

GENDER AND RURAL TRANSPORT IN AFRICA AND ASIA

IFRTD (1999)

Objectives of the case studies

The following case studies were extracted from the case study summaries of the Balancing the Load research programme funded by DFID. The programme, which began in 1996, commissioned 40 case studies in Asia and Africa to establish how gender relations affect women and men's access to goods and services and influence the provision of transport infrastructure and services. The following two case studies intend to highlight the experience of women in rural Asia and Africa, and the way in which appropriate transport interventions have improved the sustainability of their livelihoods, as well as their life chances. The full case studies are currently being edited by Priyanthi Fernando and Gina Porter. Further details on the Balancing the Load programme can be found in the Proceedings of the Asia and Africa Regional Seminars on Gender and Rural Transport.

The first case study demonstrates some of the transport problems women face in undertaking marketing activities in a poor coastal region of Ghana where men monopolise ownership of intermediate transport modes, a trend which is commonplace in Sub-Saharan Africa, as demonstrated in section 7.1 (Transport Interventions) of the key paper on Women and Rural Transport in Development.

The second case study in India demonstrates how the adoption of IMTs (and in this particular case, bicycles) by women can overcome notions of cultural impropriety, and highlights the usefulness of bicycles in all domestic and income earning activities (see also section 7.1 in the key paper).

1. AFRICA CASE STUDY

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSPORT AND ACCESSIBILITY IN OFF-ROAD AREAS: THE CASE OF WOMEN TRADERS IN GAMOA, COASTAL GHANA

By Gina Porter

In many districts of coastal Ghana, women face considerable difficulties in getting their goods to market, particularly from off-paved road locations. Feeder roads and tracks deteriorate rapidly in the rainy season and even settlements just a few miles from a tarred road can become inaccessible. Traders may not visit such villages at these times and so prices are depressed. Women have to headload their produce to the nearest motorable road if they are to obtain reasonable prices.

The study asks five research questions which define the scope of the report:

1. What is the current organisation and cost pattern of transport services in off-road areas (regarding links to the main market centres utilised)
2. What are the particular needs and difficulties of women traders in a small number of selected off-road settlements (and to what extent are they transport related?)

3. Most transport is owned by men. Is there potential to develop women run/owned transport services?
4. What potential is there for various types of intermediate transport use in the specific local cultural context and what would be the implications of its use for women's trading activities?
5. Could electronic communications (such as mobile phones) play a role in improving market information? Would this have transport implications?

Central Region in which Gomoa lies has a reasonable road network compared to northern Ghana, but the condition of roads is frequently very poor. Gomoa has a fairly good network of roads, but the majority of which are classed as 'gravel'. On inspection these are frequently found to be indistinguishable from earth tracks, since the topography of Gomoa means that the gravel surface is rapidly lost and cracks appear.

A frequent response from richer and poorer women in the survey villages (Adabra, Sampa, Lome and Abora), was to talk about the lack of capital for expanding trading activity, including lack of money for transport fares (in the case of poorer women with regard to visiting local markets, in the case of better-off women to visit larger, more distant markets). Although women are the principal produce marketers, they are usually less able to afford transport than their husbands, who generally have larger areas of land to farm.

Defaulting creditors and long delays in repayment of credit are a second common problem for traders which affects those with both large and small businesses and both roadside and off-road residents alike, but is not specifically transport related. Another frequently mentioned problem is that of drivers of tro-tros arriving late on market day to pick up the traders and their goods. Many women in the off-road villages complained about loss of sales occasioned by such delays. The market may be well-advanced by the time they arrive, so it is not possible to sell all the produce they have brought before the customers disperse (having already purchased from the more punctual traders). Failure of transport to arrive at all is particularly common during the wet season, when drivers are unwilling to venture along difficult stretches of road. Women complained about the spoilage and losses of produce this caused.

IMT use is relatively low in Ghana. Photographs of five IMTs were shown to a group of women of varying age and economic status in each of the four villages. The photos were selected to illustrate a range of transport options: the 'kencart' (a large mesh container on wheels, shown being pushed by a woman), the tricycle cart (shown ridden by a man), the wheel barrow, the bicycle (with long rear carrier), and finally a shoulder pole (shown being carried by a man).

The kencart was the most popular option with women from all villages, with the exception of Lome, where the bicycle ranked first. The cart was perceived by most women to be a really valuable means of transporting crops from field to village and on towards local markets. When the groups were asked about potential difficulties in getting the cart along village paths, they generally responded that the cart could be parked on the nearest junction with the broad track and still ease their work considerably.

The tricycle cart was the second choice overall, especially with older women, and seen as having good potential, like the kencart, for both farm to village and village to market transport. The wheelbarrow generated less interest and comment than either the kencart or tricycle cart.

The bicycle attracted much debate. Its long carrier was admired, but only in one village was the bicycle ranked above the kencart or tricycle. It was perceived to have restricted load carrying capacity, and unsuited to the unevenness of farm paths. Interestingly, women did not anticipate any opposition from men if they had bicycles to ride, but many were uncertain if they would be able to learn to ride them, and it is possible they would be commandeered by men. By contrast with the others, the carrying pole was rejected everywhere. All the women felt that it looked uncomfortable and too heavy, and would make it impossible to carry a baby on their back while transporting goods.

Only one woman in all the village surveys was actually a transport owner, but this is exceptional. Most women in Gomoa have little likelihood of ever having enough funds on their own to purchase even a modest IMT.

Group ownership ought to be an option in these circumstances, but there is widespread concern among the women interviewed in all villages that groups would have difficulty amicably sharing any vehicles purchased in this way and everyone would want to use it at once. And in the poorer villages, even group purchase was considered beyond women's means. This suggests that in many villages, poverty or lack of experience with group enterprises may inhibit development of women-owned /run motorised transport and IMTs and that substantial groundwork would be necessary to ensure the success of any project.

The potential for improving access to market information through the use of mobile phones was also examined in the study. The author states that it seems in principle, another useful approach via which women's efforts to get the best prices for their goods could be assisted. However preliminary surveys are not encouraging. Most women do not seem interested in hearing about prices obtainable in more distant markets. They report that they prefer to deal in their own, local market where they are known and perceive themselves to be at less risk of being cheated. Many women also argue that they do not have the funds to visit more distant markets.

In coastal Ghana women have the principle responsibility for marketing. Access to motorised transport services from and to off-road villages is often very restricted and more costly than comparable distances over paved roads. Traders are regularly disappointed by the late or non-arrival of vehicles on market day, particularly in the rainy season when roads become impassable. The women may lose money as a result of this.

IMTs are currently very rare in rural Gomoa and almost wholly male-owned and operated. The more widespread use of IMTs could assist women in moving crops from farm to village and village to market, and the majority of women were extremely interested in photographs of IMTs provided for discussion, particularly the handcart. However, most women could see little opportunity for obtaining IMTs themselves, because of lack of funds. They were negative about the idea of group purchase.

The World Bank's recently launched village infrastructure project (VIP) could help with IMT acquisition, but villagers are unaware of it at present. Since the project is envisaged as providing investment to user groups, it is important that women in these villages consider ways in which they can come together to take advantage of this potential source of finance.

2. ASIA CASE STUDY

CYCLING INTO THE FUTURE: THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN PUDUKKOTTAI, TAMIL NADU

By Nitya Rao

The story of the introduction of bicycles and bicycle riding skills as part of a literacy campaign (by the National Literacy Mission) in the early 1990s in Pudukkottai region, Tamil Nadu, is a well-known example of women's increased mobility, independence and empowerment through the successful implementation of the bicycle.

The initial campaign enlisted the help of men to teach women how to cycle. Loans were made available for women to buy bicycles and those with a regular income (such as NGO workers) were quick to take these up. As more women were seen regularly cycling, the opposition and 'male jokes died away'. It became acceptable through the sense of it being a widespread movement.

Key informant interviews, a focus group discussion and a village survey were the tools employed to establish answers to the following questions:

1. Though cycles were introduced from the perspective of empowering women rather than meeting their transport needs, have they been able to meet those needs, both for their productive and reproductive activities. Are women able to access bicycles to meet those needs?
2. What had been the impact of women's increased mobility on their self-esteem and confidence, on gender relations in the community?
3. Has providing bicycles to women been a sustainable intervention? In particular, has women's investment in cycles continued and do they have control over the use of these cycles?

A total of 49 women were interviewed in 12 villages, and of these, only three did not know how to ride a bicycle. Most of these 'sample' women were Backward caste women, half of them barely literate and the others educated up to middle school. They earn a living through their labour. They are mostly in the 20-30 years age group and most of them have children and families to care for, in addition to their income earning activities. Their workload is therefore heavy.

An activity and time profile conducted with eight couples revealed that while men and women spent 6-8 hours per day on paid work, the women spent a similar amount of time on household maintenance and childcare tasks, whereas men spent less than two hours on these. Women's working day could stretch to between 12-18 hours per day.

The researchers found that all women who had access to bicycles, whether their own

or that of a husband, father or brother, were using them for a range of tasks, related to all areas of their responsibilities. The most common uses were fetching water from the well or tank, taking paddy to the rice mill, collecting fuel and fodder, going to the hospital in an emergency, and going to school (younger girls). A few use the cycle for their productive work, such as selling flowers in the market, purchasing and selling gems to and from the contractor, and maintenance of plants in a government nursery etc.

In a door to door survey covering 50 households, it was found that 32 women (64%) now own a cycle. 83 out of 91 men asked knew how to cycle, and 34 out of 100 women.

Only four out of the sample 49 women actually owned their own bicycle, however, women seemed willing to use hired cycles not only in emergencies, but also for use in paid work or when they were able to plan several household tasks together that are located at a distance. Hiring every day would be too expensive, but now they know how to cycle they can also borrow from neighbours or use one belonging to another member of their own household.

Cycling is generally viewed as a cheap and efficient means of transport and definitely contributes to meeting the transport needs of women, particularly those in 'low access' villages (distant from essential services). The pattern of use and ownership of cycles bears out that better provision of services such as drinking water, food shops and health and education facilities can lead to substantially reducing women's transport burden and needs.

While between 30-50% of people hiring cycles in the District are women, ladies cycles can rarely be found in the shops. The women have got used to riding bicycles with a cross bar, and feel that it gives them better balance when carrying loads. Even riding a gentleman's bicycle in a sari does not bother the women any more, the convenience of the mode of transport outweighing all other considerations.

The respondents explained that since learning to cycle, they have become more involved with social, development and community tasks because they can confidently and independently cycle from village to village. In one case, this has helped enhance the status of a woman, who is now a major decision maker in her household.

Other women reported how taking a sick relative or child to hospital themselves on the bicycle gave them a feeling of independence and usefulness; of being a 'useful member of society'. The motivation to learn among the women who do not yet know how to cycle is still high today.

While access to cycles for women now seems widespread, what is more problematic is the issue of control. Very few women still actually own cycles, hence they are dependent on the cycles of others, and they have to adjust their work according to the needs of the owners. Male householders generally own the bicycles, and therefore get priority in their use.

Only 12 of the 49 women interviewed had easy access to cycles, and another ten reported that they usually had access to a bicycle when they needed it. The distance of

the cycle hire shop was quoted as a problem for the women, reconfirming that the utility of cycles is no longer an issue of debate for the women, but seen as an accepted requirement to meet their needs.

There are still however, some social restrictions that prevent some women from cycling. Husbands say they worry about their wives or daughters being injured, but in many cases women's work is just not a priority for men. Cycles greatly reduce the time and labour inputs for women in several drudgery-ridden tasks that are essential for household maintenance, but as these are unpaid tasks and have no cash value, the owners of the cycles, mostly men, do not see them as critical for women in the performance of their tasks.

Cycling for women does not seem to have changed gender relations (for more than two thirds of the sample) in the household significantly. Major decision making (on expenditure etc) continues to be vested in the men.

With the greater acceptance of cycling in the District, the profitability of cycle shops as an income earning enterprise has seen their numbers increase steadily. A cycle shop is now seen as a facility that should be available in a village. With changes in employment patterns and lifestyles, the isolated and self-sufficient village economy is a thing of the past. Mobility and transportation are integral parts of people's lives. Large numbers of girls are cycling to school every day in Pudukkottai; this is indicative of even higher bicycle use in the next generation.

The primary impact of learning to cycle on women's lives is their perception of independence in terms of their roles in the household and community; productive, reproductive and community managing roles. However, 40% of the women reported that their workloads had actually increased. Tasks traditionally undertaken by the men, including marketing, taking children to school and other tasks which involved travelling long distances, have all now shifted to women. Bicycles do however help them to complete their jobs faster and more easily. Despite their extra burdens, they report having more time for leisure.

The Pudukkotai programme has demonstrated that cycling can be one very effective strategy for empowering women. The women themselves have found an efficient, cheap and easy way of meeting their transport needs, which has also empowered them. It is clear that the use of bicycles by women in Pudukkotai is a sustained and sustainable phenomenon, and an integral part of their lives.

Source: IFRTD (1999). Balancing the Load: Proceedings of the Asia and Africa Seminars on Gender and Rural Transport