

# GENDER, TRANSPORT AND THE FEMINIST AGENDA: FEMINIST INSIGHTS TOWARDS ENGENDERING TRANSPORT RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

*The increasing recognition of the importance of integrating gender into transport research, policies and strategies is underscored by the need to refine theoretical frameworks around gender and transport and to link gender and transport research to a strong feminist agenda. It is argued that issues pertaining to gendered power relations (in communities, methodological approaches and institutions) need to be assessed through a gender lens from the necessarily political standpoint of effecting gender equality. This paper aims to stimulate discussion around the potential contributions of shifts in gender and development theory to gender and transport research in developing countries. This includes critically evaluating the relationship between “gender” and “women”, the efficiency paradigm in gender and transport research, the relationship between gender roles and gender power relations, gendered senses and the experiences of space and gendered organizational culture.*

**Keywords:** gender, transport development, transport research

## INTRODUCTION

There has been increasing recognition of the importance of integrating gender into transport research, policies and strategies over the past three decades. Through the application of a gender lens, androcentric approaches in traditional transport planning have been called into question. The need for engendered transport research and policy has also been evidenced through empirical data pointing to the gendered differences in travel patterns and needs, as well as time and money spent on travel and transport. While the bulk of research in this area is still located within developed countries, increasing

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attention to gender and transport can be witnessed in developing countries (Venter, Mashiri and Buiten, 2006), where much work is needed to effectively engender transport research and planning towards the alleviation of poverty and oppression.

However, this developing area of research is characterized by the need to refine theoretical frameworks around gender and transport. It is argued in this paper that by doing this, methodologies may be improved in a way that can effectively link gender and transport research to a strong feminist agenda. It is further argued that pressure to advance empirical research and implementation, while sidestepping theoretical engagement, may politically and practically compromise strategies to effectively integrate gender into the transport sector. Instead, the need for theoretical discussion should be prioritized and integrated into action agendas capable of implementation.

As Law (1999, p. 573) points out, “Work on gender and transport has been increasingly isolated from developments in both transport geography and feminist geography, and now risks intellectual stagnation”. This paper aims to stimulate further thinking around gender and transport by applying concepts based on feminist geography, as well as those originating from feminist development theory in general. This is done in an attempt to contribute to the theoretical development of this area of research and to highlight the potential theoretical and political weaknesses that may compromise the effective engendering of transport sector endeavours. While this paper is by no means intended as an exhaustive or comprehensive engagement with feminist issues related to gender and transport, it does aim to stimulate debate around, and engagement with, theoretical and political issues potentially impacting on gender and transport in the developing world in particular.

## **I. DEFINING CONCEPTS: GENDER AND A FEMINIST APPROACH**

It is important to note that feminist theory draws upon a vast and diverse body of knowledge, applying a variety of theoretical canons and approaches from Marxism to post-modernism. This means that feminist theory is incredibly diverse in its approach, with various feminist theories addressing gender inequality from different perspectives. What distinguishes a “feminist” approach, however, is a concern with, and desire to effect change in, the subjugated status of women (Cirksena and Cuklanz, 1992). Furthermore, feminist approaches are distinguished by their categorical application of “gender” as a tool of analysis (Mannathoko, 1992). Gender as a concept

denotes the various social aspects of being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, that impact deeply on the ways in which humans think about and organize their social activity, as differentiated from biological sex (Mannathoko, 1992). Therefore, feminist theory aims to identify the sources of women's oppression, the varied nature and impact of gendered power relations and possible ways in which to address power imbalances threaded through with gender. By necessity, then, a feminist approach is distinguished by a political agenda to effect change. In this sense, it can be argued that, for gender and transport as an area of inquiry and action to succeed in challenging the conditions that have led and continue to lead to gender inequalities in transport, gender and transport cannot be entirely distanced from a political feminist agenda to effect meaningful change.

It is further important to note that a good deal of progressive feminist theory is evolving towards a broader conception of "gender" than a focus on "gender equity" through legal reform and the participation of women will allow. Some feminist theorists have begun to develop theory that further critiques knowledge production and certain privileged ways of thinking as being androcentric. The discourses and institutions that rest on these knowledge production processes and ways of thinking are also therefore critiqued as being androcentric. This has implications for the notion of gender mainstreaming and integration in the transport sector as a whole. If transport institutions and knowledge production processes around transport (such as research) are androcentric, this will have implications for the way in which transport resources and policies are handled.

## **II. GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: THEORETICAL DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENT**

A brief account of what is considered to be critical milestones in debates surrounding gender and development theory as a whole will be highlighted here to provide a context from which to explore the theoretical and political issues surrounding the gender and transport arena. Gender and development theory has been, and continues to be, a divergent and contested body of theory. However, key shifts in its development have been characterized by the reconceptions of the relationship between the notions of "women" and "gender".

Early analyses leading from a liberal feminist paradigm tended to focus on "women" as a social category and their relation to the economy and development processes. Noting the exclusion of women from male-dominated

arenas, initiatives in this vein focused on compensatory measures to include women in development endeavours (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999). This approach is commonly known as the WID approach and has since been roundly criticized, although key components of this approach still remain in certain development institutions' approaches despite rhetorical shifts.

The WID approach has, in the first instance, been criticized for drawing from problematic development paradigms that favour efficiency (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999). Hence, WID approaches have also been criticized for being based on development paradigms that "interpret Africa from the perspective of its economic 'inefficiency'" and that are subsequently associated with the prescription that "women of Africa should be concertedly 'captured' by the global market and the economic initiatives of the state" (Lewis, undated). Therefore, opponents of the WID approach argue that inserting women into unequal, androcentric and Eurocentric development processes, without questioning the development agenda as a whole, can further entrench gendered and class oppression rather than relieve the subordinate position of women (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

For example, some feminist scholars have pointed to examples in which women's increased participation in the paid labour force in developing countries has led to further gender and class oppression. Casale (2004), for example, notes that the feminization of the labour market in South Africa has not particularly benefited women, since the very causes for women's disadvantaged position in the labour market relative to that of men have not fundamentally been challenged. Mama (1996) also succinctly captures key feminist concerns regarding the WID approach, which, she argues, draws on "a discourse which (does) not challenge the gross inequalities of prevailing gender relations, under the rubric of 'women in development'". She further notes that the WID approach was constructed in a way that avoided "directly challenging patriarchy and capitalism and demanding the confrontation of women's oppression, instead targeting women as a group to be 'integrated into development'" (Mama, 1996).

Critiques such as these have highlighted the need to question development paradigms emerging from a patriarchal context, rather than assume that the inclusion of women in development processes and analyses will bring about equality and empowerment. Furthermore, critiques of the WID approach led to theorization on the institutional changes necessary to avoid the perpetuation of gender inequalities within or through institutions. Rather than focusing merely on "women" as a social group, these critiques led to

frameworks that also took into account the processes and relations that recreate and reinforce inequalities between men and women.

These frameworks draw from the GAD approach (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999). This approach takes the relational aspects of the WID approach further, emphasizing more fully the manifestations of gender not only in the form of unequal relationships between men and women but also in structures, procedures, institutions and ways of thinking. The role and study of masculinities have also emerged through GAD, along with the notion of gendered organizational culture (Flood, 2004). The GAD approach furthermore highlights the multiplicity of intersecting variables that challenge the implied homogeneity of the concept “woman”. In so doing, the GAD approach asserts the need for a multifaceted and relational analysis of gender, whereby gender identity and status are viewed as being influenced by other social factors, such as race, class, ethnicity, age and culture. Thereby, women are not seen as a homogenous group, but as diverse in their gender identities and statuses over place and time.

The application of, and boundaries between, the approaches above are not always easily identified. Furthermore, while a strong body of knowledge supports a general shift away from a WID approach, in practice, WID discourses continue to echo in the corridors of many institutions dealing with development endeavours. However, feminist theory, especially that which has emerged from Africa, has witnessed an important theoretical and political shift towards an understanding of gender as relational, constituted by many different variables, including race, class and ethnicity, and manifest at social, institutional, economic and political levels. Some of the implications of this general shift for gender and transport research are discussed below.

### **III. GENDER AND TRANSPORT: THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS**

#### ***Problems in considering “gender” and “women” synonymous***

While the theoretical developments described above generally advocate a relational conception of gender, in gender and transport research, advocacy, policies and strategies there exists a strong focus on women’s transport needs in particular. This in itself is not surprising, considering that the bulk of knowledge on transport has been identified as excluding women’s interests. Therefore, a focus on women is a necessary step towards equality, addressing the significant gendered lacunae that exist in transport research and

planning. Indeed, from a feminist perspective, capturing the voices and interests of women, so neglected in most disciplines, is an important practical and political step towards equality and the awareness of important gender dynamics.

However, where “gender” is taken merely to connote “women”, theoretical, political and methodological problems may arise. In the first instance, there may be a tendency to homogenize women (and by implication men as well), bypassing the important intersections of class, race, ethnicity, age and others. In developing countries in particular, obscuring views into the class and race dynamics of gendered transport burdens and constraints in this way would compromise the methodologies and political agendas aimed at effecting change. Second, as critics of the WID approach have highlighted, gender and gendered power relations are constructed and manifested in relationships, between men and women, between women and women or men and men, and between people and institutions. Gendering, in other words, does not occur in isolation. Thus, challenging gendered inequalities and power relations cannot be achieved through a focus on women alone.

In this sense, with regard to gender and transport research, policies and strategies, there needs to be an awareness of the problematic assumptions inherent in discourses that narrowly equate “gender” with “women” alone. A number of methodological frameworks applied in gender and transport research have indeed unpacked gender relations with a view to understanding women’s transport constraints through investigations into gendered access to, and negotiation over, transport resources.

For example, in development research, the Moser framework includes a tool for the gender disaggregation of not only men’s and women’s activities and roles but also the control of resources and decision-making within households (Moser, 1993). This framework can be used to identify salient bargaining processes and interactions among household members surrounding resources, thereby creating an opportunity to reflect upon gender relations. As March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay (1999) point out, however, the Moser framework has been criticized for comparing men’s and women’s roles, activities and control over resources without sufficiently probing the relationship between them. While the framework makes strides towards a GAD approach by articulating the issues of control and therefore power, critics of the Moser framework argue that it still tends towards an overemphasis of the differences between men and women, rather than further exploring the ways in which women and men are connected (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999). Therefore, a cognizance of the problematic aspects of the “gender” and

“women” synonym, which emphasizes women as a societal category over gender relations, could contribute to unpacking gender relations in more depth and hence formulating the best responses towards addressing gender biases in transport.

### ***Questioning the efficiency paradigm***

Women’s mobility constraints have been linked to the stagnancy of economic growth and a lack of social sustainability in households and communities, thus impacting on the success of development strategies (Lebo, 1999; Mahapa, 2003). Large, visible stakeholders in the field recognize the need to address women’s transport needs to ensure equitable, feasible and sustainable transport interventions (Lebo, 1999). Thus, gender mainstreaming in the transport sector is increasingly being regarded not only as a rights issue but also as part of economic and financial considerations for development projects and investments (Mashiri, Buiten and Zukulu, 2005). Therefore, two lines of argument in relation to gender and transport sometimes run parallel to one another, one premised on gender equity and rights and the other premised on economic and financial considerations for women’s integration in development projects and investments. The efficiency, or business case, model in particular is potentially problematic to the feminist agenda. On the one hand, the belated recognition of women’s contribution to the economy and social sustainability through agriculture and unpaid domestic and care work is of critical importance. On the other hand, however, feminist critiques of (WID) approaches should lead us to expand upon this recognition towards a questioning of efficiency paradigms underpinning transport research. This involves asking whether these paradigms, inherent in the very male-biased approaches to development planning that gender activists are attempting to transform, will effectively transform the transport sector. There is a need to question whether the efficiency paradigms underpinning much of the transport research will be effective in addressing socio-economic inequalities, which demands a rights-based approach.

While financial constraints should be borne in mind when determining investments, it is argued here that there also appears to be a need for the appropriate politicization of gender and transport endeavours from a feminist perspective in order to ensure that gender equality is indeed reached. Approaches relying on efficiency claims to motivate change would, under a feminist lens, need to be carefully considered. Where efficiency is a goal, critical issues of unequal gendered power relations are at risk of being sidestepped. Furthermore, it is important to regard the efficiency paradigm critically to avoid a situation in which women’s labour is not merely “captured”

and used for the purposes of development. Instead, the meaningful transformation of gender relations needs to be promoted in the development arena.

### ***Moving beyond gender roles towards gendered power relations***

Common gender-informed critiques launched against traditional transport planning and research include those relating to the tendency to determine and direct transport investments based largely on mainstream commuter patterns (Venter, Mashiri and Buiten, 2006) and to tackle transport issues through a top-down approach, concentrating on technical requirements (Masika and Baden, 1997). Shifts in transport planning perspectives towards approaches taking greater account of all travel needs, including those of low-income persons and special-needs users (Mashiri, Buiten and Zukulu 2005; Venter, Mashiri and Buiten, 2006), have been advocated not only by gender critiques but also by transport research aimed at tackling transport issues from a pro-poor perspective.

Thus, a general shift can be observed towards addressing transport roles and needs relating not only to mainstream paid employment but also to those associated with social, reproductive and informal productive forms of work (Grieco and Turner, 1997; Mashiri, 2005). The effect is to consider socio-economic growth and sustainability as encompassing not only formal employment but also other forms of unpaid work that support the economy and are intrinsic to social well-being. Furthermore, the effect is to make visible the gendered work performed largely by women, which is generally absent from traditional approaches. These have been important steps made in gender and transport research.

As Law (1999, p. 569) points out, “Researchers using aggregate travel data and travel diaries for a number of developed countries reported consistent and significant gender differences in trip purpose, trip distance, transport mode and other aspects of travel behaviour”. She further points out that “explanations drew on the burgeoning feminist literature, particularly the concept of sex roles.” However, Law indicates the weaknesses identified in focusing merely on “gender roles”, noting that “the concept of role-playing tends to imply equivalence, consensus and choice rather than power and coercion” (p. 572).

Therefore, some gender and transport researchers and activists have highlighted the need to include an analysis of gendered power relations that impact upon roles and access to resources. If a feminist agenda is to be

incorporated into transport research, researchers need to unpack not only gender roles and needs but also the power relations that restrict women's access to transport resources and the transport roles they are assigned. Gendered roles and access to resources should not be normalized, but viewed critically in the context of patriarchal power relations.

### ***Incorporating gendered notions and senses of space***

Literature related to gender and transport in developing countries has begun to incorporate to a greater extent the issues related to gendered senses and the experiences of space in developing countries, in particular related to the issues of sexual harassment, rape and the associated fear that can act as a constraint to free, secure and dignified movement (for example, Fernando and Porter, 2002). However, it is argued here that, in developing countries, there is a need for increased attention on having a theoretical base originating in feminist geography, which pertains to the gendered senses and experiences of transport and mobility. As Law notes, "Daily mobility incorporates a range of issues central to human geography, including the use of (unequally distributed) resources, the experience of social interactions in transport-related settings and participation in a system of cultural beliefs and practices" (Law, 1999, p. 574).

Law thus proposes further research surrounding gendered subject identities in relation to transport and mobility. This could extend gender and transport research to unpacking gendered beliefs, power relations and relationships to technology that impact on mobility patterns and relations to resources. Furthermore, gendered embodiment, as well as its relation to transport and mobility, needs to be researched in order to understand and address the implications of sexual assault and harassment (as well as the threat thereof) for women's and girl's transport and mobility patterns and experiences (p. 580). These issues need to be further explored in developing countries for the transport sector to respond effectively to the critical social dynamics of transport, mobility and, indeed, access.

Transport surveys, for example, tend to focus on transport patterns and needs, especially in relation to access to resources, while omitting a deeper probing of the socially constituted experiences of space that impact upon transport patterns or needs. Therefore, qualitative research into gendered senses of space, for example, exploring women's gendered sense of safety or vulnerability in certain spaces, could highlight potential factors influencing their decision to travel or not to travel in certain areas, at certain times, in certain ways (for example, in a group) or using certain modes of transport.

### ***From women's participation to engendering organizational culture***

One of the key responses aimed at addressing gendered inequalities and exploitation in development projects and institutions has been the increased participation of women. This has often been promoted through the framework of gender mainstreaming, which is increasingly being incorporated into mainstream thinking and policy development. However, the associated meanings, potential scope and applied tools for gender mainstreaming can differ considerably.

As discussed above, feminist development theory has witnessed a shift from WID to GAD approaches, with the latter critiquing and aiming to address the tendency to merely insert women into gender-biased development processes to the detriment of their effective empowerment and equality. Instead, GAD is concentrated on the notion that gender relations should be addressed in development processes, effecting the empowerment of women, as well as the transformation of structures, procedures and institutions towards the promotion of gender equality. Societies and institutions are organized around gendered norms and identities that collectively assign statuses, roles, views, attitudes and priorities.

Thus, not only women's participation but also the engendering of organizational culture are needed to move beyond the ways of thinking and doing that continue to subtly or overtly constrain women's meaningful participation in various sectors and to address gender-biased benefits accruing from development projects. The transport sector should be encouraged to respond progressively to theory and research identifying organizational culture as an important factor impeding meaningful transformation.

For example, where the organizational and professional discourse in a given organization is underpinned by androcentric approaches, as discussed in this paper, attempts to integrate feminist approaches will be ineffective and will potentially marginalize the members of the organization that attempt to integrate these feminist approaches into their work. Furthermore, where an organization's prevailing work culture continues to be prejudiced against women, marginalizing them in subtle or overt ways, women's employment in such organizations will not result in their truly meaningful participation within that organization. This could relate to issues from sexual harassment to other subtle forms of sexism, which continue to undermine women's position within the work environment. Therefore, the discourses and practices that underpin the day-to-day functioning of organizations need to be assessed from a gender perspective, and the necessary reforms need to be implemented. Certain

organizations have begun to address these issues through comprehensive gender audits undertaken by gender specialists, who assess the working environment within organizations from a gender perspective and make the relevant recommendations.

#### **IV. FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION**

Regarding the theoretical issues discussed above, the question remains as to how they can be translated into programmes and strategies that can make a difference to communities in developing countries. One of the key propositions put forward here is that there is a need to prioritize the strengthening of research through theoretical reflection towards a knowledge base that can contribute to gender-aware and feminist-informed action agendas. Without theoretically informed research, understanding the issues that need to be addressed will remain a challenge.

However, these theoretical discussions should also be implemented at all stages of development, from research through to policy and programme development and implementation. For example, the cognizance of critiques of paradigms that implicitly aim to harness the work of women in development, without addressing the core need for their socio-economic empowerment, could lead to action agendas that improve the underlying socio-economic power relations that undermine equitable development. An understanding of gender relations within various communities through an awareness that gender is multiply constituted and that it varies over space and time can contribute to engendered programmes that are locally appropriate.

Finally, it is proposed here that the political slant of the feminist agenda, based upon the assertion of unequal gendered power relations and the need for the assertion of gender rights, needs to be mainstreamed in all processes leading towards the implementation of programmes. In essence, transforming mindsets and approaches is necessary for the feminist agenda to find root at all levels of development processes.

#### **CONCLUSION**

While the issues raised above are not intended as a comprehensive overview of potential feminist theoretical and political concerns regarding the developing gender and transport arena, the aim of this paper has been to stimulate discussion around the potential contributions of shifts in gender and development theory to gender and transport research in developing countries.

Through such theoretical and research developments, it has been argued that action agendas can be strengthened towards sustainable solutions. It has been put forward that issues pertaining to gendered power relations (in communities, methodological approaches and institutions) need to be assessed through a gender lens from the necessarily political standpoint of effecting gender equality. It has been argued that unless gender and transport theory is developed in this respect, and interacts more directly with feminist concerns over gendered power, the meaningful transformation of the transport sector is likely to be compromised. Unpacking and addressing these issues is a complex process. Nonetheless, an explicit engagement with feminist theory can contribute to expanding gender and transport theory, as well as improving methodologies and approaches in order to transform transport-related research by incorporating gender issues.

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