

## When gender dictates mobility



**12:30 PM** No lunch. She's on her way to a medical appointment that has been postponed for weeks. Halfway there, the phone rings: it's the nursery. Her baby is sick and needs to be picked up. She turns around. Another missed session. Luckily, the grandparents agree to take over.

**2:00 PM** A hasty return to work. After wolfing down a sandwich, she sits down at her desk and works nonstop until late afternoon.

**5:30 PM** Third sprint: rush to school to pick up her elder child. Time is running out: if she's fifteen minutes late, her child will be standing outside alone. Then it's off to the supermarket. As she navigates the aisles, she juggles her bags and the notifications piling up on her phone.

**6:30 PM** Back home. Shopping, homework, dinner to prepare. The kitchen becomes a battlefield. At the same time, a washing machine to load, laundry to hang up. In her head, already thinking about tomorrow: medical appointments to book, forms to fill out, emails to send.

**9:00 PM** Finally, calm returns, the children are asleep. But there's no time to rest: there are work emails to answer, papers to file, accounts to check. The day isn't over yet; it drags on and on, endlessly. Claire goes to bed late, feeling like she's been running from morning to night, always racing around between emergencies, always with the feeling that time never really belongs to her..

Claire shares this typical day with thousands of women. Every minute counts, and mobility is at the heart of this equation. When transportation is irregular, complex, or poorly designed, it adds a layer of stress and fatigue to a day that is sometimes already saturated. Transport operators therefore play a key role: making every trip smooth, safe, fast, frequent, and reassuring.

A qualitative study conducted by Keolis, in collaboration with Nova 7, surveyed several women across France to understand their mobility: identify what makes it unique, its obstacles, and its drivers. This large-scale study highlighted key features and identified major pointers by which to comprehend the specific nature of gendered mobility.

### Preamble

## An ordinary day, or the art of chasing after time

**6:15 AM** The alarm clock rings. Claire opens one eye, her head already full of things to do as a single mother: make breakfast, get the kids dressed, check their school bags, remember to do the laundry she forgot the night before. Before she even gets out of bed, her day has begun.

**8:00 AM** First sprint: drop the children off. One at school, the other at daycare. Two trips, two goodbyes, two races against the clock. In the crowded bus, the school bags and nappy bag weigh heavily. So do the stares. An inappropriate comment from a stranger this morning: "With a smile, you could brighten my day." Not abusive, not serious, some would say, but enough to remind her that she is never completely out of harm's way, never invisible.

**8:30 AM** Off to work. Connections, crowded stairs, a missed train: nothing unusual. She arrives with her mind already saturated, but relieved to be on time.

### Gender and Mobility : A collective oversight

For many, the issue of gender and mobility seems non-existent at first glance, and the obstacles to women's mobility are not immediately apparent. Some women claim that they experience mobility "just like men," while others acknowledge the constraints but consider them "normal."

« There is no difference between men and women; we are all on an equal footing. »

A woman living in Tours

Men, too, share this denial :

« Honestly, I don't see any difference. »

A man living in Tours

However, of learning to ride a bike as a child to the slower mobility of old age, women experience ways of getting around that are deeply influenced by their gender. Each stage of life brings its own set of constraints, but also strategies and adaptations.

### A relationship with mobility that evolves according to life stages:



#### The family sphere, the first gendered framework for mobility

From childhood, experiences of mobility are shaped by the role of parents and associated memories:

"I used to ride my bike with my dad. He would take me to my friends' houses and I would follow him like that. Then he would come back to pick me up the same way." A woman under 30, Lille

Mobility is partly shaped by the habits we had as children and the memories we retain of them. For some, mobility will revolve around the car, while for others it will revolve around the hardships (and joys) of always getting around on foot or public transport.

"When I was younger, I used to take public transport with my father to go to the Festival of Lights. I remember there were a lot of people. In Lyon, at least, you quickly feel suffocated. And now, when I go back to Lyon, I can't stand it anymore." A woman living with a partner and children, Servas

Childhood is considered to be a particularly mobile period, marked by active lifestyles. Walking and cycling are fun ways for children to exercise and begin to develop independence in their travel habits (walking short distances home after school, running small errands by bike, etc.).

" My father used to take us on lots of trips by tram, bus, and underground, and we loved it as children. I have memories of that, and I can see that my children love it too. For example, we would go into town, and he would take us by bus because he knew we liked it "

A pregnant woman, Bron

When cycling, it is crucial to feel comfortable. However, as they grow up, girls, whose expectations are shaped by discretion and caution, will find it more difficult to incorporate cycling into their daily routine. A lack of self-confidence or a refusal to take risks can then have a negative impact on riding and reduce the use of bicycles for everyday travel. Boys, on the other hand, who are known for being "daredevils" and more adventurous, find cycling to be an ideal way to assert themselves.

From an early age, girls are made aware of the dangers of public spaces. Whereas boys are encouraged to explore, girls learn to avoid risk rather than confront it. This early conditioning sets the stage for the tactics they will develop later in life.

"My little brother has more freedom even though he's two years younger than me. They don't trust me even though I've never caused any trouble, but they trust him even though he has."

(Study on the mobility patterns of secondary school students – Nova7)



### Adolescence, when gender starts to matter

Adolescence is a real turning point. With the appearance of their "first curves" and social pressure to "look good," teenage girls become more vulnerable to inappropriate comments and gestures. To protect themselves, they develop a whole arsenal of strategies: wearing headphones without music to appear unapproachable, wearing loose-fitting clothes, changing their routes, or favouring modes of transport considered safer. These are all discreet tactics, but they reveal a form of constant vigilance against the risk of unwanted interactions.

"The first time I took the underground, I wasn't afraid. I started to feel afraid when someone groped my bum, or someone made an allusion. I realized that when people see me, they can quickly sexualise me. It changed the way I use public transport, the way I dress, things like that" A woman under 30, Lille

At the same time, those "first times" alone on public transport are experienced as true rites of passage, symbols of independence. But this independence remains limited in rural areas, where teenage girls depend on their parents' driving licences.

"When you're a teenager, you're really dependent on your parents. If they can't drive, you're in trouble. Even when I took my driving test, my mother had to drive me there" Aïda, a pregnant woman, Bron

### Student life and working life, progressive autonomy (with the car as a focal point)

In early adulthood, the desire for freedom that profoundly influences young women's mobility can finally be expressed in tangible terms. This stage is often marked by a broadening of possibilities.



In exploring these new spaces, young people also discover new opportunities for going out and having fun. From the point of view of mobility, these opportunities bring with them instances of insecurity. Vigilance is the watchword during these social occasions. With nobody looking out for them, young women fend for themselves, even if this involves a form of acceptance that their gender limits their scope for exploration.

"I chose this place because I was looking for somewhere that was easy to come home to when I went out at the weekend, no more than a 20-minute walk away when public transport had stopped running. I was right next to Lille-Europe station. I go out in Old Lille and it takes me 20 minutes on foot" A woman under 30, Lille

Commuting to and from work, which then determines daily mobility, also takes shape during this period of entering working life. Very often, a job means a car. The sequence "driving licence - graduation - first job - purchase of a vehicle" seems to be relatively common.

"I eventually passed my driving test, which helped me find work. It's essential nowadays. I'm a carer, and in some towns there are no buses, so I need to have a vehicle in the countryside" Véronique, with a partner and children, Agen



### The couple, sharing mobility, really?

To understand mobility, one must understand all lifestyles. Domestic tasks are a determining factor in how and if both genders travel. Statistics reveal the extent of inequality and confirm that the home is still markedly the domain of women.

*In France, women spend an average of 206 minutes per day on domestic tasks, compared to only 111 minutes for men. (Barcelona Demographic Studies Centre - 2024).*

Car ownership is often one of the attributes of couples, especially those with children: 96% of couples with at least one child own a car, compared to a national average of 84% (INSEE, 2018). However, the use of this vehicle is also marked by certain gendered patterns.

For women who use cars, it is often a vehicle employed for complex and exhausting step-by-step trips that require the ability to move quickly and independently.



### Being a mother, travelling for others

From pregnancy to their children's independence, the daily lives of most women are deeply structured by this mobility "for others."

*Among young women (aged 25-34), 58% agree that family should come before career (compared to 46% of women on average) (HCE, 2024). Women are four times more likely than men to work part-time, rising to seven times more likely when they have children.*

In eight out of ten cases, single-parent families consist of a single mother with one or more children. (INSEE 2022).

For pregnant women, the fact that seats are theoretically reserved for them on public transport can partially change their experience of public transport. They feel somewhat protected by this form of "privilege." However, for the majority of respondents, pregnancy is a period of life during which they are much less mobile.

"When I was pregnant, I felt protected and bolder. People were more respectful." **A middle aged woman**

Whether they drive, walk or take public transport, women's mobility is shaped by the various elements of this cognitive load, which leaves little time for other horizons.

As a result, women adopt the motion of hyper-proximity: they work closer to home in order to carry out family activities nearby: they do more shopping, take the children to school and to extracurricular activities, etc.

"Within a couple, I think men don't perceive cars the same way we women do. We see the practical side; they see the pleasure"

**Woman living in Épinal**

"He usually drives, unless we're going out for drinks or dinner, in which case I drive so he can drink."

**Woman living in Tours**

*Women have an average of 9 hours less free time per week than men (32 hours compared to 41 hours) (Forum vies mobiles 2024).*

From the moment their child is born, mothers' mobility is directly impacted. Travel then becomes focused on others: we no longer travel just for ourselves.

This increased responsibility has led to changes in the behaviour of women drivers. When driving, they adopt a safer driving style. And, in the name of caution, some choose to give up cycling or public transport.

"The biggest change in my driving habits has been my children. You tell yourself, 'I'm not responsible just for myself anymore.' When I was young, I used to drive really, really fast. When I had to install a child seat, I stopped. I think that shift has been less pronounced for my partner." **A woman from Épinal**

*The arrival of a child profoundly disrupts women's mobility. The average distance travelled for leisure activities falls to 38.5 kilometres, 20% less than for women without children, while it remains unchanged for men. Even more striking is that over a week, the distances travelled plummet to 100 kilometres, a 40% drop, while those of men remain stable (Forum Vies Mobiles, 2024).*



### Senior citizens, a new momentum for mobility

Usually associated with reduced mobility, the third age (taking retirement as starting point) is marked by profound changes. Whether it is "leisure mobility" made possible by the end of the home-work routine, or mobility resulting from the need for independence and transport accessibility, the mobility of the women interviewed is undergoing a period that is just as complex as that of their "working life."

*In France, the number of people aged 65 and over has increased significantly, with a marked acceleration since 2011 and the arrival of the baby boomers in this age group. Currently, people aged 65 and over make up around 21% of the population (57% women and 43% men); by 2050, this figure could rise to 28% in France.*

The mobility of senior citizens is partly affected by accessibility and health constraints. Age can sometimes make people more fragile.

"I don't know how I see my future mobility, I already have a lot of health issues. We'll see if we can still get around when we're 90. I walk as much as possible because I'm starting to become disabled. And it's true that I worry, the day I can no longer walk will be really terrible for me."

#### A retired woman from Chambéry

This fear of loss of independence thus leads to a certain dependence on public transport. This more anxious relationship then leads to even higher expectations of transport services. Considering one's future mobility also means thinking about the services that will support a possible loss of independence.

"For retired people, like my grandmother who lives in Velpo, she used to take that line all the time, which served all the key points. Now she has to take two buses. It's not convenient and it's very limiting."

#### A woman living in Tours

*Over the age of 75, 77% of men compared to only 39% of women say they have a driving licence and drive regularly.*

Time is also a key factor in this mobility among older people. Having more time means returning to a pace that only childhood allowed to some extent.

Walking is the symbol of high-quality, conscious mobility that "takes its time." Walking is therefore a key way to understand the mobility of senior women whose physical condition allows them to get around easily.



For these same women, cycling often becomes a rediscovery.

"It was when I arrived in Touraine that, for the first time in my life, I discovered cycling on bike paths. I took my mother's bike and rode it for the first time in my life. I discovered the life of a retiree." **A woman living in Tours**

Finally, some older women consider themselves less prone to insecurity because of their distance in age from the "core of desirability." While a teenage body is perceived by respondents as the "ideal prey," the aging body is considered the furthest from this objectifying gaze (with the exception of the pregnant body, which is also somewhat desexualised).

"I think I've reached an age where they're less interested in me. But the stress is still there, it's always there. It was such a traumatic experience, and I'm sure that they're no longer interested in me either. Being attacked is no small thing. But maybe I feel safer now." **A woman living in Rennes**



### Other factors that accompany women throughout their lives, women-specific health conditions

Gynecological complications, miscarriage, painful periods, endometriosis, menopause, and prolapse are all events biologically specific to the female body that can hinder mobility.

"I had bouts of endometriosis, then it went away. When it was very severe, I couldn't even stand up straight and I couldn't walk. For me it was occasional, but for others who have it all the time, it must really prevent them from walking." **Josephine, an endometriosis sufferer, Paris**

*Period pain (also known as dysmenorrhea) is the leading cause of school absenteeism among teenage girls and work absenteeism among young women: 50 to 70% of teenage girls experience painful periods on a regular or occasional basis. (Ameli)*

### Being a caregiver, the impact on daily life

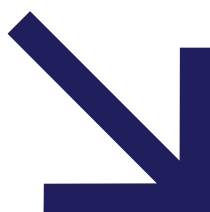
Overrepresented in care professions (carers, nurses, human resources managers, education sector, etc.), women must not only balance their mobility with their own responsibilities (or even vulnerabilities), but must also often take into account the vulnerabilities of their loved ones.

*It is estimated that 60% of caregivers are women, even though they represent only 52% of adults in France.*

*96% of people who stop working to care for a child or parent are women (INSEE 2018).*

"I came to Touraine ten years ago just to take care of my aging parents, and I put them in a retirement home in Rochecorbon. They have since passed away, so I'm going to move back to Paris where my children are."

**A woman living in Tours**



### Facilitating mobility, a central challenge

Women's mobility, although often invisible in public discourse, harbours complex dynamics influenced by social expectations and specific constraints, family role, and specific constraints. The gendered characteristics of mobility appear from childhood and evolve throughout life, from adolescence to old age. Challenges include reactions to social norms, managing cognitive load, and taking into account other factors such as health or caregiving responsibilities.

To improve women's travel experience, mobility systems and public spaces must be designed to be more inclusive and meet everyone's needs. Mobility systems and public spaces must be designed to be more inclusive and meet everyone's needs.

Our priorities must focus on enhancing the attractiveness and continuity of public transport services, taking into account the diversity and complexity of lifestyles (longer service hours, non-standard and irregular schedules). Particular attention must be paid to the fluidity of connections and coordination between modes, in order to shorten waiting times, especially when bus services are infrequent.

In addition, running communication campaigns to empower each citizen and promote community spirit, encouraging passengers to look out for one another (such as the 5D method), and deploying a visible and available human presence throughout the journey, are all essential measures to reinforce women's sense of security on public transport.

Finally, we have a role to play in encouraging women to cycle, by supporting groups that promote learning to ride a bike, repair workshops dedicated to women, and more broadly by supporting the teaching of mobility skills from childhood (for example, as in the case of school visits in the Paris region).