

3. Bicycles and Rural Women

3.1 Attitudes of Women Towards Use of Bicycle

Women's attitudes towards bicycles vary with their:

- (i) Culture and tradition;
- (ii) Exposure to other women riding bicycles;
- (iii) Social situation;
- (iv) Economic situation; and
- (v) Location, i.e. terrain and infrastructure.

Each of these factors is discussed subsequently.

Culture and Traditions

In Mbale district, which is predominantly Bagisu, and in other parts of Uganda such as Buganda in the Central region, it is not considered proper for women to ride bicycles. Women are supposed to be "subservient and a bit secretive," and someone who rides a bicycle is judged to "behave like a man." (Quote from Mr. Waswa Balunwya, Business Consultant, *Every Woman*).

Both women and men mentioned that women riding bicycles are perceived as being more independent, more "liberated" than others, and that husbands may not consider women riders as a positive development. Frequently, stories are told of women who had left their husbands when they became financially independent or "too liberated." These factors were rarely mentioned in Tororo district where the culture seems more permissive with regard to women riding bicycles. Tororo women come from many different ethnic groups, and they do not seem to face cultural taboos about riding bicycles. They are keen to have the opportunity to use a bicycle. The obstacle that women encounter here is one of access to bicycles. If there is a bicycle in the household, it is considered the man's possession. Even if the bicycle stands idle, the woman may not be allowed to use it because the men fear that it will break if used for women's transport activities.

Culture and traditions are strong and important factors in rural areas. However, even though rural societies might be considered traditional, they are not necessarily static. During structured discussions with Bagisu women on the plains, some showed an interest in the possibility of having access to a bicycle for their daily transport needs. When asked what their families and friends would think about them riding a bicycle, a young woman in Nampanga (Mbale) answered that when people realize how much the vehicle assisted her, they would change their opinion.

Exposure to Women Riding Bicycles

It is quite rare to see a woman riding a bicycle in Tororo or Mbale districts. Yet, in the towns and on the main road through these districts, a few female riders can be observed. In the rural areas of Tororo, women occasionally ride bicycles. However, in the villages of Mbale district, it is a very unusual event.

Women who have never seen a woman on a bicycle often start to laugh at the mere thought of it. On the other hand, if they know, or have seen women ride, they are more attuned to the idea of riding themselves: "If she can ride why should not I!".

Social Situation

In the 14 villages visited, there were only five cases cited of women riding bicycles regularly. Two of the women are Bagisu, from Mbale, and three are from Tororo district. These women share some common social characteristics which facilitate their access to and acceptance of bicycles.

All of the women riders live in male headed households. Two of the women are teachers and two are nurses. The fifth is a self-employed business woman. They either live in villages that are relatively close to Mbale or Tororo towns, or in the vicinity of the main road on the flatland. All of these bicycle-owning/using women have a formal education, and they have been exposed to cultures and traditions different from their own.

In the villages, a teacher or a nurse is frequently the RC1 women's representative. Education, thus, is a merit that is appreciated and recognized by rural women. Educated women are respected and looked up to by other women. If the school teacher or the nurse rides a bicycle, they may help to "break the taboos." Hence, if bicycles were to be introduced into rural areas where they are not part of the inherent culture, these educated women could be important agents of change.

Economic Situation

All of the bicycle-riding women previously mentioned earn money, and they use the bicycles mainly to go to and from work. Two of the women have a motorized vehicle in their households. Thus, they belong to a very privileged economic group. If the man has a car, then the woman can have a bicycle. However, if there is only one vehicle in the household, it is generally considered to be for the man.

Women frequently stated that in cases where there is only one bicycle in the household, they feel that it is more correct to let the husband own it, even if he is only using it for social purposes. They would feel awkward or ashamed to own a bicycle while their husbands had to walk. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, men are reluctant to share bicycles with their wives. Consequently, many women reached the conclusion that the best way to ensure that they would have access to a bicycle would be for the family to have two bicycles. However, this option is economically beyond the means of most rural households.

In two of the cases mentioned here, the women received their bicycles through a project - family planning and tree planting. Thus, they did not have to pay for them.

Location - Terrain and Infrastructure

In rural areas, women are primarily responsible for the life-sustaining transport tasks in and around the village, such as water and firewood collection. They are also responsible for the daily transport of food from the fields to the home, and, during harvest periods, they contribute significantly to bringing in the crops from the fields. In addition, they are responsible for grinding, which involves trips to the grinding mill.

When an area is hilly or mountainous, the activities which bicycles can be used for are more limited. Water is commonly located down in a valley while the settlements are up on a ridge. Firewood may be located far away and collectors must travel over difficult terrain where the absence of proper footpaths makes it difficult to pass. Moreover, crop production frequently takes place on steep slopes where a bicycle cannot effectively be put to use.

The condition of tracks and footpaths, particularly if there is a difficult water crossing, also limits the use of bicycles and thus influences the attitudes of women towards the employment of bicycles for "their" activities. In the plains, women were frequently concerned about broken bridges and slippery soil. However, they all recognized that if footpaths were improved, the employment of intermediate means of transport could have wider applications.

Summary

The attitudes of women reflect the perceived usefulness of the vehicle. It is much easier for women in flat areas to perceive how a bicycle could be useful in their daily transport activities even though they may not know how to ride or may never have seen anyone use bicycles for water or firewood collection.

The fact that exposure to an event influences attitudes underlines the importance of demonstration projects. The average villager is more likely to get used to the idea of women riding bicycles when he has been exposed to the idea in other situations.

Teachers and nurses could act as agents for change with regard to increased bicycle usage among women. It would not, however, be desirable for a bicycle to be perceived as a vehicle that is only for educated women. This group of women should therefore not be encouraged to use bicycles in isolation, but along with other more typical village women.

3.2 Bicycle Usage Among Women

Riding Skills

In Tororo district, the majority of women over 40 years of age claimed that they knew how to ride a bicycle when they were young, before they got married. They are, however, doubtful as to whether they would attempt to ride a bicycle today. Their main interest in bicycles stems from the possibility of sending children to do errands. They believe that older sons would be more positively inclined to help with water collection or to be sent off to the grinding mill if they had access to a vehicle.

Older women in Mbale district, however, have generally never ridden a bicycle. They are interested in bicycles for the same reason as older women in Tororo, that is, for the possibility of transferring part of their responsibilities to other family members.

On the other hand, younger or unmarried women in both districts are more open to the idea of cycling. It appears that fathers are more likely to allow their unmarried daughters to ride bicycles than husbands are to allow their wives to do so. A major problem, particularly in of all Mbale, is that many women do not know how to ride. Despite their lack of riding experience, women of all ages in the plains feel that bicycles could ease their transport tasks and they have a positive attitude to bicycle ownership.

Trip Purposes

Traditionally, while men are responsible for transport outside the village, women are responsible for travel in and around the village. However, when women have access to bicycles they use them to go to work, to go to the market, to go to buy something from a shop, to bring a sick child to the clinic, or to make a social visit. That is to say, women end up using bicycles for the same purposes as men, mainly external travel.

Since women have very limited access to bicycles, it is not strange that bicycles are not used for water or firewood collection. It is also to be expected that when women do get access to bicycles they use them for wider external travel.

Loads Carried

Women who were observed riding bicycles used them to carry very small loads, for example, 5 maize cobs, or a small box of medical supplies in the case of a nurse on a field visit. Thus, the bicycles were used mainly for personal transport, and not for load carrying.

3.3 Women and Bicycle Transport Services

Rural Traders

In Mbale and Tororo districts, women do not render bicycle transport services. Throughout the visit to eastern Uganda, only one woman, in Iganga district (outside of the defined study area), was seen transporting matoke on a bicycle; she was seen at the junction of the main road carrying 4 bunches of matoke. As this is more than she would need for personal consumption, it is possible that she was taking it to a market.

Rural women's groups have on occasion hired bicycle riders to transport their produce to market. This is, however, a rare event. Most women's farming groups complained that they were the "victims of middlemen" who take advantage of the fact that women have difficulties transporting their produce to market. As a result, they are forced to sell to the bicycle traders at low prices.

Boda-Boda Transport Operators

There are no female boda-boda riders although boda-boda services are used intensively by urban women. Boda-bodas perform a very useful service for the urban woman and the town-market woman, who employ the boda-bodas for both personal and goods transport. Many working women use boda-bodas to go to work. Also, in the mornings, some parents send their children to school on boda-bodas. The urban women mentioned, however, that they have to be careful not get into the habit of taking boda-bodas on a daily basis, because it becomes too expensive.

3.4 Constraints Upon Greater Use of Bicycles by Women

The constraints upon greater use of bicycles by women can be divided into four main categories.

- (i) Culture;
- (ii) Technical constraints;
- (iii) Economic factors; and
- (iv) Infrastructure.

Each of these categories is discussed subsequently.

Culture

In some areas, cultural factors will make it more difficult to expand bicycle usage. Projects aimed at encouraging bicycle riding among women in these areas must move more slowly, and more carefully than in areas where bicycle riding is culturally accepted.

Technical Constraints

In Uganda, the standard bicycle is the man's type with a horizontal crossbar. All the bicycles in the shops in Mbale and Tororo town were men's bicycles. All the men, women and children seen riding were on men's bicycles. The most common brands of bicycles are imported from India - Roadmaster and Hero. There are also some Phoenix from China and Raleighs from India. Most of the bicycles have 22-23 inch frames.

Bicycle retailers do not import women's bicycles because there is no demand for them. They claim that a ladies' bicycle with the curved frame or the slanted crossbar is not as strong as a man's bicycle. The general opinion among both women and men confirms the belief that the crossbar makes the bicycle sturdier. As a result, women customers tend to buy men's bicycles even if they plan to ride the bicycles themselves. Men are also against the idea of ladies' bicycles because male household members do not wish to be seen riding on a woman's bicycle. Thus, it is more acceptable for a woman to ride a man's bicycle than for a man to ride a woman's bicycle. This is another reason for buying a man's bicycle, since it can then be used by all household members.



A Phoenix ladies bicycle belonging to a family planning field worker in Tororo



Boda-Boda transport services are extensively used by urban women

The average height of women in Eastern Uganda is probably around 1.60 meters. It is difficult for a woman of this height to keep her balance when riding a man's bicycle on a bumpy road, or to quickly come to a halt. Urban women frequently wear Western-style clothing while rural women mainly dress in the traditional full-length busuti. It is particularly difficult to get on or off a man's bicycle in such a long dress. On a relatively good but narrow feeder road, the team witnessed a woman falling along with her bicycle because she had difficulties dismounting when she was startled by the sound of an approaching car.

The available mens' bicycles thus have frames which are too large to be ridden securely by women of average height. One way to encourage bicycle usage among women could be to import ladies' bicycles. A deliberate effort in this direction is being made by a World Bank- financed project - the Agricultural Development Project (ADP), which is active in eight districts in the Eastern and Northern region. The districts covered in the Eastern region are Kumi, Pallisa, Soroti and Tororo. Another project - the South West Region Agricultural Rehabilitation Project (SWRARP) - also has some experience with the use of ladies' bicycles.

ADP has a specific women's component. It has assisted women's farming groups to establish village stores. There are a total of 31 such stores in Tororo and Pallisa districts and the ladies' bicycles were sold through these shops. Each shop received 5-7 bicycles. The bicycles were sold for Ush 40,000 each, which is about 67 percent of the market value. Despite this discounted price, there are two unsold bicycles in the shop in Mukujju village in Tororo district. The reason for the ladies' bicycles remaining unsold is that they are said to be weaker than the mens' bicycles. The SWRARP project also encountered difficulties in selling the women's bicycles, particularly due to cultural beliefs in the Southwestern region.

The ADP bicycle is a Roadmaster from India. It has a very large frame with a curved down-tube instead of a crossbar. It had a top-heavy and unsteady feeling when test-ridden. Thus, if the judgement of women's bicycles being weaker or less steady was based on the experience of this specific model bicycle, it would seem accurate. A family planning field worker from Tororo town had a Phoenix ladies' bicycle. It was a smaller bicycle which felt more compact and gave no impression of being top-heavy or unstable. The field worker was very satisfied with her bicycle. When women from Mukujju village were shown this model of ladies' bicycle, they concluded that it seemed as strong as a man's bicycle, and that it would indeed be easier to ride.

Another constraint upon increased bicycle usage for women's transport activities is the containers in which water is carried. In Tororo district, water is frequently fetched in pots while in Mbale it is more common to use jerrycans. Pots are more difficult than jerrycans to ferry on an intermediate means of transport. This has to be kept in mind if bicycles or any other IMT are introduced for the purpose of water collection. Thus, where pots are used, households would also have to acquire the jerrycans. In September 1991, a 20 liter jerrycan cost about Ush.2,500; a pot costs Ush.500. Pots, however, break more easily than jerrycans.

In September 1991, an agreement was reached between private Chinese and Ugandan businesses to manufacture bicycles in Uganda. It would be desirable that these bicycles be produced with the type of rear racks and other reinforcements which are used locally. This would reduce the additional expense that bicycle owners incur for modifications. It would seem reasonable that projects interested in promoting bicycle use among women, collaborate with this factory to aim to extend the bicycles' carrying capacity for women's loads such as water.

Economic Factors

In order for a woman to be able to claim a bicycle as her own, she has to pay for it herself. This is a very difficult issue since in the rural areas of eastern Uganda it is traditionally the man who takes care of the sale of agricultural produce. Thus, months can pass when rural women have no access to money at all, not even for the smallest expenses. In most villages a woman's only possibility of getting money is through income-generating projects developed through women's clubs. Yet, even if a club has an income-generating project, it does not necessarily produce any income.

Therefore, although the vast majority of rural women encountered in Tororo district and in the flatter areas of Mbale are very keen on bicycles, they feel that it is impossible for them to purchase one because of the difficulty in saving Ush.65,000. Even when they attempt to save school fees, school uniforms, and unexpected expenses for sickness and travel prevent them from accumulating large sums of money.

Rural women understand and are very interested in the prospects of credit. Credit would enable them to pay in installments and this is perceived as a much more manageable commitment than saving the entire sum. In the past, rural women have rarely had access to credit schemes. Similarly, the experience with existing credit schemes is not good. For instance, farmers have had bad experiences with the "Rural Farmers' Credit Scheme" administered by District Agricultural offices, through which they could borrow up to Ush.500,000. The scheme was targeted at the small farmer and aimed at encouraging productivity increases through improved cultivation methods and the intensified use of fertilizer and other inputs. The program failed due to delays in delivery of inputs and in disbursements of loans. (Farmers tell stories about how the scheme let them down: One woman had to sell her only cow in order to pay the laborers she had employed to prepare a new plot of land because she did not receive the loan she had been granted. She also did not receive the necessary inputs, making it impossible to plant.)

Interest rates are a somewhat difficult and sensitive issue for farmers. Commercial interest rates are set around 45 percent - the inflation rate in Uganda is about 40 percent. Crop prices do not adjust to compensate for this steady increase in the general price level. Thus, farmers constantly see their purchasing power deteriorate while interest rates on loans are set to reflect the rate of inflation.

Women also complained that in the past, interest had been charged from the date that a loan was granted rather than from the date that the loan was disbursed. Hence, they felt cheated by the arrangement and would not apply for credit again if this procedure was repeated. However, despite previous negative experiences, rural women continue to be interested in credit schemes, particularly if they think they would work well and without delays.

Infrastructure

The condition of footpaths and tracks in the villages is a constraint upon the wider applications of bicycle use for the transport needs of women. Improvement of these tracks could expand the use rural women get out of bicycles. These women generally have a positive attitude about carrying out self-help work on the local transport network when they can envisage the positive results that this would bring. This suggests that rural women might be receptive to the idea of improving tracks and paths for extended bicycle usage, particularly on the plains.

Summary

If ladies' bicycles are introduced with the aim of encouraging bicycle usage among women it is important that the bicycles sold are of good quality in order for them to be comparable with existing mens' bicycles in terms of load-carrying capacity and versatility of use. It is also desirable that the women's bicycle be equipped with a carrying device that facilitates the transport of water, crops or firewood.

It is conceivable that in areas where bicycles are not currently used, they could be introduced and targeted for women's transport purposes. Also, if ladies' bicycles are equipped with improved rear racks or other carrying devices, they may be perceived as a "new" vehicle particularly designed for women. It is possible that women riding these new bicycles no longer will be seen to "behave like men."

Due to the fact that men do not like to be seen riding a ladies' bicycle, the purchase of a woman's bicycle could limit the use of the bicycle to the female members of the household. This is not necessarily bad, because it could help break the existing pattern of bicycles being monopolized by the male household members and allow women to use the bicycles for "what they are intended" i.e. women's transport activities.

Moreover, as ladies' bicycles become more common, it is conceivable that young men would become less reluctant to ride on ladies' bicycles and would run errands using a ladies' bicycle rather than walk. Thus, if ladies' bicycles are introduced, women may get the dual effect of saving time and effort directly through the use of bicycles in their daily transport activities, and indirectly by transferring transport responsibilities to their children. At the same time, the risk of men monopolizing the vehicles may be reduced.

Women's lack of money is manifested in the numerous attempts among women to establish income-generating projects in the rural areas. Men are generally responsible for all monetary transactions. Thus, months can pass without women having access to money. Credit can help to overcome part of this financial constraint although the fundamental problem remains that, despite hard work and income-generating attempts, women have difficulties in raising even the smallest amounts of money.

Moreover, when women have access to money, there are often a number of more urgent priorities such as school fees, medical bills or old debts which take precedence. Thus, there are many claims on women's scarce funds which are given priority over the purchase of a time- and effort-saving device for the women themselves.