

Transport as gendered employment practice in sub-Saharan Africa

Project Background Information/Introduction:

When it comes to gender equality in employment, transport as a sector has done very poorly. Overall employment statistics can be difficult to find in sub-Saharan Africa, given the informal nature of much employment but the fact remains that women are under-represented across the sector. The transport sector is a cornerstone of the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of goods and services. It further provides access to skills acquisition and income generation. The lack of visible female engagement in the transport sector has stemmed from a male-dominated and male-oriented system insensitive to gender-specific needs of half of the world's population. This has, in turn, impacted women's access to healthcare services, education opportunities, employment opportunities and on their general wellbeing.

The lack of visible female leadership in the transport sector has only served to further exacerbate the negative perception of women who are employed in the transport sector.

Negative perceptions about women's competencies in areas such as leadership, accounting, and mechanical/vehicle operation run deep and are perpetuated by both men and women. This project highlights some of the underlying barriers to women's success in the transport sector and some of the existing and potential opportunities for the advancement of gender equality.

Research Aim/Objectives/Questions/Hypotheses:

This project examines the factors influencing women to engage in employment in the transport sector in Sub-Saharan Africa with particular reference to Kenya. As a multi-disciplinary project, it approaches transport planning and development in particular with a focus on female transport engineers and transport planners and their engagement in this sector. Examining both government and private sector entities in the transport sector, the project will explore the barriers and opportunities women face in engaging in this sector in general and for women engineers in particular. It further queries the role of existing female entrepreneurs, leaders and engineers in this field in encouraging other women to engage in the transport sector. To do so, and with an ethnographic approach to the issue, the project examines the historical, social, economic, political and cultural factors at play in understanding the gendered nature of employment in the transport sector.

Data/Methods/Analysis:

Using an ethnographic and feminist approach, this research interrogates the experiences of women engaged in the transport sector to address the aforementioned questions. The project fieldwork takes place in Kenya, an economic and developmental hub for the East African region as well as a transport hub for road, rail, air and shipping routes.

This involves an extensive literature review, first of ethnographic and feminist methodology, then of various topics forming the context. This further includes a review of how female leaders and women in transport are portrayed in mainstream and social media.

The primary means of data collection, however, will remain participant observation and semi-structured interviews with mostly female and some male transport professionals including civil/structural engineers in the transport sector. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this also includes virtual interviews and meetings. Data collection will also include life history interviews with selected female transport engineers and transport planners. Qualitative data analysis including thematic coding will be used to establish key themes in the responses.

Contributions to the SDGs:

If gender equality as an SDG is to be achieved, women must be included in the transport sector and engaged not only as users, but planners and service providers among other roles (SDG 5). Employment in senior roles in the transport sector could also afford women a higher income and more decent jobs (SDG 8). It would further contribute to addressing poverty and social inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa (SDG 1 and 10) as well as contributing to sustainable cities by increasing the responsiveness of public transport to the needs of women (SDG 11).

Lessons learnt and key takes/reflections:

This project is intended to highlight a key gap in achieving gender equality in employment in a major economic sector. It also should be applicable to similar male-dominated fields and aid in understanding the general context for professional women in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those engaged in highly technical areas. Part of this context involves understanding the historical and current socio-political underpinnings of development and may provide some insights applicable to other targets for development in the region. Raising awareness of the relevance of gender equality in employment and particularly in the transport sector can inform policy trajectories and acknowledgement of the role that representation plays in social change.

Project Information:

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References:

The UKAid-funded Research for Community Access Partnership (RECAP) Gender Mainstreaming Research projects. (<http://www.research4cap.org/SitePages/GenderMainstreaming.aspx>)