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India: Tamil Nadu bicycle project (IFRTD)

These case studies are being compiled to draw lessons from the experience of a wide range of organizations. They are considered as works in progress and will be updated periodically. Comments on the cases are welcomed, as are suggestions on additional cases which could be included in the series.

Thanks to the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD) for making the report available on which this case study is based.

CYCLING INTO THE FUTURE: The experience of Women in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu

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 a successful intervention: cycling. The author of this study wanted to see how circumstances had evolved more than five years 'Down-the-load', and whether the movement in women riding bicycles had sustained and would remain sustainable. The initial campaign enlisted the help of men to teach women how to cycle. Loans were made available for women to buy cycles and those with a regular income (such as NGO extension workers, childcare 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.

The author sought to ask three 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 has been the impact of women's increased mobility on their self-esteem and confidence, on gender relations in- the community?
3. Has providing cycles 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?

Key informant interviews, a focus group discussion and a village survey were the tools employed to find answers to these questions. 49 women were interviewed in 12 villages.

Out of these 49, only three did not know how to ride a bicycle. Most of these 'sample' women were Scheduled and Backward caste women, half of them barely literate and the others educated up to middle school. They earn their living through their labor. 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.

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. For instance, if a husband owns the bike and has to leave for work at 8a.m., then the woman has to get up extra early to try to finish as much of her work (water collecting etc.) before this time. The men in the households generally own the bicycles, and so they get priority in its 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 labor 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 cycles 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.

In concluding the comment on the evidence of the survey and interviews, the author states that 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. The second and related impact has been in terms of improvement in both their self confidence and self-esteem.

Looking at gender relations the picture is more complicated. On the positive side, women cycling has come to be accepted as a normal phenomenon, and rural girls now learn to cycle alongside boys.

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 cycles, 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 the majority of rural homes of the District a cycle is now common property. In a door to door survey covering 50 households, it was found that 32 of them (64 per cent) owned a cycle. 83 out of 91 men asked knew how to cycle, and 34 out of 100 women. There might perhaps have been three or four prior to the literacy campaign.

Only four out of the sample of 49 women actually owned their own bicycle, however. Women seemed willing however 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 neighbors 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,

An interesting issue is that while between 30-50 per cent of people hiring cycles in the District are women, ladies cycles can rarely be found in the shops. The women have in fact got used to riding gent's cycles, and in fact feel that it gives them better balance when carrying loads. Even riding a gent's bicycle in a sari doesn't bother the women any more, the convenience of this mode of transport outweighing all other considerations.

The author tells the stories of some individual women and how cycling has helped them. A common theme is that they can be more involved with social, development and community tasks because they can confidently and independently cycle from village to village.- This in the case of one woman has enhanced her status within the home so she is now a major decision taker in her household. Her husband is quite happy with this, not least because his workload has reduced! This woman brought the bicycle on a loan, as many others have done, and she has already repaid it.

On the other hand, almost 40 per cent of the women reported that their workloads had actually increased. Tasks that the men would do before, such as marketing, taking the children to school or whatever involved traveling distances, have all now shifted to women. Cycles do however help them to complete their jobs faster and more easily. Despite their extra burdens, they report having more time for leisure.

On a broader front, the Pudukkottai program 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. The signs are that use of cycles by women in Pudukkottai is a sustained and sustainable phenomenon, an integral and necessary part of their lives.

(Source: "Cycling Into The Future: The experience of Women in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu" By Nitya Rao. Case study presented at the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development workshop in Sri Lanka. June 1999.)