

# The Role of the American Bicycle Girl: An Indicator of Healthy U.S. Cities towards Sustainable Mobility



Amount of space required to transport the same number of passengers by car, bus or bicycle. Photo credit: Press office, City of Münster, Germany.

## A Fundamental Shift in Transportation Thinking: The Role of Automobiles Reconsidered

In an era of heightened unsustainable energy use and environmental degradation, the need to achieve sustainable mobility in our society has emerged as a critical issue. Human progress is dependent upon our mobility, thus it is essential we transition and grow alternative transportation.

Females are facilitating the transition to pedal-powered transportation. They are emerging as important, influential advocates in supporting active transportation infrastructure and behavior, purposefully molding a safer and healthier world future generations will inherit.



Complete Streets graphic in Olympia, Washington showing walk-able, pedestrian and bicycle friendly design. Photo credit: Cascade Bicycle Club Blog, Max Hepp-Buchanan



An international day dedicated to transforming our cities' endless parking spaces into fun public parks has been called PARK(ing) Day. On September 16th, 2011 Virginia Tech students got out of their cars to reclaim Blacksburg streets.



Urban bike art with chives in basket, spotted in Toronto. Photo credit: Morgan Passi

### The Dynamic, Evolving Image of the American Bicycle Girl Past to Present

The American Bicycle Girl will play a profound role in defining our future of sustainability and health in transportation. Her potential in the U.S. is not yet realized, but her courage and creativity will speak the truth about challenges facing our times. From the Wheelwomen of the early nineteen hundreds who rode their bicycles to freedom to today's pedaling to sustainability cycle chic advocates, the American Bicycle Girl offers hope for a transportation revolution of safe streets, healthy communities and sustainable mobility.



Women suffragists wearing typical cumbersome clothes – long skirts and corsets that restricted movement and made it impossible to ride a bike. As a woman, riding a bike was once considered "off the road to down-hill temptation." As a vehicle of social change, the bike liberated women from their lives of domesticity and isolation. Photo credit: <http://www.thebicyclescape.com/forwomen.html>

Annie Londonderry was the first woman to bicycle around the world. She is wearing bloomers, a controversial riding costume for women during the early nineteen hundreds. Culturally acceptable cycling clothing and fashion has always been a barrier to women cycling. Photo credit: annielondonderry.com by Peter Zheutlin. © Peter Zheutlin.



"I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives a woman a feeling of freedom and she realizes that, on the whole, she takes her best self when she can't get into harness unless she gets off her bicycle, and away she goes, the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood." - Susan B. Anthony

### Who is the Bicycle Girl? Effects of Gendered Cycling on our Streetscape

She is the woman who has rediscovered the joys and uses of riding a bike, invoking nostalgia from childhood memories. She is the woman who recognizes her special role in the transition of our society, culture and economy to a more sustainable form. She is the woman who drives major changes in advocacy, especially in the realm of how bikes fit into our communities with social purpose. She is the reformed soccer driving mom who rides with her children to practice. She is the utilitarian, errand running, grocery shopping, family leader who ensures her son doesn't become a couch potato. She is the PTA representative lobbying for Safe Routes to School in her community. She is the student who commutes by bike to save gas money and the environment.



A street style photography blog in Denmark celebrates utilitarian cycling and provides helpful resources for women on how to bike dressed in clothes of your destination. Tips on how to bike in a skirt and avoiding helmet hair and sweat have encouraged women's bicycle transportation. Photo credit: Copenhagen Cycle Chic



An American Bicycle Girl in Wichita, Kansas, a mother transporting her two children. Photo credit: Tubulocity.com

Women bicycle primarily for its ease of use and efficiency, but sometimes for its empowerment (Zheutlin). Whatever their cause or motivation, women who bicycle are inadvertently contributing to a culture of respect around all modes of transportation. Bicycling women promote mainstream recognition that two-wheeled transportation is culturally acceptable. With the increased perception of cycling normalization, safer streets are retrofitted to reduce automobile speeds and allow individuals who actively commute to be prioritized. The growing population of female cyclists has been a valuable contribution to developing the American Streetscape to accommodate the needs of cyclists.



The bicycle is key in Copenhagen [for transporting young children...]. If you have kids in Copenhagen you either own a cargo bike or have considered buying one. In fact, 25% of all families with two or more kids own one, either as primary transport in a car-free family or as a second car." (Colville-Anderson)



### Women are an Indicator Species for Bike-friendly Cities

It is understood women are catalysts for safe pedestrian and bicycle friendly design, thus bicycling women help progress the live-ability of a place while supporting a sustainable mode of transportation.

- Women are more averse to risk than men. This translates to increased demand for safe bike infrastructure as a prerequisite for riding (Baker).
- In Portland, "women were less likely than men to try on-street bike lanes and more likely to go out of their way to use bike boulevards, quiet residential streets with special traffic-calming features for bicycles"
- In New York City, "men are three times as likely to be cyclists as women, yet a bicycle count found that an off-street bike path in CentralPark had 44 percent female riders" (Baker).

Redeveloping bicycle and pedestrian facilities around the needs and Safety Concerns of women in the U.S. will also allow a holistic approach to encouraging active transportation.

- U.S. cities with "adequate bike lanes, separated off-road cycling paths, wider lanes on roads, good connectivity and more direct routes" induce greater numbers of women bicyclists (Women's Cycling Project).



Women in Denmark have no problem pedaling around all day and tending to errands by bike. A woman stands at a crossroads of blue cycletracks with her basket full of goods from shopping. Photo credit: Copenhagen Cycle Chic

In Copenhagen, Denmark, bike commuting is a way of life, even in the snow. Two women brave the cold with their children safely inside cargo bikes. Shutting the kids around to school and playdates is no problem with the city's safe cycletracks. Photo credit: Cycling Embassy of Copenhagen



Posters capturing the beauty of Danish cycling women as liberated, independent and increasingly feminine- a cultural icon of modern and rational women (Kastrup). Photo credit: Copenhagen Cycle Chic