

# PEDALLING TOWARDS EQUALITY?

*Transport cycling can't properly grow in the UK while the conditions suit only the young, male, fit and fearless.*

*Dr Rachel Aldred explains*

**I**n Britain, cycling is highly unequal. Women, older people, and disabled people are all under-represented. Transport for London (TfL) reports that 74% of cycle trips there are made by men, while across England men are twice as likely to cycle to work as are women. It's been the case for so long that people assume it's normal. Cyclist equals young man on bike, in Lycra. But it's not normal – and it doesn't have to be like that.

Over the past few years, I've seen 'inclusive cycling' start to move from being marginal to, if not the mainstream, at least greater prominence. In 2010, I remember an officer telling me in a 'stakeholder interview' that it was unrealistic for cycle campaigners to demand access for trikes and hand-cycles; just getting a small amount of bicycle infrastructure was going to be hard enough.

That year, 2010, was the year of the Equality Act, which places a duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and not discriminate on grounds of sex, age, and disability. The Equality Act has been used to challenge failures to provide tactile paving, so it does apply to the street environment.

Not that you'd know it from the cycling environment in most parts of Britain, which still has physical and cultural barriers: from bollards blocking access to everyone but skinny two-wheelers, to the continued assumption that we are building for able-

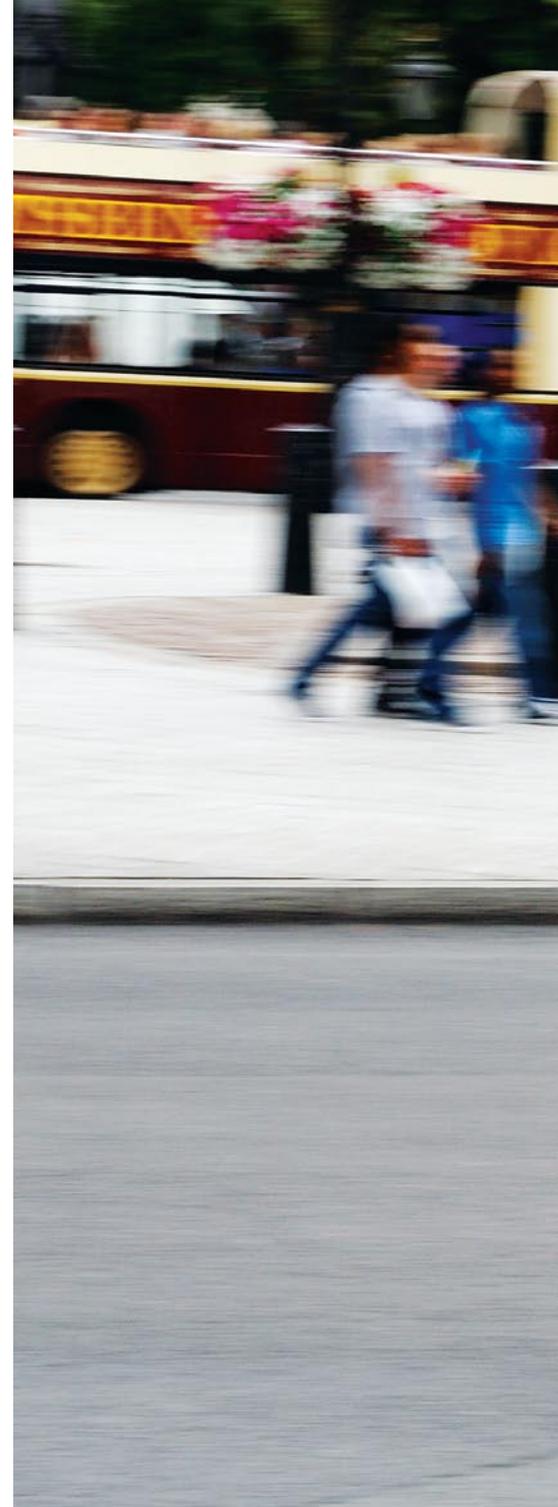
bodied young men happy to mix it with HGVs.

This article covers some research I've done into cycling and diversity. It challenges the assumption that more cycling will automatically 'trickle down' and become more equal. It puts forward a different way of thinking about cycling and equality, where 'inclusive cycling' isn't just boxed into a 'minority' corner but becomes central to cycling for everyone.

## More cycling, more equality?

In countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, the picture's very different. In the Netherlands, women consistently cycle for a higher proportion of their trips than do men. In all three countries, it's quite normal for older people to cycle. Rather than – as in the UK – cycling declining rapidly at older ages, in high-cycling countries, cycling levels drop down in young adulthood but often then increase at older ages. Dutch adults do more physical activity as they get older because retired people have more time to ride.

A lot of academic and policy work hasn't caught up with this. I still read papers where it's assumed that women won't cycle as much as men. I read claims that we need bus services because older and disabled people can't cycle. Yes, we do need buses, but for some older and disabled people, cycling could be *more* accessible than walking and getting a bus. I've interviewed people who



struggle to walk to the bus stop, but can easily ride a trike.

Places where cycling is higher, where it's easier and more normal, are places where you'll see lots of cycling by women, older and disabled people, and children. We can even see this in the UK. Cambridge is not cycling heaven – it has its share of bollards and hostile main roads – although it's better than many places. But, because of a range of factors, from the medieval street plan to the long-standing bans on Cambridge University students bringing cars with them, cycling has remained popular, with around one-in-three commuting residents doing so by bike.

And the patterns seen in high-cycling countries are also found in Cambridge, with roughly equal gender balance and more than



- (Above) A fairly typical London cyclist, taking her chances in Trafalgar Square
- (Left) Cyclists in Amsterdam: no Lycra, no helmets, no worries about unfriendly infrastructure
- (Below) Handcycling in the UK can mean having to deal with hostile urban environments



» one-in-four commuting over-65-year-olds still doing so by cycle. Compare that to London, where 5.2% of commuters aged 30-34 ride to work but under 2% of those aged over 60 do.

The Cambridge effect, and the correlation between cycling levels and cycling equity (both within the UK, and comparing the UK to other countries) has led some commentators to assume that to get greater equity, all we need to do is to get more cycling. A report by Department for Transport/Sport England states that:

'The ratio of men to women also varies depending on the overall level of cycling: i.e. it would appear that getting more men to cycle to work encourages gender equality on this measure.'

In other words, target the low-hanging fruit and the rest of the tree will follow. But is that really the case? A piece of work that I've carried out with Anna Goodman and James Woodcock has tested this thesis – and found reason for scepticism.

### England and Wales: no increase in diversity

Our starting point was that cross-sectional association between more cycling and more equal cycling. We wanted to test if that held true over time. In places across the country where cycling has increased, has it become more equal? We needed to use local level data, and so we used the 2001 and 2011 Population Census (for England and Wales), which includes some authorities where very large changes have taken place. The census includes a question on main mode of travel to work, which isn't perfect but good enough for our purposes.

In both years, the census shows the usual cross-sectional trend for gender: places with more cycling have a more equal representation of women. However, when you look at change over time, and correlate change in cycling against change in gender equity, the relationship disappears. Places that



## Britain's hostile roads force people cycling to tool up, speed up, man up or – more often – give up

managed to increase cycle commuting failed to shift the gender balance.

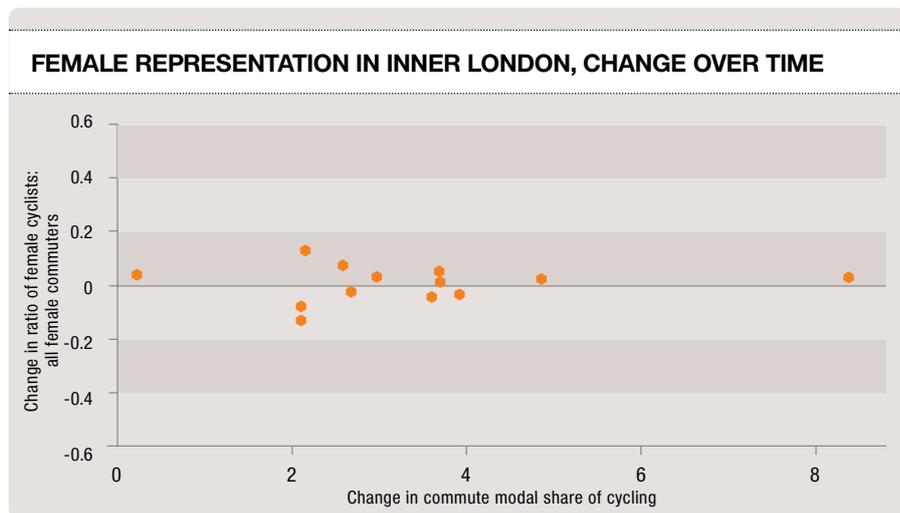
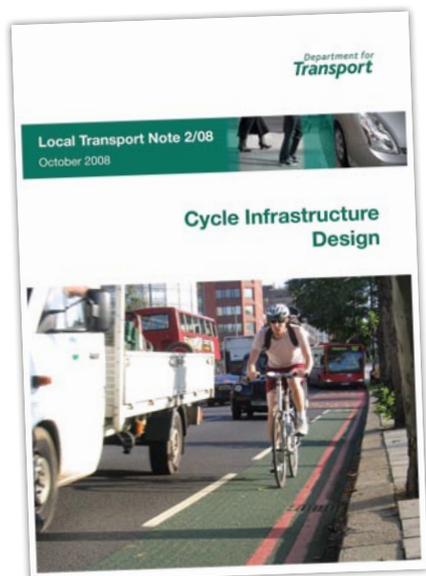
The graph below shows changes in women's representation among cycle commuters in Inner London. You can see that although cycling's gone up in all Inner London boroughs, there's no overall change in gender balance.

Looking at age, the picture's even less optimistic. In 2001, looking cross-sectionally, there was a weak association between cycling and age equity. Places with more cycling had a better representation among over-55s. In 2011, that relationship no longer held. Looking longitudinally, we can see that those places that managed to increase cycling actually got worse in terms of age equity. Cycling became even more concentrated among the young.

These results are on the one hand rather

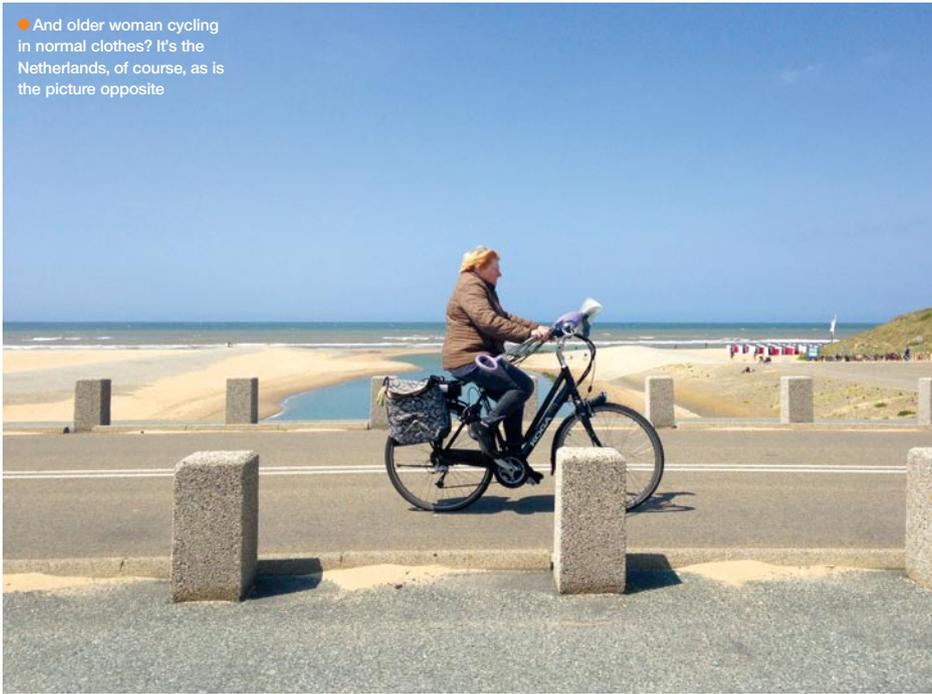
disappointing. We had expected – and hoped – to see some improvement in equity. On the other hand, thinking about what happened between 2001 and 2011, it's perhaps not that surprising. As a nation, we failed to invest in cycling. Spending on cycling was a tiny fraction of what was needed, and often wasted on paint. And we continued to see cycling as something only the young, the male, the fit and the able-bodied would do. Check out the cover of *Cycle Infrastructure Design*, published in 2008 (below left).

So far, Britain's growth in cycling – where it exists – is mostly driven by culture, not infrastructure. In London, cycling is fashionable again, with millennials turning away from car ownership. Better to be on a train connected to social media, or getting much needed exercise on your bike or on foot, than holding onto a driving wheel in a



Graph: Anna Goodman, analysis of Census 2001 and 2011 data

● And older woman cycling in normal clothes? It's the Netherlands, of course, as is the picture opposite



jam, going nowhere and doing nothing.

But culture's reaching its limits, and increasingly even London's confident, fit, and active millennials have had enough of being marginalised on the roads, reading about yet another cyclist crushed under a truck (with no one charged). They've had enough of paint masquerading as infrastructure, of rat runs masquerading as 'quiet residential streets'. And they're fed up that their friends, parents and children are unable or unwilling to ride with them.

What we're seeing in those statistics is the limits of where we'll get to without substantial change in infrastructure, policy and enforcement. Evidence shows that women are disproportionately put off by cycling conditions that force them to mix with motors. So as long as our cycling infrastructure remains poor to non-existent, we can expect the gender balance to stay stuck.

### Re-thinking cycling & equality

So far, so depressing. But it's also an opportunity. The data says to me that we can't keep building for 'Mister Local Transport Note 2/08' (far left), riding with grim determination alongside HGVs on that narrow advisory lane. That's pretty off-putting to most other people, and even Mr LTN 2/08 is complaining. He'd rather we built for everyone too.

We need to turn discussions about cycling and equality on their head. Even in the Netherlands, women's cycle trips tend to be shorter than men's. As distance increases, women, on average, stop cycling before men do. And yet in this country we persist in thinking it makes sense to build the fast and direct route for the fearless young men and the wiggly detour for everyone else.

The statistics on distance show that you need to build fast, direct routes for women: fast, direct routes that feel safe. Happily, those kind of routes also suit the fearless young men too. Get to your destination quickly and unthreatened: a win-win for everyone.

Providing good cycling environments is particularly important for low-income people without car access, and for people in rural areas with limited other transport options. The recent iConnect study showed that people without cars benefitted more from high-quality separated infrastructure for walking and cycling. Of course they did! They have fewer other options. Cycling is a democratic, inclusive transport mode, which can transform people's life chances. But only if we ensure that the cycling network is democratic and inclusive.

We know what people want, and we know the status quo is exclusive. My Near Miss Project research showed that slower cyclists are experiencing three times as many near misses for a given journey distance as quicker cyclists. This feeds through into inequalities experienced by gender, as women – on average – cycle somewhat more slowly than men.

It isn't acceptable. Too often, Britain's hostile roads force people cycling to tool up, speed up, man up or – more often – just give up. We need inclusive space for cycling, where everyone from Mr LTN 2/08 to the wobbliest pootler can get to where they're going safely, comfortably and at their own speed. ●

**Dr Rachel Aldred is Senior Lecturer in Transport at the University of Westminster. Further reading: [bit.ly/morecyclingdiversity](http://bit.ly/morecyclingdiversity) and [bit.ly/nearmissproject](http://bit.ly/nearmissproject)**

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