

Women and Walking

Walking is our fundamental 'mode of being' and for centuries the foundation mode for our transport systems, the cornerstone of urban mobility and the social mode of our communities. Everyone walks and nearly all journeys include walking. For clarity, this definition of walking includes people in wheelchairs and with other mobility devices and a journey is from door to door, not just the 'main mode'. In many communities walking is the dominant mode for people to access their local services, including public transport for longer journeys. Walking can be 20-65% of transport mode share and yet does not receive either the recognition, the funding, the infrastructure or even just the space required to support this number of people walking. Facilities are not safe, comfortable or attractive but people walk because they have to or out of sheer personal determination.

Walking is also the greatest ally for public transport systems. Public transport operators are increasingly recognising the need to prioritise walkable commuter catchments around stops and stations, addressing safety, security, comfort and ease of access for their riders. Walkability is seen as the best value for money for increasing ridership, improving services and enhancing mobility for less-able customers. Walkable neighbourhoods with good public transport are the space, cost and time efficient, green, clean and quiet environments of the future.

But the lack of walkable communities is having a bigger impact on women due to gender differences in travel patterns and behaviours. Women tend to have daily patterns of activity that are more complex than men's, including trips for childcare, paid work, household chores, and elderly care. And in many communities (across all socio-economic groups) these distances are often short and easily accessible by walking. But the data shows that when women have a choice, they are choosing not to walk, due to poor street design or complete lack of sidewalks or destinations, personal time constraints and a lack of personal safety. Where women have no choice but to walk, they are vulnerable to a lack of personal security and road safety (for both themselves and their children) while using the transport network and local streets.

The decline in walking for transport (utility walking) in middle-higher income countries, is also having negative consequences for public health, not just the health of our transport systems. The World Health Organisation recognises everyday walking as a critical component for realising better physical activity outcomes for everyone and especially women. The health benefits of walking are well documented. A gender lens highlights the importance of walking for women for mental health, bone density, weight management and balance. A walkable city increases physical activity for everyone but in particular, women's activity levels increase in more walkable communities, thus reducing the gender gap in activity and inequality. There are distinct difference in motivations around mode choice and surveys have shown that women 'want' to choose to walk but do not feel enabled to do so and so default to private motorised travel.

For a relatively small percentage of transport budgets, big gains for walkable communities can be realised and the needs of women addressed. In essence, density, connectivity and destinations within walking distance are the cornerstones of the built environment for walkable communities. Ensuring safety, security, comfort and ease of access will invite women to choose to walk and to allow their children to walk. Or for those without a choice, will deliver an appropriate level of service for this low carbon, cost efficient, socially enabling mode of travel.

Walk21 is the leading international organisation promoting walking. In collaboration with partners around the world, Walk21 promotes and supports walking through measurement tools, policies, The International Charter for Walking and the international conference series. We focus on disseminating best practices, setting standards, articulating the needs of walkers and giving political advice and guidance to cities and agencies across the planet. Through our global network we celebrate walking and actively seek to create a walkable future for everyone.

But to do this, it is imperative that we generate better data about walking, about women's travel patterns, needs and expectations. Cities need clear policy guidance and support to both establish a vision, to recognise the economic value of walkability, ensure delivery of the best infrastructure where people walk the most and to evaluate outcomes.

Working with the ITF, Walk21 will continue to focus on daylighting the importance of walking, for everyone in our communities and the needs of walkers for safe, comfortable and attractive walkable communities. Through articulating the data needs, enabling collaborations and coordination between stakeholders and promoting the benefits of walking across the transport system, we can increase the visibility of walking and realise the value it has for society and especially women.

Links:

www.walk21.com

<https://www.fiafoundation.org/connect/publications/share-the-road-global-outlook-on-walking-and-cycling>

<https://www.itdp.org/publication/walkability-tool/>