

Babae on Bikes: Intersectional Feminism and Public Policy in the Philippines

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Abstract:

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Philippines, the nationwide quarantine made mobility and transportation extra difficult in the streets of the Philippines. Filipinos, especially those who are considered as “essential workers,” resorted to cycling. Since bike commuting will most probably be part of the “new normal,” legislators file separate bills and implement guidelines to safeguard and promote cycling. These bills intend to re-introduce cycling to the public as the cheapest, most sustainable and reliable, and safest form of transportation. However, do these policies address the problems that women bike commuters experience? Are these bills responsive to the issues of safety, economic status, and welfare of the Filipina cyclist? This paper attempts to analyze public policies on bicycle commuting in the Philippines through the framework of intersectional feminism. Since it is a paradigm that analyzes the overlapping oppression of race, gender, and class, this paper first explores the two main problems that women cyclists face in the Philippines: safety and economic injustice. This study then proceeds to evaluate the proposed bill on bicycling commuting; the Senate Bill No. 1518 or “The Safe Pathways Act or of 2020”. Towards the end, this paper concludes that such public policy is gender-blind and exclusivist: the problematic space provided for women on the streets is not remedied but is rather amplified. Through intersectional analysis, this research offers specific recommendations how to further develop public policies in the future, making them more inclusive, responsive, and empowering.

Key Words: intersectional feminism; public policy; bicycle commuting; cycling women; pandemic commuting in the Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION: *Babae* on Bikes

On 16 March 2020, the entire Luzon was placed on an “enhance community quarantine” (ECQ) (Dancel, 2020). Back then, being the most populous island in the country, it was known to be the epicenter of COVID-19 in the Philippines. Borders were closed,

economic activities were halted, and public transportation that serve the ordinary Filipino, such as jeepneys, buses, and even tricycles were discontinued. Pre-pandemic commuting, especially in Metro Manila, was already a challenge but because of the dreaded virus, the difficulty was magnified. As history has proven time and again, when everything

fails, people re/turn to bicycling. This surge of bicycling is not exclusive to the Philippines; in Europe, which has existing bike-friendly cities, the demand for bikes, gears, outfits, and infrastructure increased due to the pandemic (Vandy, 2020). In fact, the major bike manufacturers, namely Giant, Canyon, Specialized, and most recently Santa Cruz, admit that their prizes and production increased up to 12% citing the demand and logistical costs issues brought by the virus (Cahill 2020; Miller 2021). But then again, the Philippine experience is different: unlike its neighboring Asian countries, the Filipino consciousness has always been indifferent to bicycle commuting; its lack of adequate infrastructures and absence of public policy to safeguard and protect cyclists just prove that the country is not bike-friendly. However, what kind of public policy cultivates a bike-friendly, walkable, sustainable, and safe street? Do the bike commuting bills promote safety for all but most especially the vulnerable sectors of the society, such as women, children, persons who are differently abled, and the old? Do the guidelines in building infrastructures for bike commuting consider the welfare of women? Why is there a need to reflect on the lived experiences of the bicycle commuting Filipina?

Employing intersectional feminism, a framework famously coined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989; 1991), which evaluates the webbed oppression of gender, race, class, age, etc., this paper aims to analyze a bill referring to bicycle commuting in the Philippines. Since it is a framework that can acknowledge the lived experiences of a Filipina commuting cyclist, this paper first explores the two core problems that they encounter in the Philippines: safety and economic injustice. This study uses Cruz's (2017) article entitled, *Women, Cycling, and Sustainable Cities*, in drawing out the "deterrents to women's cycling." Cruz's (2017) paper maintains that these factors highly discourage the Filipina to consider cycling in general not just for commuting and then argues that these factors shall be considered if Metro Manila strives to be a "gender-responsive and cycling-friendly." Since Cruz's article analyzes pre-pandemic cycling, "safety" does not refer to "COVID-19 free" yet. In contrast, this research specifically evaluates the proposed bill on bicycling commuting, "The Safe Pathways Act" (henceforth SPA) or Senate

Bill No. 1518 of 2020 and expands the scope from Metro Manila to the urban spaces in the Philippines. SPA is supposed to be a mitigating response to transportation issues intensified by the pandemic. Towards the end, this paper concludes that SPA is gender-blind and exclusivist: the problematic space provided for women on the streets is not remedied but is rather amplified. Through intersectional analysis, this research offers specific recommendations how to further develop public policies in the post-pandemic future, making them more inclusive, responsive, and empowering.

2. Recognizing the Margins

2.1 *Intersectional Feminism: From Slavery to Saddles*

Historically speaking, the bike is manufactured specifically for men. The geometry, fit, purpose, outfit, gears, rules – everything about it caters to men's mobility and ego. In fact, whenever a woman attempts to cycle, she is demonized¹. But what happened in the 1890's made bicycling not just another mode of transportation but also a symbol of freedom for women. Suffragist leader, Susan B. Anthony (1896; Dawson, 2011) notably mentions that the bicycle "has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world" as "It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance." Bicycles have become the trusty steeds of first wave feminists when they campaigned for votes for women. Hanging their banners and blocking Churchill's barricades, the image of a cycling woman protesting for freedom is so powerful that Elswick Cycles and Manufacturing Company (now Elswick Bikes), a bicycle company in England, produced special bicycles for the suffragists (Floreay 2013, 29; Thorpe 2017).

As the bicycle becomes the symbol of women's liberation, another metaphor inspired by mobility is constructed to fuel Black feminism: the intersection. Crenshaw (1989, 149), an American lawyer and philosopher, asks us to imagine this:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars

traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

Through this, Crenshaw illustrates that a Black woman could experience a multi-layered oppression by virtue of her race, economic status, gender, sexuality, language, etc. To initiate effective reforms in the society, this interwoven discrimination should be addressed. If an institution - in this case, the law - turns a blind eye on one or three of these aspects, Crenshaw thinks that Black women will not be emancipated:

Judicial decisions which premise intersectional relief on a showing that Black women are specifically recognized as a class are analogous to a doctor's decision at the scene of an accident to treat an accident victim only if the injury is recognized by medical insurance. Similarly, providing legal relief only when Black women show that their claims are based on race or on sex is analogous to calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries is identified. But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. In these cases the tendency seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away.

This is the main point of intersectionality. Since the effects of discrimination is deeply embedded, intersectional feminism instigates analysis that shall consider the multifaceted roots of discrimination. Systems of oppression continue to thrive up to this day precisely because these marginal aspects, such as race and gender, remain overlooked. Hence, the perpetrators run free while the oppressed are still shackled.

Although intersectional feminism has its

roots in Black feminism, other disciplines use this paradigm as a “primary tool for theorizing identity and oppression” (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011; Nash 2008). One of these important fields is public policy or policy making. As it centers on crafting solutions to respond to certain problems, intersectionality in public policy starts by acknowledging “that to address complex inequities, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work” (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 218; Parken and Young 2007; Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women [CRIAOW] 2006; Hankivsky 2005). Recognizing the need to address the “matrix of domination” as coined by Collins (1990), intersectionality in policy making considers the multifaceted identities of a person - race, gender, and class - as interlocking sources of oppression. For example, in applying intersectional feminism in policy making that will resolve teenage pregnancy in the Philippines during the pandemic, it is a mistake to focus on the behavior of these young moms alone. *What are the gender norms in the Philippines that may prohibit access to proper sex education and reproductive health? How does poverty play a role in this case? Are young lesbian moms considered? How about pregnancies caused by sexual violence, such as rape and incestuous relationships?* When these questions are considered, one uncovers the interwoven layers of discrimination that a Filipina experiences. This spells the importance of intersectionality in governance and public policy: as soon as these interlocking levels oppression are recognized, it makes strategies or action plans inclusive, responsive, and empowering.

2.2 *She is Safe if Space is Shared, is She?*

In a study that focuses on the streets of Metro Manila, Cruz (2017) argues that to transform the urban space into a “sustainable city,” it should address first the factors that discourage women to cycle. She (2017, 96) then identifies these “deterrents to women’s adoption of cycling as a transport mode” in the Philippines: “(1) safety concerns, (2) deviant images of cyclists, and (3) compliance to the demands of normative femininity”. For the purposes of this research, while all three are valid, this study focuses more on factor the first one since it is the most alarming. Cruz (2017, 95) recognizes that “Safety is the dominant discourse that cyclists deploy in their advocacy, simply because cycling is potentially life threatening.” This is essentially true in the Philippines. According to the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), they recorded a grand total of 50,230 road crash incidents in 2020 and 3,026 of which are non-motorized vehicle (bicycles, e-

bikes, and/or pedicabs) involved. It is important to note that while MMDA considers age bracket, vehicle types, and accident factors, the agency does not have a record on sex and gender of those who were involved. Last 2019, MMDA recorded 1,759 incidents; 696 of which resulted to damage to property, while 19 are fatal, and 1,045 cause non-fatal injury.

Total Number of Vehicle Involved					
Vehicle Type	Fatal	Non Fatal Injury	Damage to Property	Total No. of Vehicles	Percentage (%)
Bike/E-Bike/Pedicab	36	2067	923	3026	2.40
Motorcycle	253	12925	12030	25208	20.16
Tricycle	13	697	1232	1942	1.55
Car	89	6318	52371	58778	47.01
PUJ	14	477	2071	2562	2.04
Taxi / FX	7	528	2503	3038	2.43
Bus	14	357	2862	3233	2.58
Van	36	1582	12346	13964	11.17
Truck	80	976	9494	10550	8.43
Train	1	5	7	13	0
Unknown	8	318	2370	2696	2.15
Grand Total	551	26,250	98,209	125,010	100

Fig. 1. Road crash statistics in 2020 provided by the MMDA

Unfortunately, the issues on safety when it comes to women and cycling do not just cover physical risk. Filipinas who choose to cycle also experience inappropriate treatments, such as catcalling and other forms of sexual harassment. “Padyak Pinay” in Facebook, which describes itself as a “society and culture website” chronicles lived experiences of cycling women in the streets of Metro Manila.

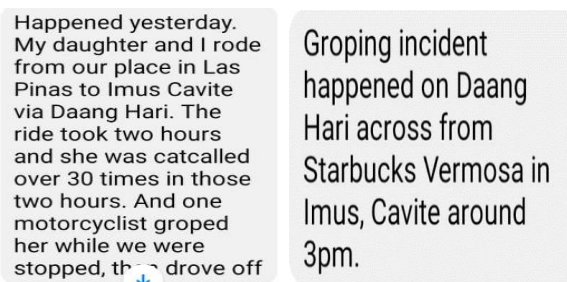


Fig. 2. These are actual posts from the FB page of “Padyak Pinay.” Because of the risks involved, women are forced to adapt to the cycling conditions in Metro Manila. Posts such as these prove that women have no other recourse but to inform and protect each other.

This is to inform, warn, and encourage Filipinas to consider bicycle commuting despite the risk of sexual assault. Aside from Facebook, they made an app called “Cyclist Stories on Catcalling,” which aims to stop street harassment through mapping areas where women experience catcalling, ogling, or other inappropriate behavior while cycling.

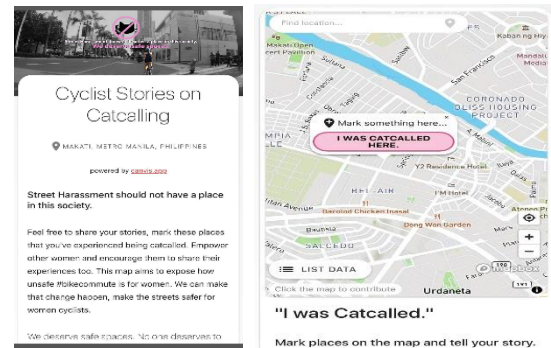


Fig. 3. These are screenshots of the app called “Cyclist Stories on Catcalling.” Created by a woman cyclist, women can identify the streets where she experienced sexual harassment or other inappropriate treatments and warn others, too.

Through the narratives of the users, women look after each other on the streets. Most importantly, the experiences of women in the streets of Metro Manila are so harrowing that they needed these platforms to express themselves while protecting other cyclists, too.

One of the sources of oppression that should be highlighted here is about economic injustice. Filipinas belong to a developing country and poverty always harms women and children the most. As the Philippines suffer from transportation crisis that is consequently being heightened by the pandemic, bicycle commuting could have been made accessible to them. Unfortunately, the Philippines implements “pink tax” or “menstrual tax.” This form of taxation and marketing ploy explains why women’s products are more expensive than men’s. This is the same in cycling; the gears, outfit, bikes, safety equipment, etc. that are being sold to women cost more. Compared to men’s, women’s gears are made to be more “fashionable” (pink) but less durable or functional. Moreover, due to women’s anatomy and safety issues, they are expected to spend more for their protective equipment (i.e., sports bra, padded cycling shorts, napkin, fitted bike frame and saddle, pepper spray, etc.).

3. Dissecting the Intersections of the Safe Pathways Act and Sustainability

On 1 February 2021, the SPA or Senate Bill No. 1518 of 2020 was unanimously approved for second reading in the Senate. The said bill is primarily

authored by Senator Pia Cayetano, a noted triathlon herself and an advocate of sustainable cities. What are the salient points included in this bill?

Physical Infrastructures. First, if this bill passes as a law, it mandates that the government shall establish the “Safe Pathways Network” (henceforth SPN) solely for non-motorized vehicles. SPN shall include (1) bicycle lanes (permanent), (2) pop-up bicycle lanes (temporary) (3) slow streets or roads that are for “designated network of people” (i.e., delivery, trash collections, etc.) and (4) the health facilities loop, which is reserved for healthcare workers. SPN shall “connect users to essential destinations such as medical facilities, public and private facilities frequented by people, school, when they do open, and other similar places that may be identified” (S.N. 1582). Because this is a response to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, the space of these bike lanes shall follow the 1-meter physical distancing requirement. Secondly, parking spaces for bicycles and non-motorized vehicles shall be provided in all public places, such as malls, schools, churches, government offices, etc.

Roles of Public and Private Sectors. This bill specifically mentions that both the government and private sectors are enjoined to promote not just cycling but also walking. Moreover, facilities and programs that advocate for such like shower and changing rooms shall also observe physical distancing.

Safe Pathways as Permanent. This bill mandates that physical improvements for the walking and cycling community shall be made permanent even in the post-pandemic future. As such, this also allocates funds to build and maintain these.

A Response to UNDP. It is also important to note that the bill mentions that “it is in line with the state’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)” identified by the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) (S.N. 1582). Said SDGs aim “to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.” The Philippines is one of the signatories of UNDP’s Strategic Plan. SPA (S.N. 1582) identifies the following goals: SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being); SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy); SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure); SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities); SDG 13 (Climate Action); and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

The enactment of the Safe Pathways Bill in the future ensures the building of proper infrastructure that shall share roads with cyclists, allot parking areas, and appropriate funding. This effort is commendable because building these physical facilities is a big step towards urban sustainability. However, does it alleviate the factors that discourage women to consider cycling as a viable and safe way to commute? Since the bill merely focuses on bicycle lanes, pop-up lanes, parking spaces, and the likes, SPA is apparently gender-blind and exclusivist. It only addresses the issue of lack of physical space for cyclists in general but how about a safe space where women can travel without fear regardless of time and their attire? Sadly, it is also silent about the economic problems that women are facing, especially during the pandemic. How can women acquire their own cycling gear now that the market prices have increased? Moreover, as SPA mentions that it is compliant with the SDGs, it cannot disregard the plight of women cyclists; UNDP particularly includes “women’s empowerment and gender equality” as one of its Signature Solutions. In fact, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), one of the SDGs identified by the bill, lists the following as two of UNDP’s target goals:

By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

Since UNDP recognizes the importance of inclusivity in mobility, it particularly highlights the welfare of women. This is where the importance of intersectionality in policy making comes in: “policy is not neutral as it is not experienced in the same way by all populations and that important differences and

concomitant needs have to be taken into account” (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 218). Applying intersectional feminist analysis on public policy requires that we also consider the margins where systems of oppression thrive. Disregarding the lived experiences of the Filipina cycling community pushes us away from making our streets safe and sustainable.

Some possible recommendations for the improvement of the SPA that consider the women cycling community are: inclusion of gender sensitivity workshops in acquiring driver’s license, tax subsidies for companies that market and manufacture gears and equipment for women without the “pink tax,” tax relief for employees who are bike commuting single mothers and/or those who are the main care providers of their PWD family members, removal of VAT on women’s essentials like napkins and tampons, hiring of Anti-Bastos Traffic Enforcers (ATE) in SPN, establishment of clean and sanitary breastfeeding stations in SPNs, and inclusion of more women policy makers.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic causes a lot of problems and it further exposes issues in our society and the government. One the most pressing is the public transportation. Efforts to improve it are being made, such as the passing of SPA for second reading in the Senate. However, through intersectional feminism, it shows that the factors that discourage women to cycle in the Philippines are not addressed. With this, this study recommends the consideration of the interlocking layer of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, so the nation can nurture sustainable cities and communities. As recognized by the UN, a sustainable city is a space space where women and children can move around at all times, without fear or judgment.

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¹ Women who ride bicycles were considered deviants. In fact, women are prohibited to do so. It was believed that cycling causes major health problems like anemia and leads to sexual deviancy. Back then,

people believed that the bike is a tool for masturbation, prostitution, and infidelity (Thorpe 2017).