

## Why I don't cycle as much

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In a small urban centre in Kenya just 14km from the capital city of Nairobi a girl was born in a family of predominately other girls. Learning how to ride a bike let alone owning one was the preserve of the boys. I watched with envy as my peers balanced their weight on the two-wheeler and pulled funny stunts as we cheered them on. I was discouraged by my mother to ever try to ride a bike even though she could ride one herself. She learnt it from her father, but she still thought it was not feminine for her girls to cycle. And she also had no resources to buy us bicycles, maybe another reason for not letting us learn how to cycle! This is a simple story told from my perspective as a woman living in Nairobi, Kenya.

I grew up and went to the big city of Nairobi. While at the University of Nairobi I observed that the majority of those riding bicycles were mostly low-income men. Mostly men, who wore their socks on top of their trousers. It puzzled me whether they did that to hold their trousers in place for their own safety as they rode the bicycles or to prevent their trousers from getting dirty. It remains a funny image in my head. I hardly saw a girl or woman cycle in Nairobi in the early 2000s. And only met a few when I ventured to the rural parts of Kenya using bicycles to ferry goods but mostly they were getting rides from a male cyclist. So, I walked for the better part of my university life in Nairobi and got into the paratransit (matatus) to travel longer distances. I observed how the few male cyclists in the city got ill-treatment on the roads as there was no cycling infrastructure. The car was the king on the streets. I only saw a few young 'rich' people cycle together for what I thought was fun. The message I carried home from my university experience was that I needed to get a job and buy myself a small car - this was safe, convenient and prestigious.

I was lucky to get a job and, in a few months, a small car. I thought I would finally have the safety, convenience and prestige as a professional. The problem is I am a trained urban planner and very soon I started asking myself questions. Questions of why the majority of people in Nairobi still walked, and why our public transport system was so dysfunctional. I never understood why someone has to walk across the city to get his/her connection to finish a trip using public transport. Women seemed to suffer the most as they carried their children and usually had luggage. The puzzle remained as to why, on average, people spend approximately one hour getting to work in the morning for distances of less than 20km. Why did we have a lot of space along our streets which basically was just left for open drainage and unkept flower gardens? I felt something was wrong.

My concern slowly grew into a passion to figure out the most equal and sustainable urban mobility model for my city. My interest grew and soon I got a scholarship to study the same in Europe. My first reaction when I landed there was the connectivity of the various modes of transport. I could not believe how they had a train station right inside the airport. Then from the train station I noticed a large bicycle parking facility. I asked my student assistant who picked me from the airport 'where are the cars parked here?'. He looked at me and told me 'I am from India. I understand your question, but here people cycle more'. I pulled my suitcase closer as I imagined the thought of him asking me to get on a bicycle. I did not know whether to tell him I could not ride a bicycle or just hope we will just walk to the hostel. The African gods must have been on my side because we walked to the hostel from the train station.

The next few days were interesting for me to observe. I got there just at the end of summer and the majority if not all students had a bicycle. I observed student families having a fleet of bicycles. Who has a fleet of bicycles instead of cars in the land of Mercedes? I had thought the first thing to do was

to get an old small Mercedes car to move around. But wait, they have lovely walking and cycling paths. Paths that were therapeutic in themselves. I was drawn to using the longer route to class as it passed through a small forest with a small river and a pond with ducks. I loved the earthy smell and the songs of the birds. So, I walked and I loved it. Winter came and I struggled walking - they should have told me temperatures can drop below what I thought was cold, my freezer! So, I explored their public transport, I could never master the schedule and my Nairobi attitude was always getting me to the station just a minute after the bus/train departed. You see, where I come from you just walk to the roadside and stop any oncoming public transport bus (matatu) and did I mention there is always room for one more?

I loved the freedom that came with walking and cycling for the residents of Stuttgart. I loved that women could get to carry their babies and luggage on a bicycle. It was a nice sight to see and I thought of the average woman back home. The car usually belonged to the man of the house, and although he had fewer errands to run than the woman who is left with the huge task of caregiving. She is left to use public transport and walk most of the time. I imagined the opportunities that she would get if only she could get to cycle with her babies and shopping. She would be able to squeeze in more time and energy to economic, recreation, and social opportunities. What a wonderful idea it would be to enable everyone including women to cycle in Nairobi.

I could not get the courage though to cycle, I was afraid of the terrain and I had no idea how to even get the right bicycle. I was also afraid of asking for help to learn how to ride, mostly my ego got in the way. Time passed and I left to go back home. I could not bear living in Nairobi city anymore and I was happy for a job opportunity outside the city. I loved my new town. Thika was small and more people cycled. Even local taxis were mostly bicycles. It was generally flat, and a few ladies even cycled. I used the bicycle taxi more and loved it. I carefully watched how the young men peddled and asked a few questions along the way.

When I got an opportunity to travel to Europe again, I landed myself in Leuven. There was no public transport and most people just cycled where I lived in Leuven. I walked, but I got tired of always having to leave a little earlier than my colleagues who just cycled down the hill in the morning. And every day I passed by the bicycle rental and repair shop. So, I finally gathered the courage and confessed to my newfound friends that I wanted to learn how to cycle. That same evening, I got started, she held my bicycle as I tried to balance and finally, when she let go, I landed in the nearby bush. I was happy though; I did not even feel the scratches on my knees and elbows. The second day, I got my other friend to teach me. He taught me a little about how to balance using the brakes and then let me go down the hill from our residence. I did not fall and successfully stopped the bicycle at the end of the hill just before joining the main road. And so here I was now confident enough to cycle, but only on roads with completely separated bicycle paths. I would still walk as I mapped out 'safe' routes to use to different locations. But in just a few days I got my own bike and cycled to all places I wished to go to. I loved the experience and I just thought how unfair my city is for not giving me and other women this safe infrastructure.

I'm back home now and, I must confess, I don't cycle as much as I would like to. My children go to school just less than 2km away from home, but we walk. We must walk along the highway which is under construction. Yes, they are expanding the highway and have not provided any 'safe' walking and cycling paths. They don't even have safe crossing facilities and when it is raining or on a foggy morning, I sadly must use the car to drop them at school just three minutes away and then make a turn 10 minutes away to get back home. You see drivers here seem not to be educated that they should at least have their fog lights on in the morning when it is raining or foggy. You just can't see the car coming on this highway and most mornings are foggy in Sigona. Apart from the safety

concerns, I am also not assured that my luggage and personal handbag will be safe as I cycle. I must also confess I am a little concerned with the safety helmet which seems never to fit on my full afro hair. Maybe just maybe we can have African women-inspired helmets? Helmets that fit our braided hair or our bulky afro hairstyles.

In a country where approximately 41% walk and only 1% cycle, I see a great opportunity to foster active mobility. By providing safer streets to cycle more people will shift to cycling, affording greater and more efficient mobility. Safer streets with segregated cycling paths and safe crossing will see more children cycling to school freeing time for mothers to attend to other economic activities. Savings on transport costs as more people shift to cycling as well as time savings will gradually contribute to better wellbeing of the residents. But we also need more data to create a case to improve gendered mobility and especially in walking and cycling. With more data, we can lobby for safer, more female-friendly mobility, especially in our African cities.