

Why don't more women cycle?

By , 15 May 2013



Back in 2009 we produced a campaign to overcome some of the barriers our research uncovered around **"What stops women getting on their bikes?"**

Our research at the time showed that:

- › only 4% of women were cycling more than once a week
- › nearly 8 in 10 women never cycled, but
- › 43% of women had access to a bike

The wider background to this is that only 2% of journeys in the UK are by bike (compared with 27% in the Netherlands), and only a quarter of these are by women (compared to 55% of bike journeys in the Netherlands).

As a result we launched a Motion for Women petition because our survey revealed that:

- › not feeling safe was the biggest concern women had about cycling (20%)
- › other big concerns were age (17%) and lack of fitness (8%) followed by a range of other issues around appearance

Enabling women to cycle

We also asked women what they believed would enable many more women to cycle.

- › 67% of women said cycle lanes separated from traffic was the number one thing that will get more women cycling over other options which included:
- › 33% wanted clearly defined cycle lanes shared with buses
- › 21% wanted enforced 20 mph speed limits or less
- › 16% wanted bike training to be available where they live

We therefore launched a petition calling for the creation of a safer environment for cycling – the wording is below:

"We, the undersigned, want to be able to choose to cycle much more. To do this we need to feel safe when we cycle.

"We demand that governments prioritise the creation of environments that encourage and support cycling, specifically this must include cycle paths separated from traffic, as a way of enabling many more women to travel by bike."

Over 9,000 signatures were handed to the then Secretary of State for Transport in a meeting at the House of Commons.

A more complex picture

Of course **safety is the number one concern**, but when **we work in schools with children**, we see a massive drop off in girls cycling as they move onto secondary school. One of their key concerns is how they look, and how boys will perceive them if they arrive at school sweaty and dishevelled.

Any of you who remember being a tweenie will remember the agony of self-consciousness that girls experience at this crucial time. My own daughter worries about exactly these things – she's eleven, cycles to school, but is moving to 'big school' in September and is painfully aware of how boys see her.

That's why we began working on beauty and the bike, initially with the **Body Shop**, latterly with **Lush**, integrating looking good on a bike with all the health benefits, seeking to give girls the confidence to cycle to school in the face of a culture that doesn't inspire this kind of independence. If we don't tackle the barriers we are presented with, we will never achieve the very high levels of cycling by girls and women we see in the Netherlands.

When we ran the Bike Belles campaign I vividly remember receiving an e-mail from a man who told me that we were being misogynistic by focusing on things as superficial and peripheral as looking good on a bike. Understandably his view was that all women needed was a bike and the right attitude. But I don't think he's right – the evidence is that this is a more complex picture.

We need women to help us solve it, and we need to address all the barriers, however frivolous they may seem. To the women and girls, like my daughter, to whom perception by others is a genuine anxiety helping her overcome this rather than telling her it doesn't matter is far more likely to change her heart and therefore her mind.

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