

# Improving access to cycling can benefit women in marginalized neighborhoods

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Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Azisrif, CC BY-SA

Research has shown that cycling offers environmental, health, economic and social benefits.

Cycling can be especially appealing to women [in developing Asian cities](#) who have fewer mobility options due to their gender and socioeconomic status. Cycling allows them to travel through multiple stops in the city to fulfill work and household responsibilities.

In the Indonesian city of Solo in Central Java—long considered a hub of Javanese culture and a people-centered creative economy—[cycling](#) has been around since the Dutch colonial era.

The city's female residents [historically cycled at the same rate](#) as males. Improved mobility increased their access to education and employment opportunities.

The government and businesses also had pro-cycling policies like financial incentives for bicycle use and parking facilities.

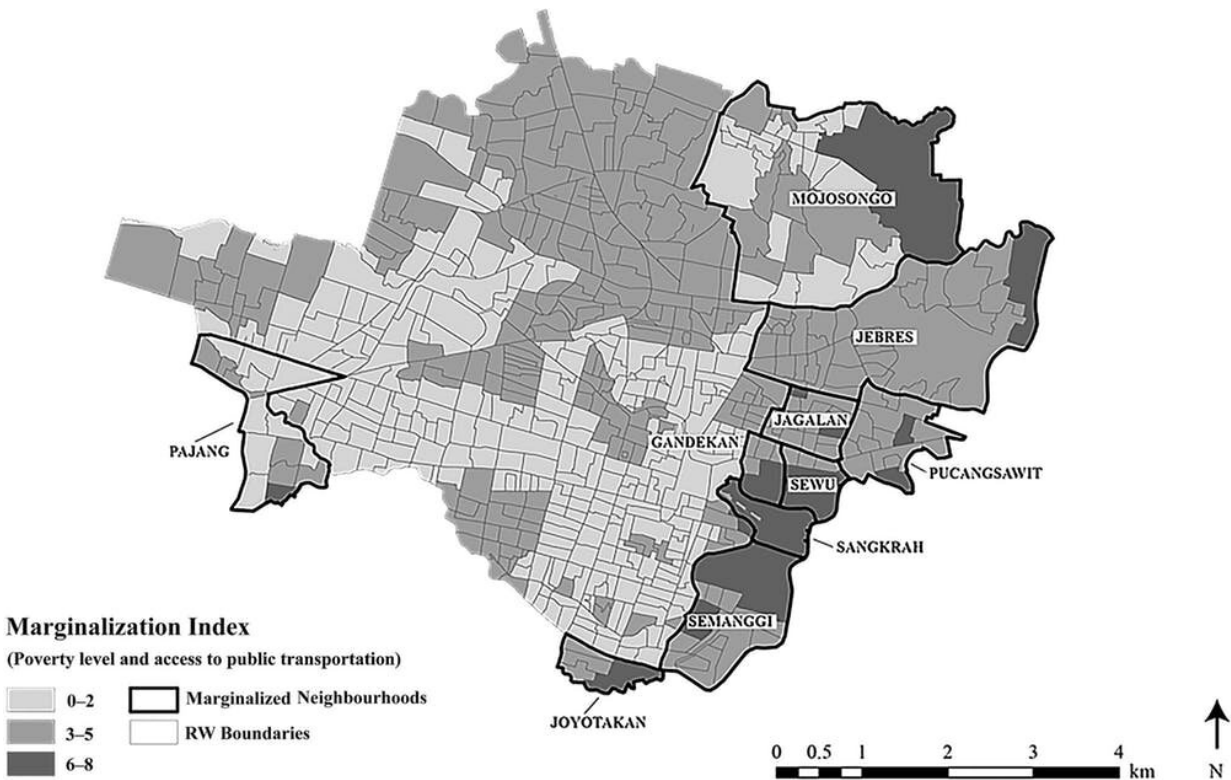
However, like many rapidly urbanizing regions in the global south, motorization sent Solo's motorcycle ownership soaring. It more than doubled between 2009 and 2013 [to nearly 424,000](#). Cycling has been left to decline in terms of policies, investments and ultimately preferred mode of travel.

Our research in Solo [investigated](#) the question of how to promote cycling among women living in areas with [poor access](#) to public transportation networks. We conducted focus group discussions, individual interviews and field observations involving lower-income women from 10 Solo neighborhoods with limited public transportation access.

## **Dream of 'women on wheels' is still far away**

With nearly one vehicle per person, Solo has rapidly become a motorcycle city. Most of its transportation planning has focused on improving conditions for such faster vehicles.

Bicycles now account for [a mere 1% of mode share](#) compared to 67% for motorcycles. However, this boom in motorcycle ownership has not been as accessible for low-income households.



Neighbourhoods that we focused on based on their marginalisation index. Credit: Lily Song

This has impacted women more as men tend to have priority access to motor vehicles, [mostly due to gender-based roles within households](#). In the end, poor women in neighborhoods with limited access to public transportation are often left with walking or cycling as their only transport options.

But the local government's policies do not support the use of bicycles, despite several initiatives.

In an attempt to revitalize cycling among its residents, the Solo

government has transformed its main thoroughfare, Jalan Slamet Riyadi, into a public space for walking, cycling and other communal activities for "[Solo Car Free Day](#)" since 2010.

The city's [28km of "slow lanes"](#) – separating bikes from motorized vehicles on key corridors in the city center—are the country's longest.

However, these cycling improvements are concentrated in the city center, more than 9km from the neighborhoods where most of our interviewees live.

Motorcyclists have also taken to using Solo's slow lanes and other smaller roads to a degree that has often endangered cyclists.

The combination of lack of reach and dominance of city roads by motorized vehicles makes them largely inaccessible to the majority of the city's female cyclists, whose poor neighborhoods are located far from transit lines.

Despite significant barriers, many women and girls still prefer to cycle around Solo.

However, most women only cycle at the neighborhood scale. Here the availability of smaller, local roads eases the experience of traveling with a bicycle.

More than a third of our respondents usually used bikes for shopping at markets and neighborhood kiosks.





Many of our respondents felt defenceless, sluggish and out of place among speeding motorists. Credit: Yayasan Kota Kita

Cycling is especially popular among girls in elementary and middle school. They have the highest rates of cycling among women.

For instance, 52% of female students rode a bicycle to school. Compare this to over 20% that walked and a mere 5% that went by public transport.

But cycling rates drop significantly in high school, possibly because their schools are located in the [city centre](#) or outside their immediate neighborhoods.

Age-specific gender roles may also explain the drop. Young women aged between 16 and 25 years report the lowest rates of cycling, followed by women between 25 and 34.

Our findings indicate that cycling plays an important role in the lives of many women. Without sufficient support from the government, poor women in areas with limited access to public transportation pay the highest price.

## **What should be done?**

During our interviews, many respondents suggested the expansion of the slow lane cycling network beyond the major arterial roads in the urban areas.

This means the city government's pro-cycling initiatives should account for Solo's dispersed residential areas to promote cycling for daily lives—not just for leisure and recreational purposes.

After connecting downtown thoroughfares with neighborhoods on the outskirts, however, another challenge remains: motor vehicles increasingly dominate roads and public space in general.

Many of our respondents felt defenseless, sluggish and out of place among speeding motorists. They dreaded being hit or crushed by them.



Another approach was to use smaller roads and more local streets to navigate the city. Credit: Yayasan Kota Kita

For women having to travel longer distances beyond their neighborhood, a common strategy was to cycle on secondary roads.

Respondents believed that by using smaller roads and more local streets, they could take more direct travel routes, ride faster and reach further destinations.

To support such strategies, the government must employ active interventions across a range of roads and streets to calm, limit and, in some cases, exclude motorized traffic.

Our respondents also stressed that cyclists do not feel respected as there are no designated parking spots for them—not even when they're willing to pay the same rates as motorists.

They emphasized the importance of upgrading cycling infrastructure—such as special lanes or parking spots—to promote comfort and convenience akin to that experienced by motorists. These facilities are especially crucial for women who have to [fulfill multiple purposes on their journeys](#).

Susceptibility to [harassment and crime](#), along with cultural norms, also discourage women from cycling.

Some suggest a riding group for women to prevent harassment, physical attacks or robbery when they travel on bikes—especially in the early mornings when essential trips to the market and mosque take place.

Others discussed public education and outreach campaigns. These would target different age groups of [women](#) and highlight the health, convenience and environmental benefits of cycling.

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