



# How Cycling Gave Women Freedom

In our world, both little boys and girls are given bicycles as a matter of course. We encourage our sons and daughters to embrace the joy of cycling. We have long forgotten that cycling for females was a hard-won right. A mere 100 years ago, it was scandalous even inconceivable that women could have any more than a nodding acquaintance with a bicycle,



**“Let me tell you ...**  
what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel...the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood.”

—Susan Brownell Anthony was a prominent American civil rights leader who played a pivotal role in the 19th century women's rights movement to secure women's suffrage in the United States.

A two-wheeled bicycle made its initial appearance in 1817 and reappeared in the early 1860s with a wooden frame, steel wheels, pedals and a fixed gear system. By 1870 spoked wheels were developed and frames were being made of metal which was stronger and lighter than wood.

With the invention of the “Safety,” a bicycle with a chain drive, normal sized wheels and a diamond frame, followed by the introduction of a step-through frame, bicycles could safely be ridden by women. Bicycles

paper in 1895, noted, “she is riding to greater freedom, to a nearer equality with man, to the habit of taking care of herself, and to new views on the subject of clothes. This change coincided with three separate political movements – suffragism, the civil rights movement, and socialism – and all were using bicycles within their newly public campaigns.

For the suffragettes, cycling gave women previously unknown independence, mobility, and connections. It offered fast transportation and required no maintenance or expensive upkeep. It also highlighted the oppressive link between fashion and politics for women. Just imagine a woman in a high collared, corseted torso and long heavy skirt riding up a one-in-



became an enormous cultural and political force, and an emblem of women's rights. (This is made even more impressive by the fact that public washrooms for women, were few and far between.) “The Columbian news-



## Bella Bicicletta is celebrating it's 5th year on June 23rd!



"Bella" is a unique annual cycling event in the Comox Valley where 100 women ride 100 kilometers together. The women are provided 3 amazing refueling stations along the route (complete with great food & cheerleading volunteers) and then ride right into celebratory finish line party. Bella is not a race nor is it competitive. It is an opportunity for women to get out on their bikes and feel exceptionally proud of what they and other women accomplish.

**"Women...** who, at first glance, would not appear able to complete such an athletic feat, passed the finish line a smile of pride and triumph..."  
Andrea Lang, Participant

It is a supportive group of women, from elite athletes to recreational riders, cycling together and feeling strong, united, safe, connected. Bella Bicicletta is also very linked to our community - it has tremendous support from local businesses and also gives back to the community by offering cycling workshops and donating to Lilli House.

Kelly & Gillian, the organizers, work to educate and inspire women to cycle. For more information see their facebook page: Bella Bicicletta or email them at : [cvbellabicicletta@gmail.com](mailto:cvbellabicicletta@gmail.com)

five gradient on a bicycle.



The accident issue was a real one. The solution? Bicycling bloomers, or a "bicycling costume," as it was known at the time. These still went to the ankles, and were quite voluminous, but they allowed more movement and were far safer.

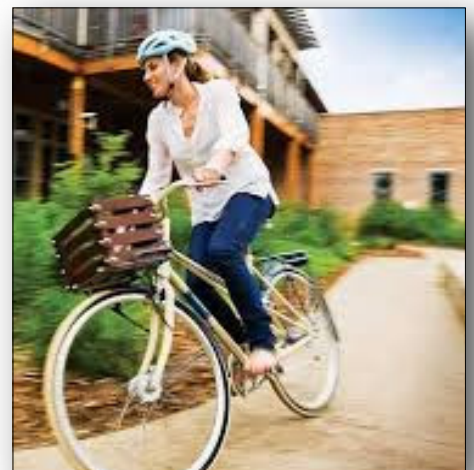


Although cyclists like Tillie Anderson, who competed during the late-19th-century women's racing craze, wore clothing more appropriate for the sport women were still going against convention which dictated that they not exercise, exert themselves, show their ankles, and most importantly, never sit astride. During the 1890s, when bicycling exploded in popularity among the middle and upper classes in the United Kingdom, there was an outpouring of moral

panic and journalists and others condemned female cyclists for their wantonness. Women on bicycles were pelted with objects and obscenities. These women, unchaperoned, could be pedaling away to engage in prostitution or lesbianism. However, the popularity of the bicycle increased, and it is estimated that by 1895, there were an estimated 10,000 "wheelmen" and wheelwomen" in Toronto. At the same time bicycle racing become very popular as a spectator sport as early as 1868 and the first ladies' race was held in Bordeaux in 1868 despite all the societal conventions.

The bicycle promoted the emancipation of workers, and it did the same for women; they rode bikes and continued to do so until the bicycle lost importance in the years following World War II.

However, despite the hard-won victories and changes in societal norms, the latest figures show a big gender divide when it comes to cycling. About 50% fewer women than men cycle twice a week or more, and when it comes to cycling on the roads, the number drops again. Why? It turns out that women today still face barriers to cycling.







### Advice for the female rider in 1895

- \* Don't boast of your long rides
- \* Don't cultivate a "bicycle face"
- \* Don't refuse assistance up a hill
- \* Don't use bicycle slang. Leave that to the boys
- \* Don't go out after dark without a male escort
- \* Don't scratch a match on the seat of your bloomers
- \* Don't appear in public until you have learned to ride well
- \* Don't appear to be up on "records" and "record smashing." That is sporty

-Source: New York World 1895



Commonly cited reasons for shunning the benefits of getting into the saddle include sexual harassment, fears about appearance, lack of cycling infrastructure and concerns about safety. Women cyclists experience a lot of comments, some of it's general, anti-cyclist stuff but sometimes it's really mean. One woman reported that a motorbiker slapped her on the bum. It was frightening and dangerous."

Another concern for many female cyclists is road safety. Women tend to be more concerned than men, one report noted, and those fears are perfectly rational. Roads aren't always safe for cyclists - and you need to be confident to go on the roads. Throw sexual harassment into the mix and is it any wonder many women are reluctant to get on their bikes? So, what can be done to get more women on their bikes and out on the road?

Tackling sexist attitudes among male road users would be a first step. Nasty comments both from male drivers as they are overtaking and even male cyclists who have been sexist and patronising. What is seen by some men as harmless fun can be unnerving, frightening and confidence-draining for women.

Another oft cited reason given by working women, especially mothers, is that it was almost impossible to add cycling into their daily routines. Not counting the complications of getting children to child care, women have to figure out ways to get ready for work after a commute - washing, figuring out how to dry their hair and do their make-up - all in the confines of small, shared washroom space.

Appearance is an important issue for women while there are



Remember the fun you had when you didn't worry about how you looked.

worries among some about ability. Women who've had bad experiences of sport at school, or feel they're unable to get fit, or aren't sure how to change a tire or work out the gears on a bike, can feel intimidated.

Lastly, women are stopped by their priorities and feel guilty if they do exercise, thus taking some 'me' time. Ironically, societal norms and attitudes are still presenting barriers.

So, how do we change this and cycle more? Take your bike out for a ride ladies! Recall how it felt to not worry about how you looked. Feel the joy and freedom of your bicycle. You, and the many women who fought for the right to enjoy cycling, have earned it.

