

# Exploring the Health and Wellbeing Benefits Associated with Empowering More Women to Cycle in Ireland

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## Abstract

This commentary applies a mental health and wellbeing lens to the recently published study report 'Empowering Women to Cycle: Insights Beyond Numbers' which explores the social, cultural and infrastructural barriers that currently discourage women in Ireland from choosing to cycle more. The benefits that cycling can have on women's mental health and wellbeing are discussed, along with what is required to create a supportive framework that can empower more women in Ireland to cycle.

## Background & Context

In Ireland, women are half as likely to cycle as men. This divide begins in adolescence and persists across all stages of life. This gender disparity highlights that women's specific needs are not currently being sufficiently met [1].

This article applies a mental health and wellbeing lens to the recent 'Empowering Women to Cycle [2] study, published by Transport Infrastructure Ireland and Walk Wheel Cycle Trust. Transport and travel behaviours and requirements are often viewed as gender neutral, but this is not the case. This study explored the specific experiences and insights of women in Ireland and what they require to be empowered to cycle more, especially for everyday journeys. For the purpose of this study, the terms 'mental health' and 'wellbeing' are treated as overlapping terms, based on a holistic, non-clinical approach where every day wellbeing indicators, such as stress reduction and enjoyment, are viewed as foundational components of maintaining and improving overall mental health, as demonstrated by participants in the original report.

The study highlights the key barriers, motivating factors and recommendations and opportunities to develop a more inclusive cycling culture in Ireland and inform and influence

the development and design of cycling infrastructure within the transport system in Ireland.

Evidence for the report was collected in the form of an online survey distributed, using purposive sampling, and completed by 1047 women between 18–80 living in rural, suburban and urban locations across Ireland, a detailed ethnographic study with 30 female participants collecting travel diaries and follow-up workshops with 14 women. This methodology provided first-hand evidence, illuminating the lived experiences of women cycling in Ireland. Informed consent has been obtained for the inclusion of any quotes in this article.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the original study, with relatively small participation numbers in the ethnographic study and workshops, which may not have fully captured the full range of opinions of all women in Ireland, particularly those who may have no interest in cycling or have severely limited mobility.

With a particular focus on the findings from the survey, ethnographic study and women's workshops, the mental health and wellbeing benefits of cycling, as well as the barriers to accessing these benefits, that emerged from the study will be expanded upon in this article. While our source study

emphasises positive mental health impacts, it should be noted that some women reported cycling-induced stress related to safety concerns; these are discussed elsewhere as barriers.

### Journey Purpose, Motivation and Barriers

Women in Ireland face a range of personal, cultural and infrastructural barriers that mean cycling is a less appealing transport choice, particularly for everyday journeys. Cycling has a more negative connotation among women and girls due to safety worries, with fears of assault and harassment a key concern. Women also report feeling less confident than men when cycling, especially with regards to navigating on road traffic. Infrastructural issues such as a lack of segregated cycle lanes, insufficient lighting or a lack of exit routes all serve as additional barriers that particularly impact women and their sense of both personal and physical safety when cycling [3,4].

Familial and domestic responsibilities also serve to deter women from cycling. In Ireland 45% of women provide daily care for others (compared to 29% of men), meaning that multi-purpose trips, and transporting more items (such as the weekly shop), and children, lead to a car being the most practical choice in most cases [5].

The cultural image or perception of ‘the cyclist’ also deters women from cycling. According to study participants cyclists are perceived to be men who cycle for sport rather than function and wear performance oriented cycling kit, meaning the lack of a ‘normalised’ view of cycling is off-putting to women. Only 22% of women agree that doing journeys by cycle is the norm where they live. This links to how social norms are also impacting the level of women cycling [6,7]. In Ireland there is no significant ‘cycling culture’, like those commonly associated with The Netherlands and Denmark, for example. This means among women and girls cycling can feel less ‘socially acceptable’ and is perceived to be more masculine, which has a particular impact on dissuading young girls to cycle [8, 9].

There is a clear need to improve the planning and design of cycling infrastructure and improve the culture around cycling to be more inclusive of women [10]. While cycling has practical and environmental benefits, the positive impact it can have on physical and mental health and wellbeing among women cannot be overstated. However, this is often a by-product or bonus of increased levels of cycling.

### Cycling and Improved Mental Health and Wellbeing for Women

The ‘Empowering Women to Cycle’ study highlighted that most women in Ireland are able to cycle and have access to a cycle. There is also a desire, especially among younger women, to improve their cycling skills and cycle more for functional trips. The health and social benefits of cycling are

also acknowledged.

There is a positive propensity for cycling among women in Ireland, encouraged by factors such as fond memories of cycling as a child, or viewing it as a valuable skill for their own children to develop. The fact that cycling is good for the environment is also a prevalent consideration.

It is important to highlight that the common thread that underpins the many benefits of cycling for women, is how effective increased levels of cycling can be on improving wellbeing. Indeed, regardless of what may have motivated women to start or increase cycling in the first place, according to our research, it is often the mental health and wellbeing benefits that encourage them to continue cycling.

The value that cycling can add to one’s wellbeing, especially among women, covers a range of cultural, social, and physical factors.

### Enjoyment and Fun

Perhaps the most straightforward way cycling is shown to improve wellbeing among women is that it is simply an enjoyable activity. 76% of respondents to the survey in the ‘Empowering Women to Cycle Study’ agreed that ‘cycling is enjoyable’, and of those who were able to cycle/had access to a bike, 61% stated that the fact that they enjoy cycling is an influential factor in them choosing to cycle.

A participant in the ethnographic study highlighted how noticeable the difference is to her mental health, depending on whether she has been cycling or not, noting that cycling makes her happy.

*“I think the impact it has on my mental health is huge. I haven’t been cycling for a little bit since I left the position I was at, and I can already tell that my mental health is affected. Just being out and being on the bike really just makes me happy, honestly, there’s no other way of saying it. It does me good.” (25-34 year old woman, living in a suburban location)*

Many of the women in the research also enjoy the social aspect that cycling can provide; they view cycling as an integral part of developing their local areas with a focus on people rather than cars to create vibrant and economically robust neighbourhoods. Nearly half of women surveyed in the study agreed that cycling helps them to socialise and meet new people.

### Access to Nature

Cycling as a way to access and spend time in nature is also shown to benefit women’s wellbeing. Participants across the ethnographic study and survey noted the energising effects that being outside in nature and fresh air on their cycles has had on them.

*"The Greenway offers a really nice pocket of nature within quite an urban area. I think that's good for people...because I think it's really easy to lose touch with nature...and I think that's really good for your mental health. I find it really beneficial. It's just really nice to slow down a little bit and be amongst a bit of greenery". (25-34 year old woman, living in an urban location)*

*"I enjoy cycling because I can see the countryside and I can see animals like the sheep and cows and it just kind of makes me very calm to cycle". (35-44 year old woman, living in a rural location)*

## Stress Reduction & Time Saving

Cycling was widely acknowledged by research participants to be beneficial to reducing stress and offering time saving solutions, with cycling sometimes serving a dual purpose as a means of travel and form of exercise.

Many women in the study spoke positively of the health and wellbeing benefits associated with cycling. They particularly appreciated being able to build physical exercise into their busy daily schedules by travelling actively rather than having to find additional time for other forms of physical exercise. By combining errands and physical exercise. Women acknowledged that it does not 'feel like exercise'.

*"The thing I like about cycling is, I'm getting exercise, but I'm kind of tricking myself. If I was in the gym and a stuffy room just doing the same task, I would know I'm exercising, and I would be bored. Whereas, when I'm on the bike, I'm out exercising and I'm enjoying it". (25-34 year old woman, living in a suburban location).*

*"Once I've cycled, I don't feel like I have to go and do exercise in the afternoon because I feel like I've done it, I've killed two birds with one stone. And that takes a lot of time out of your day that, you don't have to go exercise for an extra hour." (25-34 year old woman, living in an urban location)*

Combining a task that must be completed, such as commuting to work, with the physical activity of cycling has shown to not only save time by negating the need to exercise as well as complete other tasks, but also often makes the tasks more enjoyable in the process, due to the acknowledged enjoyable nature of cycling.

*"First of all [cycling] was a necessity, but then afterwards I really came to enjoy it, and I look forward to getting up in the morning to cycle to work. So it kind of changed over time". (25-34 year old woman, living in a suburban location).*

As women in Ireland perform more caregiving duties than men, cycling can provide flexibility, offering women the ability to dictate their own schedule more, with cycling fitting

in as a form of exercise and transport, rather than another responsibility on top of an already busy life [5]. Cycling can be fairly spontaneous and does not require significant preparation or planning.

*"It works with whatever schedule. I don't need to get in sync with anyone else. I think for women anyway, for family life... it's very, very flexible". (25-34 year old woman, living in a rural location).*

Cycling also has been shown to offer a less stressful alternative to the car due to avoiding traffic and car parking or issues with public transport. Women also acknowledged cost and time savings pertaining to traffic and finding parking that switching car journeys for cycle journeys offers. Even if a cycle journey took slightly longer than the equivalent journey by car or public transport, it was seen as attractive from a health, wellbeing and environmental perspective.

## Physical Health

Women in the research recognised the health benefits of cycling. When women in the ethnographic research were asked to compare cycling with other forms of exercise, many of the women expressed a preference for cycling. The opportunity to be outside cycling was also perceived to be more flexible, more gentle and lower impact than other forms of exercise.

66% of respondents in the study who were able to cycle and own/have access to a cycle and undertake functional journeys at least sometimes do so because it helps keep them fit and healthy. Many women who took part in the study also commented that cycling is beneficial to their physical and mental health as it is low impact and more gentle than other forms of exercise, meaning it can be done more frequently.

## Creating a Supportive Framework to Empower More Women to Cycle

The 'Empowering Women to Cycle' study sets out the multitude of benefits that women can gain from cycling, as well as the range of social, cultural and infrastructural barriers that currently hinder a bigger uptake of women cycling in Ireland; the report contains the full list of recommendations and next steps. As part of these, the positive impact cycling can have on women's mental health is clear, from encouraging time spent in nature, to reducing stress and time pressures in a busy caregiving schedule, to cycling simply being an enjoyable activity.

Building a framework that addresses the barriers and highlights the positives of cycling is essential to ensure more women view cycling as a viable and beneficial transport option. Part of this is improving the physical infrastructure and offering more dedicated cycling infrastructure, to

ensure women feel safer (both physically and personally). Developing more of a cycling ‘culture’, where cycling is viewed as a social norm rather than a niche or peripheral activity, will also contribute to women feeling more confident to choose cycling.

There is great potential to promote the mental health benefits of cycling more as a way to encourage women of all ages to cycle more, by highlighting both the physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits.

Recommendations to promote the multi-faceted benefits of cycling to encourage uptake amongst women include normalising the use of a cycle for everyday journeys in normal clothing and make cycling straightforward and achievable. Promoting a positive image and visible presence of women participating in everyday cycling while carrying out their caregiving responsibilities and promoting everyday cycling at all stages of life.

To reap the mental health and wellbeing benefits of cycling as outlined in this paper by empowering more women to cycle will require both physical and cultural change, extending beyond transport policy into broader societal shifts. Working to demystify everyday cycling and developing and fostering a more positive image of cycling in Ireland that is more inclusive of women, along with providing the required infrastructure will contribute to empowering more women to cycle.

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