

Enabling women to become Motorcycle Taxi Operators: Opportunities and Obstacles in Rural Liberia

Key policy recommendations

- ▶ The spread of motorcycle taxi (MCT) services into rural Liberia has transformed rural access and mobility opportunities for villagers. **Women are key beneficiaries of MCT services.** MCTs have provided a significant step-up in local market integration and are offering easy and quick access to (maternal) health facilities, which should be supported by appropriate ministerial departments.
- ▶ Donors and the national governments should take a more active approach in promoting the spread of MCT services in rural areas. The provision of MCT services is **a low cost but effective means of achieving a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**
- ▶ As prime users of MCT services, some women have expressed an interest in **becoming MCT operators themselves.** An enabling finance and training environment for women riders should therefore be provided by the authorities.
- ▶ A key obstacle in realising this is **lack of capital to purchase a motorcycle.** Business people are reluctant to rent out motorcycles to women, since there are no successful precedents. But in some Asian countries, female MCT or motor tricycle taxi operators are quite common. To replicate and kick-start this in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), **a credit scheme for the purchase of motorcycles by women** could be established.
- ▶ To further facilitate the spontaneous spread of MCT services in rural SSA, **rural footpaths should be upgraded to motorcycle accessible tracks.** This can complement or be an alternative to the much more expensive construction of feeder roads.
- ▶ **Women should be allowed** to participate in the track construction process through labour based works. This will enable them to save money to start-up businesses or expand their income-generating activities, such as through cash-crop farming. In turn, women will benefit from increased opportunities for access and mobility that these tracks create.
- ▶ **The construction of tracks should be a community owned and driven process.** This can be ensured by setting up or training existing community-based organisations.

MCTs in rural Liberia: male operators, but female users

The spontaneous introduction and spread of motorcycle taxis (MCT) after the civil war in Liberia (1989-2003) has dramatically changed the public transport services sector. The transformation they have brought to rural areas is particularly noticeable. Prior to their introduction, rural dwellers often had to walk for hours and head load any freight. In the best case, one or two car taxis may have visited the village on a market day, if it was fortunate enough to have a motorable road. Lack of access and mobility is often a significant barrier for market integration: why produce cash-crops if only small quantities can be transported to markets at one time? Moreover, head loading is traditionally a women's mode of transporting water and firewood, and for undertaking domestic chores, which can add additional time pressures to women in particular. It is therefore no surprise that women have embraced the motorcycle taxi phenomenon. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, women make up about half of all MCT passengers, with this number further increasing during market days. Yet, with so many female passengers, it seems unusual that there are no female MCT operators.

Figure 1: Female Passengers using a Motorcycle Taxi¹



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Key findings and observations

A 2017 study funded by ReCAP identified the obstacles and barriers women in rural Liberia face in becoming MCT riders. To do so, the research team conducted female and

¹ ReCAP does not promote or endorse unsafe motorcycle practices, and advocates the use of helmets and no more than one rider and passenger on a motorcycle.

male focus group discussions, operator and user surveys, and traffic counts in rural parts of Nimba County, Northern Liberia. Some of the data was collected in an area hosting a pioneering GIZ-funded ‘upgrading footpaths to motorcycle-accessible tracks’ pilot project. The project connects remote villages to the feeder road network via tracks, using locally sourced labour and materials. The pilot project ensured that both men and women had the opportunity to be involved. The research assessed whether women’s involvement in track construction in turn made them more likely to indicate that they were interested in taking up commercial motorcycle riding.

Table 1: Motorcycle Taxi Users in Rural Liberia (12 hour traffic count) on Feeder Road (Doumpa) and not yet fully constructed track (Gogoin)

Location/ Passengers	Gogoin (Market Day)	Gogoin (Non- Market Day)	Doumpa (Market Day)	Doumpa (Non- Market Day)
Passengers	19	25	104	12
Men	7 (37%)	10 (40%)	28 (27%)	7 (58%)
Women	9 (47%)	10 (40%)	66 (63%)	3 (25%)
Children	3 (16%)	5 (20%)	10 (10%)	2 (27%)

MCTs’ contribution to rural women’s socio-economic development

Women in rural Liberia universally praise the MCT for providing quicker and more convenient access to local markets, health facilities, educational facilities for their children and public services. Those communities that can be reached by MCT have undergone a significant transformation: *Because of the visit of [motorcycle taxis] to the community we are now able to get frozen fish and rice.*² More women have been able to become (part-time) petty traders: *[Motorcycle taxis] have enabled us to do petty trading, so everybody is doing their little business.*

Figure 2: MCTs in a Village Recently Connected by a Track



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Another major positive contribution of rural MCT services is the access they provide in case of medical emergencies: *Because of the visit of [motorcycle taxis] to the community we are now able to get quick treatment, and there are less sicknesses.* Access to maternal health has also increased: *Some pregnant women have gone to hospital on [motorcycle taxis] and given birth safely.* In Liberia rural dwellers cannot afford to let their children take MCTs to school. But it was observed that as soon as there is motorised access to a village, public services (including teachers) are more likely to come to and stay in the community.

Women as motorcycle taxi operators

Given that women are heavy users of MCT services and given the good money that can be made as a motorcycle taxi operator, it is worth assessing why this is still a male only occupation. A good number of women in the focus group discussions expressed an interest in becoming an MCT operator themselves: *If I was a rider I could buy my own items instead of giving money to other riders to buy things for me.* Others were supportive of the idea of female riders, arguing that they would be much safer riders: *[If women were to ride] you would only find one woman having had an accident, if you came back to count after a year; I would choose the female rider [because] women would take their time when riding because women are always careful in things like that.* Interestingly, this perception was also expressed by the male focus group: *Women would ride more carefully.* MCTs are often disliked by Road Safety Authorities and in some cases banned from operating in certain areas because they are associated with high numbers of traffic accidents. In one of the communities, out of the 27 participants in the women’s focus group, 24 indicated that they would choose a woman operator over a male operator, if it was

² All statements are from female focus group discussions, unless stated differently.

possible. Many women showed an interest in becoming MCT operators and a surprisingly large number (although still a minority) of men were not averse to the idea of female MCT operators. But there were several reasons raised by both the men and women why there are no female motorcycle taxi operators.

Figure 3: Passenger who has Disembarked for a Narrow Water-crossing



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Some reasons focused on the strength that is required to balance a heavily loaded motorcycle on the narrow and often muddy footpaths or roads. Others mentioned the risks associated with mechanical failures: *[Women] are not strong enough to deal with breakdowns in risky areas or far away.* Others saw (traditional) values as a major obstacle: *I am the only girl in the family so I should stay at home; Husbands and boyfriends would be very jealous because they would think that another man might approach their woman.* This was also a commonly expressed sentiment in the male focus groups: *No, women should be involved in domestic work; No, she would not have respect for her husband.* Women were also worried about the risk of being sexually harassed if becoming an operator, perhaps based on their experiences as a user: *[Riding is risky] because of sexual harassment while carrying male passengers in [isolated] areas.* Using MCT operators who are known to the community (preferably a resident MCT operator) or in the case of female operators, only providing services to someone known to the operator may limit the risk of sexual harassment.

Women's involvement in motorcycle track construction

With the majority of motorised transport in rural Liberia now taking place by motorcycle taxi, it is an opportunity to reassess rural road infrastructure planning and construction. Upgrading existing footpaths between villages and from villages to the existing rural road network to tracks that can be navigated by motorcycle taxis is on average about 10 to 20 times cheaper than

feeder road construction per kilometre. If only the bottlenecks are addressed, such as water-crossings or a slippery section, this could be reduced even further.

Figure 4: Feeder Roads Require Expensive Bridges



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Moreover, by using local labour and materials, the majority of the allocated budget will be spent in the community, providing a significant cash injection (Jenkins and Peters, 2016). In Liberia, about a third of the male population between 15 and 25 years is involved in the motorcycle taxi sector (Gzeh et al, 2012). Rural track construction and maintenance would generate even more jobs: directly in construction and by opening up areas which could previously not be reached by motorcycles, allowing for further growth of MCT jobs. The GIZ-funded and Global Communities implemented 'Participatory Access to Transport for Health' (PATH) project saw the construction of approximately 25 km of motorcycle tracks which connected three different village clusters to the established road network.

Figure 5: A Footpath to Track Upgrade

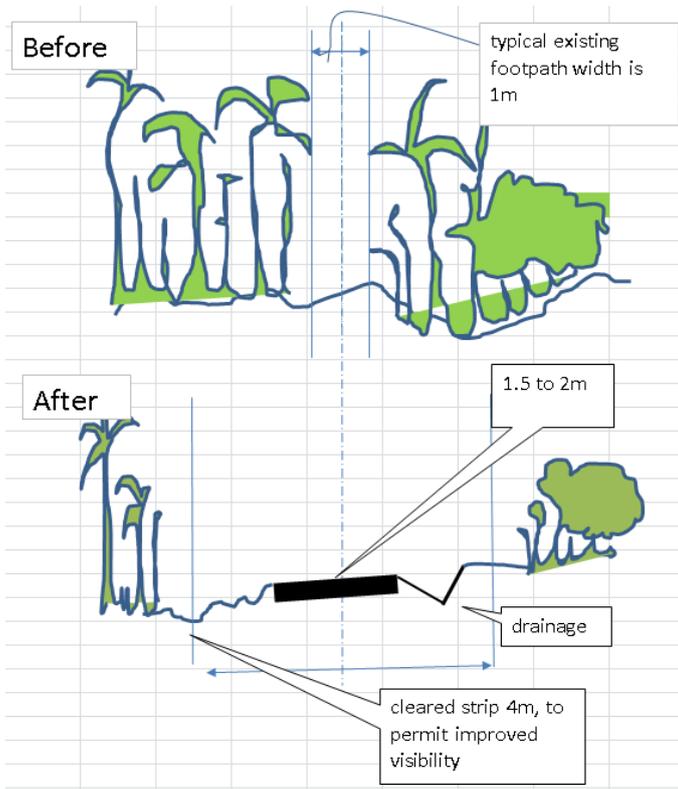


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Both men and women were involved in (and paid for) clearing and levelling; de-stumping; digging drainage canals; hauling gravel; and building bridges. Most of these tasks require little skill, but building bridges and operating a chainsaw require some training. According to a woman who was part of a bridge-building team: *This*

bridge construction made me understand that in any technical job, women can do as good a job as men. Really, women could build such a bridge all by themselves, that is what I believe. We can even operate a power-saw. She continues to explain how this one-time cash injection will change her work as a farmer in the future: *I worked for 45 days on the project now and it gives me US\$3.50 each day. [For that daily wage] I can hire about 3 labour days of farm work. And these are young and strong men working on my farm. This has allowed me to expand my farm and I know that next year it would be much easier to transport my produce to the market now that motorcycles can reach here with the new track. Before, it was just me head-loading everything, and there is not much you can take on your head.*

Figure 6: from Footpath to Track



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While only a few men and women worked on the more skilled jobs, even the women who worked on the low-skilled jobs benefited from the track construction: *Some [women] used it to pay for school fees or to buy extra food, but there are a few who started a business with the money, particularly if they could work on the tracks for a good number of days. Once they have a business going, they join a savings club to let the money grow further. Men do not do that. Some men just bought alcohol.* The involvement of women in track construction does not directly result in women taking up the MCT profession. However, there is some tentative evidence that in the track construction locations more women indicate that

they would like to become MCT operators, as compared to the focus groups conducted in the area where no track construction was taking place. This could be further stimulated by handing over the cargo motor tricycle used in track construction to a women's cooperative at the end of the project. What our data clearly shows is the positive and transformative nature of rural motorcycle taxi services for women.

Figure 7: Newly Constructed Bridge with Old Footbridge Alongside



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Summary of Project/Background

ReCAP commissioned Swansea University, AKA Research and LIDA Liberia to undertake a gender mainstreaming project in Liberia that would establish the main barriers and challenges women experience in becoming motorcycle riders in rural settings and how these can be overcome through training, credit, awareness, and policy change. A detailed study of female motorcycle taxi riders and female passengers in the rural areas of Nimba County, Northern Liberia was conducted using a mixed methods approach (qualitative and quantitative data collection methods).

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