

Lay Summary

The Social Practice and Regulation of Cycling as “A Boy’s Thing” in Irish Secondary Schools

Robert Egan and **Jane Hackett**, Green-Schools Travel, An Taisce Environmental Education Unit, Ireland

OVERVIEW

- Cycling is interpreted and socially policed as a boy-only practice among teenagers in Ireland.
- Prevailing gender norms relating to masculine and feminine behaviour exclude teenage girls in Ireland from cycling.
- Hostile cycling conditions in Ireland may inhibit styles of cycling that are more compatible with prevailing practices of adolescent femininity in Ireland.

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.16997/ATS.1121](https://doi.org/10.16997/ATS.1121)

[Access the full article here.](#)

This lay summary provides an overview of key findings from an academic article published in the peer-reviewed, open access journal, Active Travel Studies. Lay summaries are available in English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic.

✉ Robert Egan: eganr.research@gmail.com

www.activetravelstudies.org

Ireland has relatively low levels of secondary school cycling compared to other European countries, with only 2.1% of students between 13 and 18 years of age cycling as a means of travel. Nevertheless, within this small percentage of students who cycle for travel, there lies a stark gender disparity in rates of ridership: compared to 3.7% of boys, only 0.4% of girls cycle to school (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Emerging from the Green-Schools Travel Programme, the #andshcycles campaign (Green-Schools, 2020) originated from a curiosity with the cycling gender gap in Irish secondary schools. With a similar destination and travel environment, the question was posed: why do almost no teenage girls cycle to school when teenage boys in many parts of the country frequently do? In the context of Irish policy aiming to promote cycling as a mode of sustainable travel (Smarter Travel, 2009), it is of vital importance to understand what prevents teenage girls from cycling to school so that targeted interventions that enable more inclusive cycling can be implemented. Indeed, this matter gender disparities in cycling ridership moving into adulthood; for example, in Ireland, only 0.7% of women's journeys are made cycling, compared to 2.6% of men's journeys (Central Statistics Office, 2019).

On this basis, we embarked on a qualitative study exploring the cycling gender gap among second-level students across Ireland. This involved facilitating 17 semi-structured focus groups with secondary students from a mix of year groups and schools across the Republic of Ireland. The vast majority of focus groups involved female participants only and this reflected the early aim to explore the experiences and perceptions of

cycling to school among teenage girls in Ireland. However, as analysis progressed, two focus groups were carried out with boys only to explore possible relationships between cycling and social norms around 'masculinity'. Throughout the study we used classical grounded theory to guide our approach to data collection and analysis. This is a method that can be used to create useful theories of social life and behaviour that are 'grounded' in qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Overall, we found that cycling amongst teenage girls was greatly inhibited by wider gender norms and how these norms intersected with cycling as a practice primarily understood as "A Boy's Thing" among teenagers in Ireland. First, we found that cycling could be a medium for broader demonstrations of 'masculinity' among teenagers in Ireland. Namely, cycling could be a means of publicly displaying one's athleticism, indifference to danger, and audacity, in part through enacting a particularly 'masculine' style of cycling. This could involve cycling at high speed, performing wheelies, cycling without holding the handlebars, ignoring the rules of the road, not wearing a helmet, and, in general, cycling in a style that would not be (conventionally) considered 'safety-conscious'.

Second, we found that cycling was relatively incompatible with performances of 'femininity' among teenagers in Ireland. In particular, cycling as a teenage girl in Ireland could be experienced as a transgression of idealised 'feminine' characteristics of, and gendered practices relating to, modesty, beauty, perspiration, and caution. By engaging in cycling as a teenage girl, several challenges could be encountered in relation to achieving

these gender norms. Cycling could make it difficult to "cover up" as a teenage girl (particularly when wearing a skirt and in windy conditions), to maintain a particular feminised standard of "looking good" or "presentable" (particularly in relation to developing "helmet hair" but also due to challenges of cycling while wearing a skirt), to avoid the development of sweat and body odour resulting from physical activity, which could be socially viewed as "disgusting", and, finally, to avoid situations of danger, due to the hostile conditions of cycling in Ireland.

Third and last, conformity with the gender norms that we identified over the course of the study were socially policed (what we refer to in the study as 'gender regulation'). For the most part, female participants recounted experiences and fears of being "looked" and "stared at", being the subject of socially stigmatising gossip ("talked about"), being ridiculed ("laughed at"), and being "heckled" and intimidated primarily by groups of teenage boys for engaging in cycling.

Our account of the cycling gender gap amongst teenagers in Ireland provides an explanation for how cycling is dominantly considered, and reproduced as, "A Boy's Thing". We argue that the enactment and regulation of gender norms relating to dominant notions of masculinity and femininity in Ireland entrench cycling as a practice for teenage boys, and exclude teenage girls. In addition, the context of cycling across many parts of Ireland – where cyclists are subordinated road users in everyday mobility, planning and policing (Egan and Philbin, 2021) – can be seen to demand a particularly bold and daring style of cycling.

This style is arguably more compatible with the masculine gender norms identified in this study; through practices of gender regulation, teenage girls are denied access to engage in this style and cycling at large. On the basis of our analysis, our study suggests that tackling the teenage cycling gender gap in Ireland may require both liberating teenage girls from repressive gender norms that deter them from cycling (a 'political' approach) and making cycling as a practice more compatible with currently prevailing 'feminine' gender norms in Ireland (a 'compatibility' approach). To conclude, we argue that the teenage cycling gender gap in Ireland is a product of both prevailing gender norms and hostile cycling conditions, which could be respectively tackled through campaigning against prevailing gender norms and creating conditions where cycling is prioritised rather than subordinated relative to driving.
