



Run, Don't Walk: How Transportation Complicates Women's Balancing Act

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Think about something we all do every day—crossing the street. We stand on the sidewalk waiting for the light to change, and then we cross. It seems like a simple enough act, but how easily it is accomplished varies. For example, those who make it quickly across the street within the average allotted fifteen seconds typically are wearing flat shoes rather than high heels, carrying a briefcase rather than pushing a baby stroller, and walking alone instead of leaning on someone's arm.

The different ways in which women and men negotiate such common travel demands reflect many other aspects of our gendered society. The quest to produce “seamless travel” and reduce the costs of mass transit and highways has led traffic engineers to simplify urban transportation systems by marginalizing non-work trips. But this emphasis on efficiency ignores, and sometimes actually hinders, the type of nonlinear travel most women engage in. “Run, Don't Walk” is the message many women internalize, whether negotiating a city street corner or combining employment and family obligations.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze women's travel issues in the context of women's changing social status. As formal education and employment have been added to the domestic responsibilities expected of women, many feel they must run faster just to stay in place. In the past, being a wife and mother was the constant in a woman's life and employment was a variable. But now paid work has become a necessity for most women and their marriage and childbearing decisions are more flexible. Because in some ways women's lives are becoming similar to men's, while in other ways they remain very different, this paper describes why women's and men's travel patterns both converge and contrast. By understanding how women's travel is embedded in its social context, transportation planners may be able to accomplish more for women than just adjusting the timing of traffic lights.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

Women's lives have become more like men's in three important ways. One is that women are more likely to participate in the public sphere, via college and the labor force, than in the past. The second is that high out-of-wedlock births and divorce rates have made a significant proportion of women economically responsible for their families. The third is that the “gender gap” in driver's licenses has almost closed for the young and middle-aged and has substantially narrowed for the elderly. Thus transportation forms a vital link between private and public spheres for both women and men.

COLLEGE AND EMPLOYMENT

Almost one-fifth of all American women have college degrees now compared with only 6 percent in the 1960s. Nearly two-thirds of both women and men who graduate from high school enroll in college, and women now account for a slight majority among college students. One-quarter of women and men between the ages of 25 and 34 have college degrees (Spain and Bianchi 1996).

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Although women's and men's college experiences are increasingly similar, the typical female student is older, more likely to take classes part-time, and more likely to attend a community college than the typical male student (Spain and Bianchi 1996:60). This profile suggests different travel patterns for women and men. Older, part-time students are more likely than younger, full-time students to be employed or to have family responsibilities. And attendance at a local community college generates more short-distance trips than residence at a four-year institution. Thus, female students are more likely than male students to need transportation that provides maximum flexibility in combining tasks.

Just as the gap between women's and men's educational attainment has narrowed, so has the difference between women's and men's labor force participation rates. Among people in the prime working ages between 25 and 54, women's labor force participation has increased dramatically and men's has declined slightly. In 1960, 43 percent of prime-working age women and 97 percent of working-age men were in the labor force (for a female-to-male ratio of .44). By 1994, 75 percent of working-age women and 92 percent of men were in the labor force (for a ratio of .82) (Spain and Bianchi 1996:82).

Women therefore are becoming more similar to men in their tendency to work outside the home. But the jobs in which women are concentrated (teaching, clerical, and nursing occupations) differ from men's in one important respect: they are typically closer to home and require less business travel. Thus women's paid work generates shorter trips and greater dependence on public transit than men's paid work (Turner and Niemeier n.d.). Although these are often the types of work that mothers choose as compatible with child rearing responsibilities, they actually lack the very flexibility and control that parents need to balance work and family obligations (Bielby and Bielby 1988; Glass 1990; Glass and Camarigg 1992).

Telecommuting, a growing alternative to office work, may provide employed women with greater flexibility. On the other hand, telecommuting might also reinforce social isolation and responsibility for domestic tasks while perpetuating lower wages and fewer benefits for its participants (Gurstein 1996).

FEMALE HOUSEHOLDERS

Women are more likely now than in the past to maintain their own households. Delayed age at first marriage, divorce, widowhood, and non-marital childbearing have all contributed to the growth in female householders. One-half of all women now delay marriage until age 24, approximately one-half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce, nearly one-half of all women aged 65 and over are widowed, and one-third of births now occur outside of marriage. Since the 1970s, the proportion of all households maintained by women has risen from 21 to 29 percent and the proportion of families with children under 18 maintained by women has risen from 10 to 22 percent. Nearly one-half of black families are now maintained by women compared with 25 percent of Hispanic, 13 percent of Asian, and 14 percent of white non-Hispanic families (Spain and Bianchi 1996).

Women who maintain their own households face the same economic responsibilities as men. Almost three-quarters of single mothers are in the labor force, the majority of whom work part-time (Spain and Bianchi 1996:147). These women, even more than married mothers, require transportation that serves both family and employment needs because they have no spouse with whom to share responsibilities. Yet zoning separates residential from business districts and makes it unlikely that job, child care, and shopping facilities are in close proximity (Hayden 1984; Ritzdorf 1988). Laws implemented to protect property values in an earlier era were premised, in part, on husband-wife couples in which only the man was employed. Now that so many women maintain families alone, in addition to working outside the home, the transportation needs of families have changed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the proportion of women using public transit and carpooling has declined and the proportion of women depending on private cars has increased over time (Rosenbloom 1995a). Women need the flexibility a car offers in order to reach work on time and to run errands. It is not just that cars are more convenient than public transit, it is that public transit often presents actual obstacles to women. The escalators and turnstiles in subway systems, for example, are almost impossible to navigate with a baby stroller or toddler in tow. Women's lives have become more complicated, but their transportation options are still limited: a private car provides one of the few ways to meet both family and employment obligations.

Transportation is like contraception: it is ultimately a woman's responsibility for which society provides few alternatives. Just as we might well ask why, in the 1990s, we are still engaged in emotionally-charged debates about the evils of abortion when abortion could be avoided if women had access to RU486 or if male contraceptive technology had advanced beyond the often ineffective condom and the irreversible vasectomy, we might also wonder why, in the 1990s, we are still wringing our hands over the evils of private cars. We know that safe, sensible alternatives exist to both abortions and cars, yet we are stuck in a time warp: If only women would get married, stay home, and have children the way they did in the 1950s, there would be less demand for abortion and for private cars. But blaming women for complex social changes that have propelled them out of the home brings us no closer to solutions regarding either contraceptive or transportation choices.

GENDER AND DRIVING

Jokes about women drivers were popular during the 1950s when only about one-half of adult women had driver's licenses. Now that nearly 100 percent of adult women have driver's licenses, the frequency of those jokes has declined. The dramatic growth in women's labor force participation rates is credited with this rise in licensing rates (Stone 1996:4). The increase in women workers changed public attitudes about appropriate roles for women (Spain and Bianchi 1996:181,183), and now the increase in women drivers has changed our definitions about appropriate topics for humor.

Studies show an increase in licensing rates for women, but trend data may overestimate past gender differences in driving patterns. Like Ms. Ramsey, the female race car driver discovered by Professor Wachs, much of women's driving history before the 1950s has been obscured. If the accomplishments of a barnstorming performer could be erased from public memory, recognition of the errands run by the majority of wives and mothers never even existed.

Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983) identifies the demise of home delivery services during the 1930s with an increase in the number of women behind the wheel. Once grocery stores and butcher shops eliminated deliveries in order to compete with supermarkets, the burden of providing transportation was shifted from the seller to the consumer—typically women. The perception that fewer women drove at mid-century may be due to the fact that fewer women than men were formally licensed, since a driver's license was not required in all states until 1954 (Nock 1993:57). In More Work for Mother,

Cowan notes that:

By mid-century the time that housewives had once spent in preserving strawberries and stitching petticoats was being spent in driving to stores, shopping, and waiting in lines... The automobile had become, to the American housewife of the middle classes, what the cast-iron stove in the kitchen would have been to her counterpart of 1850—the vehicle through which she did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could most often be found. (Cowan 1983:85)

The proportion of women with driver's licenses has risen in every age group and is especially notable among the elderly. Used car salesmen once promoted vehicles previously owned by little old ladies as real bargains: the cars had low mileage and were in mint condition because they'd been kept in the garage for many years. That stereotype has become less applicable as elderly women retain their licenses longer. In 1992, nearly 100 percent of men and 80 percent of women in their sixties had a valid driver's license, and licensing among seniors is expected to be nearly universal for both sexes by 2010 (Rosenbloom 1995b:3-14).

The increased independence that accompanies possession of a driver's license may come with a cost. The elderly are more likely now than in the past to rely on cars for transportation and less likely to walk (Rosenbloom 1995b). As older women drive more and walk less, the health benefits of walking (e.g. in the prevention of osteoporosis) may fade. Additionally, since car accidents are more likely to be fatal for older than younger persons, as more elderly women drive they will experience a greater risk of death by automobile than in the past. Finally, female drivers have an injury risk approximately 50 percent greater than male drivers, due partially to their shorter height (placing them closer to the steering wheel with a poorly-fitted seat belt). Since women tend to lose bone mass and actually become shorter as they age, vehicle characteristics that are inadequate for younger women may become even less satisfactory for older women (Stone 1996). Just as women's death rates from cancer increased as they copied men's smoking patterns, their death rates from automobile accidents may rise as they adopt men's driving (and drinking) habits.

AREAS OF CONTRAST

Women's and men's lives may be converging in reference to labor force participation, economic responsibility for children, and possession of a driver's license, but significant differences persist. Women are more likely than men to work part-time, to be responsible for child care and housework, and to perform tasks that are considered inherently "interruptible". The division of paid and unpaid labor and the assumption that women's work (paid or unpaid) can be interrupted may shape women's travel patterns in ways that men do not experience.

DIVISION OF PAID AND UNPAID LABOR

Employed mothers are now the rule rather than the exception, and the majority of mothers work part-time. In 1990, three-quarters of women with preschoolers and 60 percent of mothers with children aged 6 to 17 worked part-time. Although no statistics exist for father's labor force attachment, men are almost twice as likely as women to work full-time (Spain and Bianchi 1996:88,152). Women's greater reliance on part-time work means that their transit use is more likely to coincide with "off hours" than "peak hours" of operation.

The hours women spend in unpaid housework and child care are double those that men spend, while men spend almost twice the hours in paid labor that women do. This division of labor makes economic sense in a world in which women earn only 71 percent what men earn: if the wife works part-time, foregone earnings will be lower than if the husband works part-time. Yet this logic creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that penalizes women economically. Part-time employees receive fewer benefits, accrue less seniority, and earn lower wages than full-time employees. Further, following a strategy appropriate for a married-couple with children makes a woman more economically vulnerable if divorce or widowhood occurs (Spain and Bianchi 1996: Chapter Five).

Working part-time is one way in which employed mothers reconcile competing family and work obligations; another is the use of paid child care. All working mothers rely more on day care outside the home now than during the 1960s, and mothers who work full-time are most likely to use group facilities. Approximately one-quarter of children with mothers who work full-time are currently in group centers compared with 8 percent in 1965; 15 percent of the children whose mothers work part-time are in day care facilities compared with 3 percent in 1965 (Spain and Bianchi 1996:178). Travel to childcare facilities generates one more type of short-distance trip, which may partially account for the higher number of trips among both single and married mothers (Rosenbloom 1995a). [Interestingly, no census data exist for the childcare arrangements of working fathers, another indicator of the implicit assumptions about women's and men's different responsibilities.]

Child care facilities located at transit transfer stops may be one solution to this dilemma. Montgomery County, MD, a suburb of Washington, D.C., is trying this approach with its innovative KidStop, a child care facility built in 1994 at the Metrorail station. Funding was provided by the Foundation for Working Families, Inc., a public-private partnership of county government, the school system, and eleven area companies. The Foundation raised construction money that was matched by the state, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority gave the group a 30-year lease on 2.2 acres at one of its stations for \$10, and corporate donations allowed firms to reserve slots at the center for employee's children for the next ten years. Kidstop—dubbed “Kiss and Cry” rather than “Park and Ride” or “Kiss and Ride”—served 60 children that year and has capacity for 120. Similar efforts to simplify parents' schedules are being tried in Illinois and California (Daniels 1995).

Children can create travel demands by participating in organized recreation. As more mothers enter the labor force, fewer women are at home during the day to supervise children's play. The solution has been a “bureaucratization” of sports in which children join after-school teams for hockey, soccer, basketball, or swimming. Ironically, this alternative has proved double-edged, because practices and league tournaments create their own set of transportation requirements on weekdays and weekends. Since few cities provide public transportation that young children can use alone, and most suburbs require cars, the recreational needs of children soon generate travel demands on parents (Tranter 1994).

Limitations of urban and suburban structure play only one part in this web connecting children's needs with adult travel. Expectations of appropriate behavior for children and adults have also changed over time. When I was young I spent every summer on my grandparents' farm in North Carolina. My cousins (all boys) knew how to drive tractors and trucks by the time they were ten. By age sixteen they were driving school buses. Although contemporary city streets may be more dangerous than rural roads were thirty years ago, adolescents were expected to be self-sufficient and teenagers were expected to take responsibility for others when it came to transportation. Such assumptions freed adults for more important work. Now, however, adults (especially women) are responsible for their own paid and unpaid work and for ferrying children around (Rosenbloom 1995a).

Reduced responsibility for transportation is only one component of children's declining contribution to household chores (Goldscheider and Waite 1991).

The transportation implications of the division of domestic labor are that men can travel from home to work and directly back again, but women typically must combine commutes to work with trips to the dry-cleaner, grocery store, or day care center. Men's linear focus on reaching work and returning home would be a luxury for most women. Women's trips, like the rest of their lives, are characterized by interruptions.

THE INHERENT INTERRUPTIBILITY OF WOMEN'S WORK

Part of the reason "woman's work is never done" is that it is interrupted so often. Women who work as secretaries, teachers, and nurses hold "open floor" occupations that subject them to constant surveillance and frequent interruptions (Spain 1992). Women who perform unpaid work in the home are "on call" for spouses, children, and service or delivery people. Women working at home also are likely to be asked to pick up medicine for an elderly neighbor, drop books off at the library, or volunteer at a child's school (Milroy and Wismer 1994). These expectations and requests qualify as interruptions to daily routine even for the forty percent of adult women who are not in the labor force. For the sixty percent of women who are in the labor force, such activities constitute another way in which their paid work is interrupted. Telecommuting may prove to be the epitome of interruptible work.

Women (employed or not) may welcome such diversions as a way of caring for a family, maintaining friendships, or establishing relationships within the community. Nevertheless, added together they create time and travel demands that depart from the linear goal orientation that reaps rewards in the marketplace. For example, a man may use uninterrupted commuting time to prepare for or review the day's tasks, while a woman is more likely to be mentally reviewing the contents of her refrigerator to decide whether she has to stop for groceries on the way home.

Women's travel patterns reflect and reinforce the same message of interruptibility that characterizes their work. The fact that wives and mothers make more trips, but travel fewer miles than husbands and fathers, suggests that women are running numerous errands close to home (Rosenbloom 1995a). We do not know if trip-linking is more prevalent among women who work part-time than among those who work full-time. It is logical, however, to expect that the multiple trips made by women are generated by their greater flexibility in regard to structured work since women are more likely than men to work part-time. But similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy regarding trade-offs between household work and paid labor, once a wife's availability for errands is institutionalized (even on logical economic grounds that her time is worth less, financially, than her husband's), it is difficult to alter that pattern to free women for more remunerative pursuit.

CONCLUSION

Women face a delicate balancing act between home and work, and urban transportation systems can make their negotiations easier or more difficult. To the extent that women's lives are becoming more like men's, current arrangements premised on linear trips may suffice. Men and women are becoming more similar in regard to labor force participation, responsibility for a family, and possession of a driver's license. But to the extent that women's lives are still very different from men's, current systems are inadequate to their needs. Women, for example, are more likely than men to work part-time, to have responsibility for household chores and childcare, and to occupy an interruptible space. The result is that women need more travel flexibility than men.

Cars seem to provide that flexibility. Women are now navigating between the private and public spaces of cities the same way in which most men do—by private car—but they are also stopping in between in “meso-spaces” for activities that are neither completely private nor totally public. Cars are uniquely suited to move through this meso-space as small, enclosed, personalized containers. If public transit could meet women's needs to move in and out of family, voluntary, and employment spheres equally well, women might use it more.

Cars also allow women some control over whom they come into contact with, thus enhancing their sense of safety. Automobile advertisements that once promoted the pursuit of freedom to men now sell security to women. A recent television ad depicted a businesswoman leaving the airport and walking across an empty, rainy parking lot at night. She used her remote key to open the door and turn on the lights of her car, her “best friend” under such conditions. If public transit promised the same sense of protection, women might use it more.

Automobile manufacturers have done more than tap into women's search for safety. They have been quick to recognize the simultaneous demands on women's schedules and have adapted their marketing strategies accordingly. The minivan that holds several children in addition to groceries and pets is marketed to women while sports utility vehicles are marketed to men. The first image invokes responsibility and efficiency; the second image invites escape fantasies. A current television ad for a minivan begins with the observation that all species have to carry around their young; it starts with images of a lion carrying a cub in its mouth and ends with a minivan driving off into the sunset. If public transit recognized that females are still largely responsible for carrying around their young, women might use it more.

This paper began with the observation that women feel they must run constantly to keep up with the demands in their lives. In this scenario, private cars make more sense than public transit. To become relevant and useful to women, public transit must be flexible and safe. Such a system would go far toward allowing women the time to walk, not run, between their obligations.

These suggestions, however, only tinker with the margins of the transportation issues women face. The central question is really why, in the 1990s, women perform more of a balancing act than men. If women have special transportation needs because of their roles as wives, mothers, and employees, is it enough to adjust the small details of transportation to make daily life easier, or should women step back and reassess the whole system that requires such a balancing act?

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For example, if women perform more unpaid work than men because their time is worth less in the market, then the wage structure needs to be changed. If it is currently difficult to quantify the value of women's unpaid time, then measures need to be created that will add the value of women's family and volunteer activities to the equation used to calculate the productive time lost in traffic jams. Finally, we may expect too much from the public sector and demand too little from the private sector. If Cadillac could retool its production line at the turn of the century to market electric-starter (rather than crank-starter) cars to women, and if most automotive manufacturers can switch from stick-shift to automatic, why not also expect them to institute wage and family policies that insure comparable promotion opportunities for women and men, timely collection of child support, and childcare facilities or subsidies for employees?

A National Conference on Women's Travel Issues allows us to address both the large and small issues regarding women's balancing act. The short-term goal of such a conference is to improve parts of the transportation system that women depend on; the long-term goal should be to question the social system that has created difficulties for women in the first place.

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