

Whose Streets?

By Seble Samuel

I live in Addis Ababa. I imported an aggressive urban cyclist mentality from the streets of Montréal, Bogotá and Quito which I originally dared not try in Addis. But the pandemic made me waver and then shift. I became more afraid of catching Covid on public transport than of braving the streets of Addis on two wheels. Since then, except for in pouring rain or at nighttime, the bicycle is my unfailing transport.

It is not a breeze. Men shout awful things. There are hardly any cycle paths anywhere. The air is polluted. And on any given day I share the road with trucks, potholes, goats and pedestrians. But I do it because I feel good. Cycling makes me feel deep joy and freedom.

I live in a city where most people don't own cars. In Addis, more than half of people walk and around 30% take public transport. But despite these overwhelming trends of active mobility and collective transport, the streets are designed for the car-owning minority. And besides my dear friend Milha, who co-organises wonderful monthly bike rides around the city, I never see any other Ethiopian women cycling.



Meskel Adebabay, Addis Ababa's central square. Photo: Seble Samuel

Addis Ababa's non-motorised transport strategy tries to change this, by growing the walking and cycling infrastructure, and creating the target for half of the city's cyclists to be women in six years' time. But for now, while the country's secondary cities are filled with female cyclists, we remain a rare anomaly in Ethiopia's capital city.

I know there are many systems that stop us: car-filled streets, sexual harrassment, gender stereotypes, never learning how to cycle, etc. So I decided to dive into the experiences that shape gendered urban cycling realities from every corner of our continent. I chatted with women in different African cities, from Nairobi to Cape Town to Lagos, to hear their stories, learn what stops us from filling the streets and how we can flip this reality.



Hamrawit and Yubi learning to cycle at the women's cycling programme Cycle Techyalesh in Addis Ababa. Photo: Maren Ahlers

Juliet Rita, who grew up in the outskirts of Nairobi in the 1980s, and who now coordinates the [Africa Network for Walking and Cycling](#), shares that “it was not acceptable for a girl to cycle. It was not the norm for a parent to buy you a bicycle. So boys used to have bicycles and I was curious to see what the boys were doing. One of the activities was, of course, cycling and chasing each other. I remember my mum would always pull me away from the boys so that I didn't engage in what she termed as “dangerous things such as riding a bicycle.” But the boys were allowed. And you know back then also, there was this notion that if you're a young girl, you're likely to break your virginity riding a bicycle, which I still don't understand.”

Lebogang Mokwena, [Learn2Cycle](#) Founder and inaugural Bicycle Mayor for Cape Town, tied such examples to “gendered patriarchal views around the person for whom the bicycle is made, and that

person is never seen as a girl or a woman. There are gendered stereotypes about the bicycle as a men's mobility instrument and not for women. And maybe that's subliminally linked to really wanting to constantly constrain the freedom of women's movement in society. Fundamentally I think it's also linked to just not wanting us to move as freely and as far as a bicycle would allow."

These repressive gender stereotypes are also interconnected with class struggles and divisions. "When you're a teenager you associate bicycles with poor people," says Juliet. "It's the servants, the watchmen that cycle to work because they cannot afford bus fare. So the attitude towards bicycles was "it's for men, and it's for men who don't have money." Because growing up you could not find a wealthy person riding a bicycle. In fact, for a long time I thought bicycles were cheap and affordable."

Olamide Udoma-Ejorh, Director of the [Lagos Urban Development Initiative](#), shares that in Lagos, "the only females you see cycling are the ones who are doing it for sport, who are attached to a cycling group. But you have to buy a really good bicycle, you have to pay a monthly or annual fee for the club, there are a lot of financial elements that come with joining a club. So they are women who are a lot wealthier than those who ride out of necessity, like security guards or household help. If you compare it, they don't have the disposable income to partake in those kinds of activities."

Lebogang adds on to these class differences in Cape Town and the desire to demonstrate wealth through status symbols. "In middle class or slightly more materially secure households, I think the bicycle is seen as a toy, because those households usually have cars. The bicycle is seen as something that children use to play and to get around but at a certain point you kind of graduate out of that. And part of how you actually demonstrate your material well-being is being able to move away from public transport, from walking, from using the bicycle, to having a big shiny machine - preferably German - on the road."

Compounding these class and gender divisions of mobility and access to streets, is the role of caregiving. "Most of the time I leave the house with two kids and I have to drop them at school or maybe I'm dropping them somewhere else, so that also makes cycling a challenge," says Juliet. "I remember when I went to Germany, I was shocked to find women riding bicycles with their children."

On the other side of the continent, Olamide echoed similar sentiments in Lagos. "There isn't anywhere that is close enough that you can really cycle to and then with kids it's very difficult." That these caregiving roles are disproportionately mapped onto women's bodies compounds the structural barriers to urban mobility and cycling, creating experiences of vulnerability and threatening the safety of themselves and their children.



Dr Thato Mosidi in the first cohort of Learn2Cycle in Cape Town. Photo: Leanne Brady

Lebogang stresses how real these threats to safety are and how much they affect how we perceive and move through our cities as women in African cities. “In a case like South Africa, with the high levels of crime but also gender-based violation of women, I do think that trying to encourage many more girls and women to use the bicycle also is a challenge because it could seem a little bit culturally and contextually insensitive given the types of violation that women, particular poor and deprived women, tend to be exposed to by virtue of having to inhabit streets that aren’t necessarily the safest or the most welcoming.”

These complex and interconnected barriers shape how we inhabit the streets in different African cities and require structural changes. “There’s a lot of embarrassment and shame, even though there are structural problems,” says Lebogang. “There’s a structural impediment as to why women would tend to not have learned something like cycling as children.”

This means, for example, that we need to rethink the hundreds of kilometres of walking and cycling infrastructure that are being planned in Addis Ababa’s non-motorised transport strategy with women’s voices at the centre. That we challenge the stereotype that cycling is only a mobility option for the poor and instead elevate cycling as a dignified form of mobility for all. That we name and break down the

gender stereotypes sustained by violence of who street space can publicly and freely and safely belong to.

In Addis Ababa, with our urban sustainability non-profit [Lem Ketema](#), and our friends at [Egre Menged](#), we are trying to make these new worlds possible. We have created a bicycle teaching programme for girls and women in Addis Ababa to learn how to ride called Cycle Techyalesh. The registration is overflowing and we have had to open up new rounds to contain all the excitement. In a handful of sessions Ethiopian women are learning to ride a bicycle for the very first time and are expressing awe and freedom and pride that they are able to propel their own movement.

“We see the bicycle as a tool for freedom as well,” says Olamide. “So women feel like they can take over street space that isn’t always theirs and still feel safe in those spaces.” Lebogang adds, “I find it’s always so amazing once these women learn how to ride and then the next question is - do you also give swimming lessons? It frees them to own up to the other things that they have never learned to do, and it gives them the confidence. The bicycle becomes a portal to the bucket list of many other things they never verbalised as needing or wanting to learn.”

So let us multiply this portal and build new worlds where the streets are for everyone.

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