



# An Examination of Women's Representation and Participation in Bicycle Advisory Committees in California

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MTI Project 1034

April 2012

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In the United States, women bicycle at significantly lower rates than men. One method of remedying this disparity is to ensure that women are engaged in bicycle planning and policy making. A bicycle advisory committee is one type of group that undertakes such work. This research examines women's experiences serving on California bicycle advisory committees and bicycle/pedestrian advisory committees. In addition, we explore some of the barriers to participation that women bicyclists face. Our study focuses on four research questions:

- Are women underrepresented on bicycle advisory committees in California?
- What are the experiences of women on bicycle advisory committees?
- What barriers keep women from seeking membership on such committees?
- What steps could be taken to increase women's participation in bicycle advisory committees?

## Study Methods

To answer our research questions, we conducted three separate investigations of women's participation in bicycle advisory committees.

1. Telephone survey to determine the gender composition of bicycle advisory committees in California
2. Interviews with women serving on ten bicycle advisory committees in California
3. Online survey of women bicyclists in California to determine how aware women are of local committees and what keeps them from seeking membership

## Findings

1. *Gender Composition of Bicycle and Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committees in California*
  - At the time of the survey, women made up approximately 24% of members on an average bicycle or bicycle/pedestrian advisory committee in California. Women made up approximately 19% of members on bicycle advisory committees and approximately 27% of members on combined bicycle and pedestrian committees.
  - Men constituted the majority of members on 38 committees, while women were the majority on only three. One committee had an equal number of males and females.
2. *Interviews with Women on Bicycle and Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committees*
  - Women on these advisory committees are more likely than men to bring up women's issues, children's issues, and issues related to other user groups.
  - Several aspects related to these committees might be unappealing to women, including:
    - The steep learning curve experienced by new members
    - The high proportion of male members

*If men feel fine being aggressive and having open road biking, then that's what we're going to have until women get on those groups and say, "This actually makes me uncomfortable."  
- Woman member from a CA bicycle and pedestrian advisory committee*

- Men's tendency to dominate the floor
  - Men's increased likelihood of having a technical background
  - Several characteristics related to the women themselves might act as barriers to participation, including the need to feel knowledgeable before speaking, the lack of confidence in their contributions, and women's tendency to be responsible for child care.
  - Women on the three committees with the highest percentage of women (out of the ten) all commented on the significant presence of women in their local government.
3. *Online Survey of Women Bicyclists*
- The majority of women (67%) had some awareness level of whether a bicycle or bicycle/pedestrian advisory committee existed where they lived.
  - The top five barriers to committee involvement named by the women were:
    1. Time (60%)
    2. Lack of qualifications (25%)
    3. Lack of specific information about the committee (18%)
    4. Family and household responsibilities (16%)
    5. Lack of interest in politics (12%)
  - A number of survey respondents explicitly named the male-dominated nature of their local committee as a barrier to their involvement.

## Policy Recommendations

### *Education about the Committee*

Almost one-fifth of survey respondents said they did not have enough specific information about their committee to consider membership. An easy remedy to this barrier is educating the public about the committee, which could also ease women's lack of confidence in their qualifications.

### *Targeted Recruitment Efforts*

Targeted efforts to recruit women could increase the number of women who apply to bicycle or bicycle/pedestrian advisory committees. Ideally, this will result in committees with a more balanced number of men and women, which itself might make the committees appealing to more women.

### *Policy and Procedural Changes*

Instituting new policies and procedures could help ensure that more women have an opportunity to become committee members and can make the committee environment more comfortable for women.

## About the Authors

Hilary Nixon, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Urban & Regional Planning at San José State University. Cathy DeLuca has a master's degree in urban planning from San José State University with professional interests in transportation, focusing on bicycle planning.

## To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/project/I034.html](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/I034.html)