of superior portering technologies.

The outcome is that male and female porters operate in different carrying markets. Female porters carry the smaller loads of petty traders and travelers, male porters transport the more remunerative, heavier loads of larger traders and over greater distances.

In looking at the organisation of kayayoos' activities, it becomes very clear that there are customary carrying routes and distances. The expectation of both kayayoos and their trader customers is that these women porters will carry their loads from the specific local markets to their corresponding local transport termini or 'lorry park'. Despite the customary character of these carrying markets there are surprisingly, perhaps, no set fees either in terms of loads or distance carried. The price for each individual load is a bargaining game between trader customer and human carrier. In this bargaining game there is a trader preference for teenage girls as load carriers because they are unencumbered with children: adult women in this trade tend to have infants strapped to their back and this is regarded as a disadvantage by customers, presumably because it makes the load carrier less flexible. In this bargaining game, girl kayayoos frequently experience verbal abuse from their trader customers who are trying to push the rate down.

In discussing why women make no use of technology as local porters and men do, it is useful to think about the social dynamics of the migration/ gender relationship around portering in Accra. On present evidence, the boys and men involved in local portering are either indigenous to the area or are long time residents of the area, or have the expectations of becoming long term residents of Accra. Furthermore, there appears to be an internal career structure within the local male portering occupation. Young boys are apprenticed to elder men who either rent or own the technologies which they help to work. Males of different ages play different roles on these work teams. In contrast, females entering the occupation of porter view it as a short term prospect with adult women and girls occupying essentially the same role. Girls and women are largely drawn from rural communities outwith Accra and expect to return to these communities in the very near future. Girls and women are not entering the occupation on terms which favour investment in the purchase of higher levels of technology; the short term migrant experience does not favour grouping together with others in order to invest in longer term projects.

Whilst migrant status may explain why women and girls do not group together in order to purchase technology, it does not completely explain why girls and women do not group together to rent the technology. This is particularly the case where these same women and girl porters group together in a range of other pooling behaviours such as savings ('susu'), the organisation of accommodation and the provision of cover for illness.

Neither our respondents' accounts nor researcher observation generated any instances of female porters using 'trucks' (hand carts) or trolleys in the transportation of goods. The gender segregation in the use of wheeled non-motorised transport appears to be complete and comprehensive. The majority of both male and female accounts of why such gender

segregation exists were in agreement: women are not strong enough to make use of wheeled non-motorised transport; traffic conditions make the use of such wheeled technology dangerous for women ; and gender roles in respect of this segregation are too strong to be broken.

Untangling the practical difficulties which women would face with the technology in its present form from the gender stereotype which custom has constructed is no easy business. The traffic conditions facing 'truck boys' are indeed treacherous and are made even more so by the absence of brake pedals on such vehicles. Brute strength is essential to the control of the vehicles on slopes; indeed, a number of truck boys within the sample reported having experienced such an accident.

The redesign of these vehicles to make them more suitable for women had received little consideration by either males or females in our sample. However, when the possibility of such redesign and its implication for female use of the technology was put to them, the majority of male respondents and a substantial number of female respondents rejected the notion on the grounds that it would interfere with the customary transport roles and divisions of labour.

Let's listen to these sentiments in the voices of the porters, both male and female, themselves:

- A 25 year old Frafra (a northern Ghanaian tribe) truck boy: God wants me to push a truck and a woman to carry loads on the head.
- A 32 year old Dagomba (a northern Ghanaian tribe) kayayoo: Men are stronger and we have babies which will be very difficult to push trucks with.

Our porters, both male and female, provided cultural and physical rationales in abundance for the comprehensiveness of gender segregation in portering. However, the resistance to the idea of female 'truck boys' is not simply a matter of practicalities: it also has to do with respect and honour. Concerns about women being exposed to traffic are partially concerns about women being placed in situations where they will be dishonoured. Whilst being shouted at by motorised users or hooted at by motorised traffic is acceptable for a male, it places a female in a situation of shame. Male porters repeatedly make reference to 'women's fear' of interactions with traffic: whether such fear is learnt as part of a cultural role or a simple reaction to physical danger, it operates to shape a form of seclusion or exclusion. From within a customary frame, women do not belong on the technology highway, no matter how simple that technology may be.

Removing loads from the heads of girl children and placing them on more appropriate forms of non-motorised transport clearly requires major policy effort, one aspect of which must surely be an Information, Education and Communication campaign directed at changing gender stereotypes in respect of technology.

(For the full set of evidence on which this summary is based see Grieco, M., Apt, N.A. and Turner, J. **At Christmas and on rainy days: transport, travel and the female traders of Accra.** Avebury, 1996)