Women and Walking: Safety and Security

Bronwen Thornton, Development Director, and Jim Walker, Strategic Director, Walk21

Walking is our fundamental "mode of movement". For centuries it has been the foundation mode for our transport systems, underpinning our individual health and connection to community. Everyone walks and nearly every journey includes walking. In most communities, walking is how people access their local services, including public transport for longer journeys. Walking is typically between 20-65% of all trips yet it rarely receives the recognition, funding, infrastructure or space required. Facilities are substandard but people walk because they have to or out of sheer personal determination and it is the women who suffer disproportionately in these situations.

Women walk more than men and tend to make more off-peak and non-work related trips. Women are more vulnerable to violence and harassment in public spaces. Often, women modify their behaviour to feel safe walking, e.g. don’t walk at night or alone or talk on the phone while walking. Women are more likely to influence the travel choices of their entire family and are more inclined to adopt sustainable modes: women cite that they would like to walk more but do not feel able.

Women tend to have daily patterns of activity that are more complex and multi-purpose than men, including trip-chains for childcare, paid work, household chores and elderly care. 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 choose not to walk due to poor street design or complete lack of sidewalks, personal time constraints and lack of personal safety. Where women have no choice but to walk, they are vulnerable to a lack of personal security and road safety while using the transport network and local streets. Women have a right to a safe place to walk, for both themselves and their children.

Walkable neighbourhoods with connected, good public transport services are the foundations of a cost and time efficient, green, clean, equitable and vibrant city. When pedestrians and the gender differences in travel patterns are considered and made visible in the planning and delivery of projects and infrastructure, streets and public spaces can be made safe, attractive, equitable and even enjoyable for everyone. Designing neighbourhoods that are inviting for women not only enables women to walk but supports those who already do.

This is particularly true for journeys to access public transport. Women report feeling unsafe, both on public transport and during the journey to and from stations. Increasingly, public transport operators are recognising walking as essential for an effective public transport system and are investing in walkable catchments around their stops and stations, taking responsibility for their riders' safety, security, comfort and ease of access to their services as well as the punctuality and frequency of the service itself. High quality walkability is one of the most affordable solutions and gives some of the best returns when wishing to increase ridership, service satisfaction and enhance mobility equity for women and the poor, young, elderly and less-able too.

The lack of walkability in our cities, increasing motorisation and subsequent decline in the amount of time people are choosing to walk in middle-higher income countries, has negative consequences for public health too. The World Health Organization recognises everyday walking as a critical component for realising better physical activity outcomes for everyone and especially women (e.g. bone density or balance). A walkable city increases physical activity for everyone but especially women. Gender-based activity inequality is highest in non-walkable communities. Investment in walkability is a very practical way to reduce the gender gap in physical activity inequalities and enable more women (and their children) to move more.
Walking and walkable neighbourhoods are fundamental to delivering not only the New Urban Agenda, but many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well. Walking is primarily captured in SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities: safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons. But it can also offer tangible outcomes for: SDG 1 - access to basic resources; SDG 3 - health: road traffic crashes, non-communicable diseases and mental health; SDG 5 - gender equality: especially violence against women in the public sphere; SDG 9 - infrastructure: quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all; and SDG13 - climate action: a low-carbon mode. Walking has always been about more than transport.

Walk21 is the international organisation championing the needs of people walking and promoting walkability. In collaboration with partners around the world, Walk21 provides the International Charter for Walking as a common framework for inspiring political commitment; has measurement tools to help make walking more visible; policy guidelines, resources and training, and the annual international conference series as a place for experts to share their experiences and promote best practices. Through a global network of experts, Walk21 celebrates walking and actively encourages a more walkable future for everyone.

Working with the International Transport Forum, Walk21 will continue to focus on daylighting the importance of walking, and the need for safe, comfortable and attractive walkable communities that are inviting to women. Better data to understand women’s travel patterns, needs and expectations is essential - especially in low- and middle-income cities. Countries and cities are seeking clear policy guidance and asking for 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. Together we can increase the visibility of walking and realise the value it has for society and especially women.

**Useful links**