

# **‘I have to beg with a genuine reason’: Shifting from gender-sensitive transport to gender equity in sub-saharan Africa**

**Gail Jennings, and additional policy research  
by Donna Schulenburg**



**21 December 2023**

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**ISBN: 978-91-987715-2-7**

**Recommended Citation (APA style)**

Jennings, G. (2023). "I have to beg with a genuine reason': Shifting from gender-sensitive transport to gender equity in sub-saharan Africa". Volvo Education and Research Foundations, Gothenburg, Sweden.

## Preface

In 2019 the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) launched its Mobility and Access in African Cities (MAC) program. The purpose of the program is to support research on issues related to sustainable, equitable mobility and access in cities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in ways that can increase knowledge and capacity, as well as contribute to long-term processes of change.

An important goal of the program is also to stimulate dialogue among researchers at SSA universities, as well as between researchers and broad groups of stakeholders, on issues related to sustainable and equitable urban mobility and access.

By initiating and funding scientific papers within specific areas, VREF aims to contribute to new knowledge that is relevant for understanding and strengthening access in Sub-Saharan African cities, as well as to spread this knowledge to researchers, educators, and other stakeholders with interests in the area. The format of these papers (or “think pieces”) is designed to give the author an opportunity to present a state-of-the-art overview of research and/or policy on a specific topic, as well as to provide space for critical reflection on the topic, based on the author’s own expertise, experiences and perspectives.

The current paper by Gail Jennings (University of Cape Town, South Africa) focuses on the state of knowledge and practice with regard to implementing gender-informed mobility planning and policy in Africa. A key question in the paper is: considering that gender equity and inclusivity are explicit policy goals across the continent, why are there currently so few policy frameworks that directly address these issues?

This work is one of two scientific papers on “Gender-informed mobility planning and policy: status, barriers, ways forward” that were commissioned by VREF in 2022. The second paper in this area, authored by Taibat Lawanson (University of Lagos, Nigeria), is also available, under “Results and Publications” on [www.vref.se](http://www.vref.se).

We hope that the papers will be a resource for researchers, educators, and other stakeholders in further developing their own approaches and engagements, as well as strengthening the impacts of their work.

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December 2023  
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## Introduction and approach

Women and girls across rural and urban Africa struggle to access existing transport services, and therefore the destinations to which they wish to travel and the opportunities and improved life-chances these destinations might bring. Services specifically designed to meet the needs of women and girls largely do not exist at all. Current bus, train, or minibus-taxi services serve primarily the fare-paying peak-hour commuter who is unaccompanied by children and goods, does not have to make multiple stops, and undaunted by the possibilities of sexual harassment and violence.

Meeting the needs of a majority cohort seems to be an intractable challenge. Like women, pedestrians are also such a cohort in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) cities and rural areas (Benton, Jennings and Walker, 2021). Behrens *et al.* ask why, 'in the face of the overwhelming statistical evidence of the numerical importance of walking and the safety risks with which pedestrians have to contend, does [walking] receive so little policy attention and resource allocation in African cities?' (Behrens *et al.*, 2016, p. 10). With this thought-piece I set out to consider a parallel question of women and mobility. And on reading the work of Mulongo *et al.* (Mulongo, Porter and Tewodros, 2020), I found that the authors had asked a similar question to mine:

Even a fleeting journey into rural Africa today will commonly reveal a transport landscape that is still dominated by male-driven vehicles and (a good proportion of) male passengers hurtling along (literally man-made) major and minor roads, while women and their children trudge along poorly defined road margins, dodging traffic and balancing heavy loads. ....  
**Why should this still be the case, given the commitment to gender equality recited in so many hundreds of national policy documents?** (Mulongo, Porter and Tewodros, 2020, p. 87) [emphasis my own]

Like the focus-group participant from Uganda who is quoted in the title of this paper, many women across the African continent still have to ask – 'beg' – their husbands or fathers for access to mobility resources, and are only able to travel when transport services are 'approved' by men<sup>1</sup>. As although both gender equity and equality have a breadth of constitutional and policy support in Africa, there are few policy frameworks that directly address issues of gender and transport. In this thought-piece I consider why this might be, that despite gender-equity and inclusivity being stated goals across the continent, there is this substantial dissonance between policy and practice.

A thought-piece is a work that discusses the state of current knowledge but also provides exploratory reflections on dimensions and implications of that knowledge. In such an approach, my own research-grounded interpretations and perspectives play a greater role than they would in

1 (BFG, 2022c)

traditional empirical scientific texts. This paper is therefore based on existing work rather than new research designed and undertaken to answer a research question.

## Theoretical underpinnings and data

### Theoretical frameworks

This paper is situated within the theoretical frameworks of feminist urbanism, feminist mobility, and feminist design. Feminism is essentially a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (hooks, 2000). Feminist design considers the way in which design methods and outcomes tend to perpetuate gender inequity. Feminist urbanism (Kern, 2020) and feminist mobility are concerned specifically with how cities and transport systems are largely designed to meet the needs of men.

Design as a discipline, whether industrial design, urban design, or systems design, has often been complicit in the spread of patriarchal ideals (Baker, 2018, p. 543). Although approaches such as design thinking and human-centered design are intended to integrate the needs of users, when women are not perceived and recognized as users (for example of systems and public spaces) their needs are not addressed. Further, feminist design can unintentionally adopt and perpetuate gender inequalities when assumptions (gender roles and norms) are not critically analyzed. Thus, even when women are involved in design processes, traditional gender roles and norms can be entrenched or reproduced (Baker, 2018).

### Terminology

I use terminology that relates to feminist or gender policy and planning. Gender mainstreaming, for example, is 'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The goal is to achieve gender equality' (ECOSOC, 1997). Gender-transformative programmes address unequal power relations and seek institutional and societal change (FCSA, 2021). Gender-sensitive programmes are those that respond to the needs and interests of both women and men in their structures, operations, methods and work, and remove barriers to women fulfilling their potential. Gender sensitivity reflects an awareness of how gender influences the opportunities of individuals in societies. Gender responsiveness actively addresses the causes of gender inequality (ECOSOC, 1997).

I use the terms gender equity or gender equality as they are used in the policies referenced. Likewise I have used the terms disability, disabled, or disabilities, as they are in the policies.

## Data

In line with the nature of a thought-piece, this work draws on the scholarly literature, a review of 11 country transport and gender policies, as well as my own desk and field research across a range of projects involving gender, mobility, and transport. Further details regarding the approach, method, and data sources, are available as Appendix 1.

## Background: the journey to gender-sensitivity

Of course everyone needs good transport services that serve their needs. Mobility poverty and (in)access matters for everyone. But it matters differently for women, who already bear the brunt of poverty, unemployment, and transport-related social and economic exclusion (Thynell, 2016; Porter, Abane and Lucas, 2020). Attending to women's mobility needs is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many of which depend on women having meaningful access to mobility resources and transport goods (UN Women, 2017; Uteng and Turner, 2019) – and is also essential if gender-equity is to move beyond policy intention and declaration signatures.

For quite some decades now, transport researchers and practitioners have had a good idea of how women travel and what happens when women's mobility needs are not met. For example, by the early 1990s the World Bank, working in developing countries and in Africa specifically, had already recognized and reported that men and women have different needs from transport services, and that transport systems at the time did not respond to women's needs (Riverson and Carapetis, 1991; Riverson *et al.*, 2005). Unless women's mobility needs were understood and responded to, they noted, there would be little chance of attaining the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Riverson *et al.*, 2005). In 2007, a Gender and Urban Transport learning module to assist policymakers in urban development was published in 2007 by German Technical Cooperation<sup>2</sup>, in support of the German government's sustainable development efforts (GTZ, 2007). In 2010 the World Bank reiterated in its guidance for operational staff that 'traditional transport planning models have not considered women's specific travel patterns', noting that that 'these differences stem from differences in the social and economic roles of men and women, with their respective household and caretaking responsibilities' (World Bank, 2010, p. 11).

Work by social scientists had in the meantime been drawing attention to the social and political sources of these mobility needs and patterns. Porter, for example, noted that 'interactions

2 Now GIZ, German Development Agency

between gender constructs, women's mobility, and transport development are evident in the African context.' She stated further:

Women's mobility affects their immediate access to facilities like markets, banks and credit, and their potential for occupational flexibility and diversification as a way of moving out of poverty, while mobility which gives access to education, social networks (eg attending funerals), and political process may have crucial implications for the future division of labour and the overall bargaining power and position of women in society. (Porter, 2008, p. 283)

By now, in 2023, it is somewhat of a truism that women in developing and emerging economies – urban and rural – make more trips than men during off-peak hours, are more likely to walk as a main mode of transport, have longer journey times and longer wait times, have less access to prestigious, motorized or personal vehicles, and are less likely than men to be able to pay for transport services (Thynell, 2016; SUM4All, 2019; Jennings, Allen and Arogundade, 2020). Women limit their movement due to fear of sexual harassment and violence (Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022). By and large, transport services do not provide for women's trip-chaining travel patterns, and patterns associated with caregiving responsibilities (mobility of care). The consequences of these mobility constraints are, and have long been, severely compromised access to healthcare, education, employment and opportunities for livelihoods, and to full inclusion in decision-making, community participation, and social life (Porter, 2008, 2011; Uteng, 2011; Uteng and Turner, 2019; Porter, Abane and Lucas, 2020).

Never mind the MDGs – the later Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also unmeetable without women's full participation in all aspects of life. SDG 1 (eradication of poverty), SDG 3 (sustainable health systems), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG 11 (inclusive cities), all depend on gender-equitable access (Uteng and Turner, 2019; Jennings and Arogundade, 2021).

There is an curious lack of continued and current scholarly literature from within the social sciences about gender and mobility in Africa, given the extent and political nature of the challenge (Porter, Abane and Lucas, 2020). At the same time, however, women's and caregivers' mobility needs are now discernable on the transport-activist agenda in the developing and emerging economies. There are, among others, resources sharing guidance on designing transport services for women travelling with babies and children, on developing streets that serve the needs of women, and on how to attend to violence against women on public transport (FIA Foundation, 2016; Sonke Gender Justice, 2016; Flone Initiative, 2019; Mabaso, 2019; Shah and Raman, 2019; Jang *et al.*, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

Women's trip patterns are increasingly documented and known, not only through conventional travel surveys (Venter, Vokolkova and Michalek, 2007; FIA Foundation, 2020; STATS SA, 2021) but also through qualitative work (Morilly and Behrens, 2021) and innovative mapping of pain points along the trip chain (Lailvaux, Ribet and Lunt, 2022). Transport projects in developing



and emerging economies more routinely require the collection of gender-disaggregated data and – and at times support extensive research into women's mobility needs (ITDP, 2018; Shah and Raman, 2019). Quantitative data from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) indicates the extent to which sexual harassment and fear of violence occur in public transport, and the impact this has on women's mobility (Vanderschuren, Phayane and Gwynne-Evans, 2019; Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022; Vanderschuren *et al.*, 2023).

Nevertheless, with some exceptions, collective knowledge about women's travel patterns seems not to have been widely used as input into transport systems, 'making progress toward inclusive and gender-sensitive transport slow' (FIA Foundation, 2020, p. 5). Approaches to improving gender equity in developing economies, which have focused on reducing poverty among women in an attempt to increase access to transport, have also had marginal success (Thynell, 2016). Any progress has been further hampered by the mobility restrictions during Covid-19 lockdowns in Africa, which affected women differently than men and have had long-lasting negative impacts (Jennings, Allen and Arogundade, 2020; Porter *et al.*, 2021).

## 'Equal rights with men': review of policy commitments to gender equity

To demonstrate and assess the constitutional and policy support for gender equity in Sub-Saharan Africa, I selected for analysis each country's constitution, primary national transport policy or policies, and primary national gender policies or similar. I also selected each country's Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) policy (or relevant section in a national policy) for review, as these policies tend to pay attention to women and walking behaviour. Of the eleven countries whose policies were investigated, all are committed at some level to promoting gender equality.<sup>3</sup> These are presented in alphabetical order.

In **Ethiopia**, the constitution gives women 'equal rights with men.' To redress historic inequity, women are entitled to 'affirmative measures' (RoE, 1995). **Ghana's** constitution gives women freedom from gender-based discrimination and requires that 'facilities shall be provided for the care of children below school-going age to enable women, who have the traditional care for children, realise their full potential' (RoG, 1992, p. 18). In **Kenya**, women are guaranteed equality and freedom from discrimination, and the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres (RoK, 2010). **Malawi's** constitution intends to 'obtain gender equality through full participation of women in all spheres of Malawian society on the basis of equal opportunities with men... and the implementation of policies to

<sup>3</sup> This 'thought-piece' takes as a given that the gender-equity goals in these policies have not yet been fully achieved. The scope of the research does not include assessing the current state of gender-related inequities with respect to mobility on the continent.

address ... domestic violence, security... and economic exploitation' (RoM, 1994). **Mozambique's** constitution (RoM, 2005) places men and women as equal before the law in all spheres of political, economic, social and cultural life. The Federal Republic of **Nigeria** is 'founded on ideals of freedom, equality and justice' (FRoN, 1999), and the country is committed to social justice and equality of status and opportunity. **Rwanda's** constitution (RoR, 2003) goes so far as to commit to women occupying at least thirty percent (30%) of positions in decision-making organs of state. Senegal's constitution (RoS, 2001a) guarantees equality between women and men in its Article 7. South Africa's constitution (RSA, 1996) prohibits unfair discrimination (RSA, 1996, p. 95), while **Uganda's** constitution provides equality and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of sex, but also commits to affirmative action in favor of 'marginalized groups' – marginalized on the basis of 'gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition, or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them' (RoU, 1995, p. 21).<sup>4</sup> **Zambia's** constitution recognizes the 'equal worth' of men and women (RoZ, 1996).

These countries have adopted associated gender equity or equality action plans, frameworks, and at times policies, that attempt to give depth to women's constitutional rights. In some instances, there is an explicit mention of the relationship between gender and transport, at other times the link is implicit – as access to opportunities – or not mentioned at all.

**Ethiopia's** National Action Plan for Gender Equality (RoE, 2006), drafted in 1993, aims to mitigate women's lack of access to services, provide support to women who need childcare services, and invest in measures that reduce women's heavy workloads with respect to collecting water, grinding grain, collecting energy resources, and using transport (RoE, 2006).

**Ghana's** National Gender Policy (RoG, 2015) commits to facilitating 'affordable, reliable and decent transport services and infrastructure for all, particularly women, the vulnerable, the aged, and persons with disability.'

**Kenya's** National Policy on Gender and Development (RoK, 2019) does not refer to transport or mobility specifically but does highlight key issues related to access to basic goods and services. The overall goal of the policy is to achieve gender equality by creating a just society where women, men, boys and girls have equal access to opportunities in the political, economic, cultural and social spheres of life (RoK, 2019).

The purpose of **Malawi's** National Gender Policy of 2015 (RoM, 2015a) is to strengthen gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women at all levels in order to facilitate attainment of gender equality and equity in the country. The policy notes the need to focus on reducing gender inequalities and enhance participation of women, men, girls and boys in socio-economic development processes.

4 Note that throughout, I use the terms disability, disabled, disabilities, as they are stated in the policies.

Among the objectives of **Nigeria's** National Gender Policy (FRoN, 2021) are to promote equitable access by women and men to critical resources, and improving access to social services by children, women, and other marginalized groups (orphans and vulnerable children, the elderly, and those with disabilities).

Transport and mobility are explicit concerns in **Rwanda's** National Gender Policy (RoR, 2010), which includes strategies to facilitate rural transport used in different localities, especially by women, and institute appropriate intervention measures to facilitate access to energy to reduce the household energy burden on women. The policy defines programmes, sub-programmes, and specific objectives, of which programme 4 focuses on transport: to ensure that the status of feeder roads is improved to facilitate users (mostly women) in accessing basic services; to adopt a state-supported programme of cheap and gender-sensitive transport; and to ensure that multipurpose public amenities with toilets for women and men are constructed at strategic points along main highways.

**South Africa's** National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (RSA, 2000) details a strategy for gender mainstreaming and provides guiding principles for its implementation. However, there is no mention of a relationship between gender and mobility.

**Uganda's** Gender Policy (RoU, 2007) does not refer directly to transport or mobility either, but does, as do other gender policy documents in Sub-Saharan Africa, refer to the need women have to access markets in order to actively participate in the country's economy.

**Zambia's** National Gender Policy (RoZ, 2014) explicitly acknowledges the fact that transport is a critical enabler, and that safe transport systems and infrastructure are essential for promoting gender equality and equity. Under Chapter 5, the policy intends to increase the participation of women in transport and the construction business value chain, and in Chapter 6, to provide periodic sex-disaggregated data that will ensure evidence-based programme implementation (not specifically transport data).

Some of these policies explicitly note that achieving gender equity is a significant challenge. Nigeria (FRoN, 2021), for example, concedes to facing challenges in terms of gender-based violence and elimination of harmful traditional practices, sexual and reproductive rights, education of the girl child, a fair balance of responsibility for unpaid care work between women and men, and participation in decision-making processes (including political participation, among others). Senegal acknowledges that strong socio-cultural and legal constraints continue to stand in the way of achieving gender equality (RoS, 2001b). Kenya's National Policy on Gender and Development states that gender inequality remains a key area of concern, mainly due to 'the patriarchal social order' supported by statutory, religious and customary laws and practices (RoK, 2019).

## ‘Balancing the load’<sup>5</sup> : transport policy and women

As with gender policies, most African transport policies commit to providing equitable access to opportunities. Women are often identified as a category of person with limited access, and are seen to have distinct needs and to travel in particular ways. Policies undertake to serve these needs and travel patterns.

Women’s mobility needs are, however, typically understood through a lens of vulnerability: a need for safety and thus for lighting, and the challenges of pregnancy or movement being limited by children. The needs of women tend to be bundled with the needs of children, the elderly, and people with disability – an implicit assumption that ‘universal design’ is synonymous with inclusivity, and thus would include meeting women’s needs. Gender is more likely to be explicitly mentioned where policies focus on walking and the provision of walking infrastructure, as women tend to walk further, more often, and carry larger and heavier loads, than do men.

**Ethiopia** categorizes women as a vulnerable user group along with people with disabilities. Women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, have a ‘special need’ (RoE, 2020a, p. 28). Women, the elderly, youth, and ‘handicapped people’ are users at ‘social risk’ who’s needs are to be addressed by the Ethiopian Transport Master Plan (RoE, 2022). Women’s needs are also mentioned, along with those of children and persons with disabilities, in the country’s Non-Motorised Transport Strategy (RoE, 2020b). The Strategy seeks to ‘ensure gender equity by supporting the development of an integrated and safe transport system that provides access to education, work, health care, cultural, and other important activities that are crucial to women’s participation in the society.’ Of concern is safety and security for ‘female user experience.’ People with small children, people carrying heavy shopping or luggage, people with temporary injuries, and older people, can all benefit from an inclusive transport environment which would consist of ‘ample, well-connected pedestrian facilities with unobstructed space for movement, consistent pavement surfaces, appropriately sloped ramps, and safe pedestrian crossings’ (RoE, 2020b, p. 16). These proposed solutions to women’s and caregivers’ needs are classic universal access interventions, to enable the movement of people using wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

**Ghana’s** National Transport Policy (RoG, 2020) situates women’s needs under Transport Sector Theme 1, Transport for All. Among the objectives are that the transport system ‘responds to the socio-economic needs of women, children and the aged’ (RoG, 2020, p. 50). Providing safety and security for ‘female users’ is key to Ghana’s Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) Strategy (RoG, 2019), which also recognizes that ‘cultural barriers’ and limited access to credit prevent more women in Ghana from cycling.

Under the subheading Non-Motorised and Intermediate Means of Transport (NMIMTs), **Kenya’s** Integrated National Transport Policy (RoK, 2009) refers to gender equity and to ‘balancing the

5 (RoK, 2009)

load' by reducing the time women spend on transport activities. The Policy proposes reducing the extent of the need to travel by improving accessibility to water and electricity, and establishing markets and health centres, in readily accessible places. The development and use of NMIMTs are to be actively promoted to enhance gender balance in the performance of social and economic household tasks and to increase women's time spent on economic and commercial activities. Nairobi's NMT Policy indicates that 'vulnerable road users, women and children have difficulties travelling without assistance' (NCC, 2015, p. 9). Women are less likely to use bicycles because of 'safety and social security,' and 'cultural and community attitudes to cycling.'

**Malawi's** National Transport Policy (RoM, 2015b) highlights the importance of ensuring 'gender equality' in the provision of transport services. The Policy encourages community participation, particularly of women, in infrastructure planning, development and maintenance, using labour-based technologies, and intends to provide for safe movements of pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles. Pregnant women, women with children under the age of five, girls, and physically challenged people are highlighted as vulnerable groups. Malawi's National Transport Master Plan (RoM, 2017) includes gender under the heading Safety, Security and Inclusion.

In both its urban and rural transport policy, **Mozambique's** National Transport Policy categorizes women as vulnerable and intends to meet 'the needs of women and other vulnerable groups' (RoM, 2014). Women, children, the elderly, and the disabled, are assumed to be the primary users of non-motorized transport, for whom facilities must be incorporated. As with Malawi, pregnant women, women with children under the age of five, girls, and 'physically challenged people', are highlighted as vulnerable groups.

**Nigeria** is currently drafting a revised National Transport Policy. Based on media reports, the anticipated focus of the revised Policy is improving rail infrastructure (TAPI, 2021). Lagos State's NMT Policy (LSG, 2018) focuses on women as pedestrians and expresses a commitment to 'enabling gender equity through the provision of non-motorized transport and public transport facilities that are safe for women to use.'

**Rwanda's** National Transport Policy and Strategy (RoR, 2021) classifies women as traditionally excluded travelers, along with the elderly, children, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities. The Policy provides extensive content on the importance of providing mobility services that meet women's needs, and highlights the gender disparity in existing services in the country. Rwanda has not yet adopted a standalone NMT Policy.

**South Africa's** post-1994 transport policy direction (NDoT, 1996, 1999, 2007, 2009) commits the country to paying attention to transport users' needs, and to redress inequity. However, these commitments do not specifically focus on gender. Early post-apartheid transport planning focused on inclusiveness and access, redressing apartheid policies more broadly rather than directly addressing specific gender vulnerabilities or disadvantages. The National Land Transport Act (NDoT, 2009) mentions 'special categories of passengers,' who are defined as 'persons with disabilities, the aged, pregnant women and those who are limited in their movements by

children.’ The needs of ‘special categories of passengers’ are to be taken into account in planning and providing public-transport infrastructure, facilities and services ‘in so far as possible by the system provided for mainstream public transport.’

The revised White Paper on National Transport Policy (RSA, 2021) refers to ‘targeted categories of passengers,’ which include ‘pensioners, the aged, children, pregnant women, persons with disabilities, and tourists’, but not women in general. Regarding gender and planning for systems that cater to the needs of women, the Policy presents a small section on the lack of gender representation in human resources throughout the transport sector. There are no policies that specifically address the needs of women using public transport, but women are included as a group under the Policy’s chapter on ‘accessibility.’ Women again feature in South Africa’s Draft NMT Policy (NDoT, 2008), classified as a ‘marginalized group’ along with ‘the disabled, children, rural communities, and the poor.’

**Uganda’s** National Transport Master Plan (RoU, 2018) does not focus on women, but an earlier draft NMT Policy (RoU, 2012) noted that while men, women, children and the elderly are all pedestrians, most means of transport are owned and operated by men. It further noted that ‘negative cultural traditions inhibit women from the productive benefits that bicycles can offer’ (RoU, 2012, p. 31). Pedestrians with children and pregnant pedestrians are to be key beneficiaries of infrastructure developed in accordance with the NMT implementation manual (MoWT, 2021).

**Zambia’s** NMT Strategy focuses on safety and security for ‘female users’ and states that ‘inclusive designs help to improve the experiences of women and girls, making it easy to walk, cycle, or use public transport’. In this way the Strategy will work toward gender equity by ‘supporting the development of an integrated and safe transport system that provides access to education, work, health care, cultural, and other important activities that are crucial to women’s participation in the society’ (RoZ, 2019b, p. 18). All Zambian citizens who are marginalized ‘irrespective of gender ... have the right to transport services and infrastructure,’ but the National Transport Policy recognizes that ‘gender has not sufficiently been mainstreamed in the transport sector as there are no deliberate programmes in the sector for gender mainstreaming. Most of the jobs ranging from construction to service provision are dominated by males. Most rural transport is not gender sensitive as it has no provision to cater for the needs of women’ (RoZ, 2019a, p. 13).

## Women’s mobility within the ‘patriarchal social order’<sup>6</sup>

Providing equitable access to opportunities is a commitment many African gender and transport policies make. The purpose of providing this equitable access, by means of access to transport,

6 (RoK, 2019)

is the empowerment that this access might bring. This underlying purpose for transport is at times explicitly stated in the transport policies above.

But is progress toward achieving gender-equitable transport perhaps slow because policy contributes to a shallow diagnosis of the problem? Transport policy does not have to ask why women struggle to access mobility resources, or why women are more likely to walk. Why do women have to make multiple trips? Who constrains women's movements? And from whom do women need to be safe? And is the problem further diffused by a persistent conviction among decision-makers that hard-infrastructure offers sufficient solutions? The 'man-made' transport infrastructure and transport systems to which Mulongo *et al.*, refer (above) have their roots to some extent in the technical, engineering, western nature of economic development and modernization (Thynell, 2016). With few women involved in the transport sector and in decision-making in emerging economies, 'masculine norms tend to be invisible and taken for granted' (Thynell, 2016, p. 73; Uteng and Turner, 2019).

Transport policy can portray women (and other 'categories') as 'marginalized', 'vulnerable' victims in need of redress, access, and safety, in an almost agentless vacuum, thereby avoiding having to attribute culpability. But as Uteng puts it, 'understanding gendered mobility outside the patriarchal system and the social-cultural norms dictating the visible movement of women [is] tantamount to segregating the body and the mind' (Uteng, 2011, p.21). Mulongo *et al.* propose that automobility is 'a masculine project' in Africa from which women are mostly excluded (Mulongo, Porter and Tewodros, 2020).

Compromised mobility tends to reproduce the power relationships that gave rise to it in the first place (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008). Vulnerability, mobility of care, limited access, and an assumed preference for walking, can all be situated within this patriarchal system. Women's circular marginalization (from economic opportunities, social upliftment, enfranchisement and political processes), poverty and limited access to mobility resources (fares, bicycles, private vehicles) emerge from the 'subservient position [that women] occupy in relation to men in many societies' (Venter, Vokolkova and Michalek, 2007). Women's vulnerability, too, is in relation to men, while women's mobility patterns emerge from traditional gender-divisions of labour.<sup>7</sup>

### **Vulnerability and safety**

Sometimes when the taxi stops and it is full of men, I feel scared and uncomfortable but I have no option. The taxi has stopped for me. I can't not get on.<sup>8</sup>

In writing of NMT users, Cooke *et al.* note that for people who walk and cycle, their 'vulnerability is not an intrinsic state but stems from the ill-design of the mobility system and the environment in which it operates' (Cooke *et al.*, 2022, p. 11). Likewise, Khayesi finds the concept of vulnerable

<sup>7</sup> What Mozambique sees as women's 'natural maternal functions' in society (RoM, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> (Introduction to gender and mobility in developing economies [FutureLearn online course], 2023)

road users 'wanting' (Khayesi, 2020). Rather than see vulnerable road users (usually pedestrians and cyclists) as those who 'are easily injured and killed in a car-dominated space,' he proposes that we recognize that the 'real vulnerability lies within transport planning that gives in to influences that are more focused on the needs of motorized transport' (Khayesi, 2020, p. 1). Vulnerability, Khayesi points out, 'is commonly used to refer to the possibility of being wounded.' This vulnerability to injury is evident in the quote from the woman traveller cited above. She does not have agentless 'safety concerns' but she is indeed vulnerable: she is afraid of the injury men might inflict upon her. As another interviewee put it:

We need to talk about the elephant in the room; I do not avoid travelling at night because I am afraid of the dark.<sup>9</sup>

The fear of injury spans the range of assault, sexual assault, and murder. When women are vulnerable, it is both because they are at risk of being wounded in a male-dominated space, and because transport planning is largely at a loss as to how to deal with violence, other than to provide street lighting. Street design and mobility systems can only do so much when it operates in an environment where men prey upon women.

## **Universality**

Universality is used frequently to frame the gender and mobility policy discourse. Here, I explore whether universal design is an appropriate response to women's needs, and also highlight the problematic nature of using universality to legitimize interventions on the basis that they benefit men too.

In Lagos, Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, and Zambia, policies require that universal design principles be applied to meet the needs of vulnerable people, very often as part of NMT policies. Theoretically, universal design or universal access ensures that no-one within a range of abilities is excluded from a service. Universal design thus aims to improve the design of facilities, not only for people with disability but for all people – to remove barriers to access for everyone, regardless of age, ability, or status in life. If facilities or services are able to accommodate people with a disability, then people who are not living with disability will also benefit from their ease of use.

Policies implicitly assume that universal design will meet the needs of women travellers. And while it might be that no user, including women, will find themselves excluded by the ramps, the tactile paving, and the dropped kerbs installed as exemplars of universal design, women are excluded not necessarily by infrastructure but by the socio-economic and power structures which they live.

9 Ibid



A further rationale for meeting the needs of women is that, in the process, everyone else's needs will also be met. The narrative goes that when cities work for women, they work for everyone (Janssen, 2022). When women's needs are met, men also benefit. The Asian Development Bank's Gender toolkit, for example, teaches how to maximize 'the benefits of improved mobility for all' (Hung, 2013). The World Bank asserts that gender equality in transport is good for business (World Bank, 2015).

Women and men's needs do overlap: everyone does need safe, comfortable, affordable, available, accessible transport services. But there are notable differences in how women prioritize such needs. Women prioritize safety more than men do (Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022). Both Malawi's (RoM, 2015b, pp. 12, 21) and Mozambique's (RoM, 2014, p. 16) transport policies indicate a commitment to both needs *and* priorities.

Universality is a problematic approach when it comes to addressing individual needs. Consider, for example, how women negotiate their mobility access when it does not clearly benefit male members of households. One woman in Uganda could only use her husband's bicycle as long as he gained from her doing so:

He has to benefit from whatever activity I am going to do, for him to allow [me to use his bicycle] (BFG, 2022c).

In a focus group in Malawi, women described their struggle to have their priorities taken seriously. Women noted that they must ask their husband's permission to use a bicycle, or that they need to give at least two days' notice that they need it, to 'avoid inconveniencing him.' Others risk household conflict, and one woman reported that she hardly ever uses the household bicycle:

If I try so hard to confront him about not letting me use the bicycle, he gets angry and tells me that the bicycle belongs to only him, sometimes we end up quarrelling, this could even lead to failure of my marriage. I just mostly borrow bicycles from others to avoid quarrels with my husband (BFG, 2022b).

Societal gender norms may lead men to experience a loss of status if women were provided equitable access to mobility services and no longer need to seek men's approval in this context. Further, as I begin to explore in the section below, men in the countries under study do not necessarily want women to be able to move.

### **Promiscuity and exposure**

After getting married, you are someone's wife, when you start riding a bicycle you [cannot see your] dress in the air.<sup>10</sup>

10 (Introduction to gender and mobility in developing economies [FutureLearn online course], 2023)

Women's mobility is significantly constrained by the way in which men associate travel with promiscuity and exposure. I had originally written this as '*Women's mobility is significantly constrained by its association with promiscuity and exposure.*' But the question is, who associates women's mobility with promiscuity? And where this association constrains women's access to mobility, in what way could transport policy provide a solution?

In 2011, Porter found that even where transport services might have served women's typical movement patterns, men across Africa were resistant to women travelling because of what they believed to be their potential promiscuity (Porter, 2011). The situation is relatively unchanged today: women in Uganda describe the way their access to bicycle travel is frustrated by male insecurity and sexual control. 'My husband feels insecure and thinks that I can be conned by other men just by exposing my body [by cycling],' says one woman. Focus group participants have shared that bicycle use is perceived as shameful, removes virginity, and causes women to 'expose [their] private parts to other men'. Men tell women to wear trousers under their dresses to avoid the shame of exposing themselves (BFG, 2022c).

We usually wear a trouser underneath so that even if you meet a man whilst cycling you are just as comfortable and safe.

In some areas in Zambia, women are prohibited by men from travelling on bicycle-taxis, motor-cycle-taxis, or from accepting lifts from men – no matter how far they might be walking, or what load they might be carrying (WBR, 2022). The close proximity of a woman to the taxi or vehicle driver is seen to doubtlessly lead to an inappropriate relationship; one respondent said he would not even give a lift to a friend's wife, as this would damage his relationship with his friend. As explored in the next section, walking has become a primary mode of transport for women in SSA for a complex set of reasons.

### **Access, agency, and choice: 'we walk because we can't afford other means'<sup>11</sup>**

With our legs, we can walk to where we are going to without paying. Most times, we are in financial press-ups and things are ... difficult. We don't have money to pay.<sup>12</sup>

Walking is the main transport mode for women in much of rural Sub-Saharan Africa (Sambu, Jennings and Myers, 2023b) and, among women with lower incomes, the main mode in urban Africa (UN Environment, 2021).<sup>13</sup> The majority of NMT policies and strategies in Africa therefore aim to improve the pedestrian experience as an example of a gender-sensitive intervention (ITDP and UNEP, 2018; MoT, ITDP and UNEP, 2019; UNEP and ITDP, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> (BFG, 2022c)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Women in fact tend to walk more than men do, across the world (SUM4All, 2019).

High-quality design standards for sidewalks and bicycle paths are indeed considered a best-practice gender-sensitive approach (SUM4All, 2019). But women in Africa do not walk more than men do because of sustainability or health imperatives (Benton, Jennings and Walker, 2021). Women are more likely to live with low income or in poverty than are men, and less likely to have access to money to pay for motorized transport or bicycle travel; they end up walking out of necessity (Jennings, Allen and Arogundade, 2020) or deliberate exclusion by men from other modes (see above). Women are not in this position by accident but by virtue of social structure and gender norms. Women have unequal access to, and decision-making agency over, household productive assets, and have lower transport budgets, so walking is their only option. 'What you have in hand is what you throw, so I don't have other means of movement apart from the walking' (BFG, 2022a).

Women participants in a study in Uganda describe walking not as the mode they choose, but as the mode they use because they cannot afford motorized transport and are denied access to bicycle transport even where the household has this prestigious vehicle. 'He [does] not allow me to use it,' said one participant: 'he doesn't allow me even to just touch it...' 'It's my father who decides who [is] to ride it,' says another participant – 'even ... when there is a day when I need it badly ... As a woman, you can't refuse, so you let him take it' (BFG, 2022c).

All participants in the study cited above recognized that bicycles would make a significant impact on their mobility experiences, but one noted that 'men are selfish... Men buy bicycles for their own use not for women to use. They have money to buy, unlike us women.' Another participant explained how her husband owned a bicycle, but she had to walk: 'He did not allow me to use it. We carry food items on our heads and walk a distance of 4 km for two hours yet there was a bicycle at home' (BFG, 2022c).

Woman can 'beg' for access to mobility resources, but they must have 'a genuine reason,' the veracity of which will be decided by men. From the same study:

If he doesn't agree then you will have to walk and go and run your errand – the man has absolute control.

Decision making on who uses the bicycle in our homes is done by the men in our homes. My elder brother owns a bicycle but he does not allow us the women to use it for any activity yet we are very far from a water point. And when we pressure him to allow us use the bicycle to fetch water, instead gives it to the boy children in the family to be the ones to ride and fetch water and not any female to use it because he says we shall spoil it. (BFG, 2022c).

Likewise, mobility of care is not a choice. 'All the responsibilities are left on women, school fees, feeding at home, everything's on women. You will find men simply chilling, as women are doing everything else' (BFG, 2022c).

The focus group participants and interviewees from whom I have shared responses are not content with the mobility (or patriarchal) circumstances they find themselves in. While women might be denied agency at many levels, this is not to say that they are comfortably co-opted into a system that is evidently biased against their needs. Respondents do not talk about wanting better services, or different infrastructure, but about wanting different norms, and the power to change these norms:

For us, we decided to oversee those [mobility] norms, because [otherwise] they would even say women don't eat chicken, what, we are fed up. (BFG, 2022c)

In the next sections I explore why different norms are necessary for transport services to meet women's needs, and I suggest that the very concept of women's mobility needs requires problematization.

### **Gender mainstreaming: 'We decided to oversee those norms'**

There is widespread agreement that without more women in decision-making positions, and visible as transport workers, transport services will remain unresponsive to women's needs (Shah and Raman, 2019; SUM4All, 2019; Sum4All, 2020; Muhoza, Anna and Diaz-Chavez, 2021; SUM4All, 2023). To this end, gender mainstreaming – a process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation – is proposed as a vital strategic intervention.

A number of transport policies in Sub-Saharan Africa promote this approach. Ethiopia's National Transport Policy notes that women are best placed to plan for the needs of other women who use public transport (RoE, 2020a, p. 37). Ghana's National Transport Policy (RoG, 2020, p. 50) plans to 'enhance conditions for women in the transport sector by promoting the role of women as service providers [and] professionals.' In South Africa, the National Land Transport (NDoT, 2009) includes a gender mainstreaming strategy. The transport sector has its own empowerment strategy (NDoT, 2014) to include more women in management and decision-making positions.

In the transport policies of both Malawi and Mozambique, gender mainstreaming is presented under a 'cross-cutting' category, along with commitments regarding recruitment and promoting of professionals in the transport sector (RoM, 2015b, p. 20). Rwanda more specifically intends to ensure 'a working environment that gives equitable opportunities in provision and accessibility of transport services and that is free from gender based violence, stigma, and discrimination' (RoR, 2021, p. 26). The country intends, through increasing gender mainstreaming in the transport sector, to create an enabling environment that accommodates 'equally men and women, raising awareness in women/girls to enroll in STEM<sup>14</sup> subjects to gain skills required in the transport

14 Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths

sector labour market, and strengthening the existing mechanisms to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in transport sector.'

However, interviewees from stakeholder engagement (Jennings, 2021) have shared that 'women [were] socially raised to see men as leaders and thus failed to see themselves as leaders. ... Men deliberately appoint women [to decision-making positions] to be weak.' A women's organization in government in South Africa suggests that 'the patriarchy controls the agenda' (SALGA, 2015), and gender is seen as a soft issue that hard engineering will always trump. 'When we want to deliver gender and transport training ... government will send the receptionist rather than a manager.' Lack of political drive, poor leadership, and non-existent administrative commitment are also cited as barriers to moving forward with gender-sensitive mobility, and without a mandate to enforce or compel, gender activists see little hope for transformation in approaches and outcomes in transport planning. 'We can only advise, support, guide and encourage, but that's as far as it goes.' This is essentially another expression of patriarchy in action. Similar to the touted solutions to women's 'vulnerability,' attempts to 'fix' gender inclusion in planning have limited traction when broader structural issues remain unchanged.

## Conclusion: putting mobility into gender planning

Women have multiple mobility needs and challenges. Some of these needs are tied to traditional, patriarchal gender roles (mobility of care and an unequal distribution of excessive and arduous travel for household chores); other of these needs are because women are predated on by men; still others are because women occupy positions in society subservient to men. But transport solutions to women's mobility challenges too often follow the path of unsuccessful development policies or programmes (Morelli and Cunha, 2021) – as 'patch-in solutions rather than a cohesive, coordinated attack on the problem' (Uteng, 2011). The 'problem', in this case, seems beyond the transport remit, and possibly beyond the remit of policy altogether. In essence, the constrained physical access to transport to which policies refer is a consequence of constrained access to power. While the proximate problems may be inadequate lighting, infrequent buses during off-peak hour, or inequitable fare structures, the ultimate problem is 'the burning issue of the patriarchy' (SALGA, 2015).

In 2008, Porter noted the urgency of needing to put 'gender into mobility and transport planning in Africa' (Porter, 2008). Yet as a researcher whose other major area of interest is non-motorized transport in Africa, I have déjà vu when reading gender and transport policy. Like with pedestrians and cyclists – that other category of marginalized transport user – interventions have long been the remit of the built infrastructure and engineering field (Sagaris *et al.*, 2021), where hard-infrastructure solutions dominate (Jennings, Petzer and Goldman, 2017). Gender solutions, too, are often narrowly interpreted through this lens, as increased lighting and better designed shelters, women-only carriages, improved walking infrastructure, increased public transport

frequency off-peak, and fare structures that support trip-chaining. Extending access to women and 'other' marginalized people is still largely understood in terms of geography or distance to public transport stops rather than in the intersectionality of gender, disadvantage, vulnerability, and disenfranchisement. Gender interventions are mostly of minimum standard, and are rarely empowering or transformational.

Women's mobility needs are not intrinsic to being women, but arise out of the patriarchal social order to which Kenya's gender policy (RoK, 2019) refers. Women's needs '[are] put on the back-end [when it is] time to decide who moves around outside the house' (Jennings and Arogundade, 2021). When it comes to political and decision-making processes in Africa, the needs of women, like those of people walking, enter the policy discourse but are eclipsed in practice by the masculine hegemony (Benton *et al.*, 2023). If policy narratives were to take the active voice, the problem would be defined differently. Women do not have gender-imposed mobility restrictions – it is men who prohibit or restrict women from cycling, driving, and travelling, in pursuit of their own agendas.

From this reflective work, it seems that the barriers to institutionalizing gender-sensitive transport include not only resources or knowledge, but also lack of interest, misguided premises, and traditional and stereotypical gender norms and roles. It is true that improved transport infrastructure and services, such as lighting and women-only buses, have an immediate impact on women's daily hardship and a longer-term impact on livelihoods and empowerment. But poor access to transport services is not only a cause of continued gender-inequity but an effect of gender-inequity. The social roles and status of women that generate women's mobility patterns and that limit access – even when transport is available and lighting is plentiful – cannot be addressed by transport policy alone.

Social processes have shaped gendered mobility patterns and access to transport, and 'mobility and transport are strongly implicated in the shaping of social processes' (Porter, 2008, p. 2). But it is not easy to formulate gender-sensitive transport policy to retrofit existing systems or build new systems without addressing the context of the social order that has engendered women's needs, constraints, and travel patterns. Gender norms and power relations are beyond the scope of transport policy. Now is the time to put mobility and transport planning into gender planning, and recognize the extent to which women's mobility concerns cannot be addressed through transport planning alone.

It is Zambia's National Gender Policy (RoZ, 2014) rather than its transport policy that acknowledges transport as a critical enabler, and that safe transport systems and infrastructure are essential for promoting gender equality and equity.

Ultimately, in fully gender-equitable societies, women would not need a different type of safety or a different type of service. Gender-sensitive transport responds to existing inequity but can only go so far in addressing the causes of inequity. To become gender-responsive, transport

planning must become mainstreamed within gender politics, and work together to address the unequal power relations that give rise to the needs that the system is failing to address.

## Research gaps and policy thoughts

Although my approach to this thought-piece was not that of a traditional policy brief – developing a detailed research gap analysis and proposing policy direction – research gaps and possible ways forward have emerged in the process of preparing it.

First, it would be useful to bring to the transportation policy discourse a deeper understanding of the outcomes and impacts of gender-sensitive transport on gender equity. Where women are or have become able to move freely, safely, and with relative ease, what has been the impact on their daily lives, livelihoods, and life opportunities? In what way has this impact incrementally and cumulatively contributed to greater systemic and social change? How have male members of households, husbands, and fathers, come to terms with shifting power balances? What theory of change could be explored and developed from this understanding?

Second, that gender and mobility activism is directed toward and integrated with gender institutions and policies: putting mobility into gender planning. There is extensive knowledge about the interactions between mobility poverty and gender inequity, but to some extent this knowledge remains within the transport and mobility body of work. The involvement of gender and feminist policy and decision-makers would amplify the opportunities for change.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Emma Arogundade for your paper review and insights; to Winnie Sambu and Alisha Myers for listening to me think aloud; and to Jane Summerton for your scholarly guidance.

# Appendix 1

## Method

### Country selection

As this is a thought-piece grounded in my personal research experience, I selected countries for review where I have in-country or desk experience with project work: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia.

### Literature

This paper does not offer a comprehensive review of the literature; it focuses on scholarly research in Africa, and on reports by organizations or entities that have influence on policy and practice in Africa.

### Policy selection

These categories of policies were selected based on project experience developing a policy analysis and diagnostic tool to assess national gender and mobility policies (SuM4All, 2022) and in developing a matrix to assess gender and social aspects related to e-mobility readiness in Sub-Saharan Africa (Flx Mobility, 2021).

### Practitioner data

To present the way in which women in Sub-Saharan Africa experience the dissonance between gender and transport policy and their daily mobile or immobile lives, I drew on my own research across the continent conducted between 2019 and 2023, which included key informant interviews, stakeholder engagement, and the analysis of focus group discussions wherein women discussed their experiences with developing policy or undertaking travel activities. All confidentiality and anonymity protocols were observed and, where required, institutional ethics clearance was sought and granted.

This research draws upon focus group data from the Bicycles for Growth (BFG) project,<sup>15</sup> which aims to reduce poverty by improving sustainable uptake of affordable, fit-for-purpose bicycles in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>16</sup> Other research used includes stakeholder engagement and a policy review conducted for the World Bank and Sustainable Mobility for All, to develop a gender and mobility

<sup>15</sup> A five-year USAID-funded initiative. I was contracted by BFG partner, World Bicycle Relief (WBR), as qualitative research lead.

<sup>16</sup> In Malawi, Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia



policy assessment and road map for South Africa; a policy review and gender diagnostic tool development for e-mobility investment in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>17</sup>; research undertaken with World Bicycle Relief to explore the outcomes of mobility poverty in Kenya and Malawi; interviews and a policy review undertaken to investigate the impact of Covid-19 mobility restrictions on women in Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa<sup>18</sup>; and interviews undertaken as content development for an online course in gender and mobility for the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative (TUMI).<sup>19</sup>

Non-motorized transport modes, such as bicycles, play a significant role in the lives of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. They enable travelling longer distances with greater loads and more quickly than walking, and are more affordable than motorized modes (Uteng and Turner, 2019; Sambu, Jennings and Myers, 2023a). The focus group sessions from which data has been drawn included discussions about walking, cycling, and access to informal shared transport such as motorcycles and bicycle taxis.

### **Policy assessments**

Individual national policies were assessed with respect to the following questions:

- Does the country's constitution mention gender or women, and what is the key statement?
- Does the country have a gender policy or gender framework? What are the overarching policy narratives or statements?
- Does the gender policy or framework explicitly mention mobility and transport? If so, what are the overarching policy narratives or statements?
- Does the country's primary transport policy mention gender/women? What are the overarching policy narratives or statements?
- In which section of the transport policy are the needs of women considered? (for example, under non-motorised transport, under vulnerable road users, or other)
- What are the policy discourses around women's needs? How are these needs framed (for example, what is the language around safety, vulnerability, marginalization)?
- Are women's travel patterns specifically mentioned?
- Are any solutions to addressing women's mobility and transport needs mentioned?

<sup>17</sup> South Africa, Ethiopia, Senegal, Rwanda, for GoMetro

<sup>18</sup> This research was funded by UKAID through the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office under the High-Volume Transport Applied Research Programme, managed by IMC Worldwide

<sup>19</sup> Ghana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique

## Focus group and interview data

Direct speech quotations in this paper are drawn from among the focus group discussions and interview discussions described under Practitioner Data. They are referenced as focus group transcripts or interviews, disaggregated by country and project.

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