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Briefing Paper 27

Pedalling Through Pregnancy: Is riding a bike when pregnant a political statement on spatial justice?

Jac Torres-Gomez, City of Wyndham, Australia

From the moment I discovered I was expecting, I was determined to stay active and healthy. As someone who has always cherished the freedom and exhilaration of riding a bike, it only felt natural to continue riding during pregnancy. Little did I know that my decision would become a topic of debate, politics, and community curiosity, prompting me to reflect on the societal norms surrounding maternal fitness and how it ties into the right to equitable access to the city, place management and spatial justice for all.

As an expectant mother based in Melbourne, Australia, riding my push bike has been a source of joy, empowerment, and physical well-being, a sanctuary amidst the physical changes and hormonal fluctuations. It makes me happy, which in turn is good for my baby and our shared maternal health outcomes. The gentle motion, fresh air, and rhythmic pedalling have provided relief from the weight and stress on my body, especially in the later stages of my pregnancy as my baby grows. Despite experiencing some occasional discomfort and back pain during this pregnancy, getting out on my bike has been my saving grace, offering a sense of freedom and vitality where my previous ‘non-pregnant’ forms of exercise such as playing team sports, hot yoga and running are not currently viable.

Many societal attitudes towards people on bikes are embedded in negativity. Those who ride their bikes, including while pregnant, are seen by many who drive cars as actually adding to traffic congestion, dangerous situations, and even contributing to increased traffic accidents (de la Bruhèze & Veraart, 1999, pp. 186–9). In my case, whether it is a worried stare at my belly from a passersby, shock from people I know who see me cycle to drop my oldest daughter to school, or outright hostility from strangers, the perception of riding a bike during pregnancy as highly risky and inappropriate prevails. Yet, evidence and personal experiences contradict these misconceptions. [While news of her mode of travel to the hospital made international headlines](#), people like New Zealand politician and advocate Julie Anne Genter, who cycled throughout her pregnancies and during labour to get to the hospital,

challenge traditional notions and inspire others to embrace riding their bike as a viable option for maternal wellbeing.

In many cities, a lack of place management and poor planning has resulted in inadequate bike paths, road conditions and cultural views pose risks for all vulnerable community members, including pregnant bike riders. The lack of designated cycling lanes, bike parking and safe routes to essential destinations like hospitals amplifies stress and safety concerns for expectant people only wishing to maintain their health during pregnancy. Taking a singular focus on technically ‘fixing’ infrastructure such as building a dedicated bicycle lane disregards cultural change and user-driven designs and solutions (Oldenziel & de la Bruhèze, 2011, pp.29–49). Challenges persist in achieving spatial justice in active transport, particularly concerning infrastructure and safety. Navigating these obstacles while carrying precious cargo adds unnecessary stress and anxiety, highlighting the urgent need for improved urban planning, changes to cultural and societal norms and well-considered policy and place management interventions at a local, state, and federal level.

I have attended most of my pregnancy medical appointments at the hospital, doctor, and osteopath solely by bike or co-modally by bike and train. Despite accessible train stations, the absence of safe cycling routes between stations and health care venues exacerbates the challenge of accessing healthcare. The lack of bike parking facilities and the reluctance of authorities to accommodate cyclists further compound the problem, hindering active transport and promoting car dependency. Unfortunately, in my experience, hospitals, seen as a place of illness rather than wellness, seem to incorporate those who are pregnant into this ‘unwell’ category when in fact many of us are very well and just at the hospital for our checkups. At a physiotherapist session with other expectant women recently, there was more shock that I was riding my bike while pregnant than the fact the other women were only able to undertake a maximum of 10 minutes of gentle walking a day. This was impacting greatly on their pregnancy, wellbeing, and chance of co-morbidity yet they highlighted a fear of being ‘too active’ might hurt them and their baby. Each shared they were struggling with their physical and mental health and each day were noticing this was getting worse for them. Where is the health lens focused for them?

Even everyday encounters reflect societal misconceptions about pregnant cyclists. A simple act of parking my bike at a signpost near a café recently rather than the designated bike racks 800 metres away became a subject of scrutiny and inconvenience as I was approached by the centre’s security saying I couldn’t park there, reflecting a broader misunderstanding and lack of support for active pregnant women. It is ridiculous but riding on the footpath because I have a child ‘under 12’ (way under 12 years...in fact they have not even been born yet) ‘with’ me, has been my backup if I get pulled aside by the police for ‘illegally’ riding on the footpath when there is no other safe infrastructure. The state law states that this is ‘allowed’. Yet why is it the person choosing to ride is seen as the issue and needing to take personal responsibility for others on the road, when in fact we all have the right to feel safe and driving a car is actually a privilege, not a right?

Active transport advocate [Melissa Bruntlett often speaks to how riding a bike as a woman should not be seen as a political statement](#). Why is it still seen as something shocking, including when that woman is also pregnant? As the Dutch saying goes, ‘we are not made of sugar’, and I wonder if I would be more accepted in my city if I pulled out my old Lycra (that stopped fitting seven months ago) or rode a fancier bike than my trusty second-hand foldable e-bike? What do I need to do to reclaim my street and neighbourhood and be considered a natural and integral part of the fabric for achieving spatial justice in my city?

In response to these challenges, enhanced place management, advocacy and awareness are crucial. Campaigns for safer cycling infrastructure, education on prenatal fitness and health, and destigmatising riding a bike during pregnancy can empower expectant mothers to make informed choices about their health and mobility. By challenging stereotypes and advocating for inclusive policies, we can create a more supportive environment for everyday pregnant bike riders and promote active living for all.

Despite societal norms and infrastructure challenges, expectant mothers like me find solace, exercise, and freedom on our bikes. By addressing systemic place and cultural barriers and promoting awareness, we can ensure that every active transport journey, whether on two wheels and with a baby bump or not, is met with respect, safety, and encouragement. As I eagerly await the arrival of my little one, I pedal onwards, embracing the joy and vitality that cycling brings to my pregnancy journey.

References:

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Biography

Jac is a passionate planner, community development practitioner, teacher, facilitator, and author, currently based in Melbourne, Australia. She has worked in various lifelong learning, planning, government, education, and community development contexts globally including in Australia, Japan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, The Netherlands, and Bolivia. Jac was previously the Learning Community officer at Wyndham City Council. She is dedicated to making places, spaces, and lives more equitable and inclusive through place management, innovative design, placemaking, planning and policy.