

Why aren't women riding more?

By Richard Peace

Safety fears are putting women off cycling

Women are still lagging behind men in their willingness to get on two wheels, research by sustainable transport charity Sustrans has found. Many lack the confidence to take on the dangers, perceived or otherwise, that cycling involves.

Some 79 percent of the women questioned felt that cycling wasn't for them, with less than 1 in 10 women cycling more than once a month. Concerns for safety ranked high among women's negative feelings, along with lack of fitness and motivation.

The 'cycling gender gap' is reinforced by recent figures from Cycling England, which suggest men are three times more likely to saddle up than women.

The Sustrans research broke down the responses according to age, with the following findings:

- 17 per cent of women considered themselves too old to cycle
- The 35-44 age bracket are the most likely to cycle, cycling 50 percent more than women in the 15-24 age group, even though 69 percent of this age group never cycle.

Fears over safety

BikeRadar spoke to Sarah Leeming, active travel co-ordinator for Sustrans in Luton, where her daily work often involves helping get women back in the saddle.

She said: "Confidence is a big issue with all age groups, especially with regards to road safety. Traffic-free routes, such as Luton's National Cycle Network routes, are an excellent way for women to gain confidence in safe surroundings, as are the group rides Active Travel organises."

The Cycling England research corroborated Sustrans' general findings, with more than half the women questioned citing safety as an issue. In the image stakes, the biggest fear amongst 18- to 34-year-olds was 'arriving at work sweaty'.

Yet more research from Portland State University in the US confirms that 'too much traffic is a barrier to biking' is a more prevalent view among women (52 percent) than men (34 percent).

Leeming also felt 'helmet hair' syndrome was a factor, with some women citing turning up at their destination dishevelled and sweaty a factor. She said one of the best ways of countering this image problem was to get women on bikes and enjoying themselves through cycle training.

"Some larger ladies say they are simply too big to get on a bike but my experiences with cycle training have never shown this to be true," she said.

Image problem

BikeRadar asked Henrietta Sherwin, staff member and PhD student at the Centre for Transport & Society in Bristol, and a former senior researcher at the BBC, why she thought women cycle less than men.

She said: "In countries with a culture of cycling where it isn't seen as a marginal activity, like Holland, Germany and Denmark, equal numbers of men and women cycle. This is because people are influenced by what they see around them ... and whether they can identify with being a cyclist.

"In the UK, the image associated with cycling is male, often in Lycra, quite likely to be moving at speed and often not a very friendly person – possibly aggressive.

"There are good reasons for this – it stems from cyclists feeling marginalised, constantly being criticised from all sides, not liked by pedestrians and not appreciated by drivers – so a particular mentality has resulted. For women this isn't attractive."

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Where women live is also likely to influence how often they cycle, according to Sustrans. Women in the South West are most likely to cycle (wet weather and hills – two commonly cited disincentives – clearly not putting them off), while those who live in Scotland and the North West are the least likely to saddle up.

To encourage women to get on their bikes, Sustrans will be organising female-friendly cycle rides in the summer using traffic-free sections of the National Cycle Network.

The charity has also set up a new women-specific website, www.bikebelles.org.uk, which has just gone live and has lots of information on what to wear, where to go and how to do it.