

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

Key policy recommendations

- ▶ The introduction of motorcycle taxi (MCT) services in rural Sierra Leone has transformed access and mobility opportunities for villagers. MCT services have enabled a big step-up in local market integration and are offering easy and quick access to (maternal) health facilities. **Women are the key beneficiaries** and should be supported in accessing MCTs as users and operators.
- ▶ The expansion of MCT services are a **low cost but effective means of achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development**. Donors and the national government should actively look for opportunities to promote the spread of MCT services in rural areas.
- ▶ As prime users of MCT services, women have expressed an interest in becoming MCT operators themselves. **Key obstacles** to realising this goal are the lack of capital to purchase a motorcycle and/or the reluctance of business people to lease out motorcycles. Government support for the provision of finance should be provided to women in order to achieve this goal.
- ▶ To promote the spread of female operated MCTs (and cargo motor tricycles), a **credit scheme** for women cooperatives for the purchase of these intermediate forms of transport by women should be promoted. Driving lessons, in collaboration with MCT unions, are also necessary.
- ▶ The use of MCT services by women and their collaboration with MCT operators for petty trade/business activities have contributed to **women's empowerment**. This has led to deep socio-economic and cultural transformations, breaking with traditional (and sometimes oppressive) patrimonial village structures.
- ▶ Other development interventions can learn from or even piggy-back on the MCT phenomenon, as **affordable and accessible transport services are essential** and both a prerequisite as well as catalyst for socio-economic development in rural areas.

MCTs in rural Sierra Leone: male operators, but female users

Motorcycle taxis have become a common form of intermediate transport in many parts of rural Africa. They give villagers easier access to local markets, health and educational facilities. In Sierra Leone, the spontaneous – i.e. market-driven – introduction and spread of MCTs started after the civil war (1991-2002) ended. First operating in urban centres, they soon spread into rural areas. Due to their linear design¹ and surprisingly large passenger and/or freight carrying capacity, they quickly replaced more conventional forms of transport. Where villages were connected to the main road network by no more than footpaths, MCTs brought motorised transport opportunities for the first time. Nearly all motorcycle taxi operators are males, often serving a significant female clientele. So what is the gender impact of motorcycle taxis in rural Sierra Leone? That is, what are women's needs for and use of this intermediate mode of transport? And what are the main barriers and challenges women experience in becoming motorcycle riders in rural settings?

Figure 1: Female Passengers Negotiating a Motorcycle Taxi Fare



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¹ Motorcycles are two wheeled vehicles and can negotiate off-road and narrow footpaths.

Key findings and observations²

The 2017 study identified obstacles and barriers that women in rural Sierra Leone face in becoming MCT riders. Female and male focus group discussions, operator and user surveys, and traffic counts were undertaken within rural communities in the Moyamba, Kenema, and Bombali Districts of Sierra Leone. The Bombali district study (in the Northern Province) illustrates, among other things, the impact of rural motorcycle riding on the previously rather inaccessible areas of a large-scale agricultural (bio-fuel) plantation. The case study in Moyamba district (Southern District) was conducted in an area in which a local initiative over the last four decades has opened up a previously inaccessible and subsistence-oriented farming district to road transportation. A case study from Kenema district (Eastern District) considers an area that was a major focus of rebel activity in the civil war, and where the scars of war are still prominent.

Table 1: MTC Passenger Responses - Benefits of MTCs

MTC Passengers on Surveyed Road	Kenema District (n = 50, male = 7)	Moyamba District (n = 61, male = 18)	Bombali District (n = 31, male = 16)
SOS ride possible?	38 (76%)	38 (62%)	23 (74%)
Resident MCT in community?	40 (80%)	40 (66%)	28 (90%)
Better access to market?	38 (76%)	56 (92%)	25 (81%)
Better access to health?	21 (42%)	35 (57%)	20 (65%)

MCTs contribution to rural women’s socio-economic development

Women in rural Sierra Leone 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 are accessible by MCT have undergone a large transformation: *During the hungry period in August, we give money to okada [MCT] men to buy food and bring it*

*for us. Going to get it will cost me more because I have to pay for myself [two ways] and the load [back]. [Instead] I just pay for the load one way.*³ The possibility to use MCTs for courier purposes has further added to their attractiveness. More women have been able to become (part-time) petty traders: *It has helped to promote our business (charcoal) [by providing] transportation to the junction to sell.* Another major positive contribution of rural MCT services is the access they provide in the case of medical emergencies: *If we want to carry the sick long distances for treatment, we mostly use motorcycles.* Access to maternal health has also increased: *[Motorcycle taxis help us] carry children to clinics for maternal care; [Motorcycle taxis] have helped pregnant women in deliveries.* In rural Sierra Leone, MCTs are not used much for access to primary schools, since this would be too expensive, although some senior high school pupils can be seen travelling to school on MCTs. However, it was observed that as soon as there is motorised access to a village, public services and public servants (including teachers) are more likely to come to the community for a posting.

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: *If really we have access to motorcycles we will love to ride because it is a means of earning our daily bread and supporting our families.* Both men and women were supportive of the idea of female riders, suggesting that they would be much safer riders.

MCTs are often disliked by Road Safety Authorities and in some cases banned to operate in certain areas because they are associated with high numbers of traffic accidents. Women clearly show an interest in becoming MCT operators and a surprising large number (although still a minority) of men are not averse to the idea of female MCT operators. Nevertheless, there were several reasons raised by both the men and women why there are no female motorcycle taxi operators. Some reasons focused on the strength that is required to balance a heavily loaded motorcycle on the narrow and often muddy footpaths or roads: *Prefer the man [as a rider] because he can lift whatever load (strength) and [if there is an] accident he can easily lift the motorcycle from the passenger.*

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³ All statements are from female focus group discussions, unless stated differently.

Table 2: MTC Passenger Responses to Female Operators

MTC Passengers on Surveyed Road	Kenema District (n = 50, male = 7)	Moyamba District (n = 61, male = 18)	Bombali District (n = 31, male = 16)
Want more bikes?	48 (96%)	54 (89%)	28 (90%)
Good if there are women MCT operators?	38 (76%) 1 out of 7 men agreed	33 (56%) 7 out of 18 men agreed	9 (30%) 2 out of 16 men agreed
Preference for gender of rider?	Woman, 17 Man, 32	Woman, 11 Man, 49	Woman, 4 Man, 26

Others saw (traditional) values as a major obstacle: *[Women] take care of the children in the home; No, [riding is] not [suitable] for married woman.* This was also common sentiment expressed by the male focus groups: *No [to women riders] because they will start challenging us [the men] in income earning.* Although other men took a more liberal perspective: *Yes, female okada [MCT] riders are to be trained, so the communities can be developed by women too.*

Table 3: Operators' Perspectives (all male)

MTC Operators on Surveyed Road (n=97, all)	Kenema District (n = 33)	Moyamba District (n =34)	Bombali District (n = 12)
Carry more women?	11	23	19
Ride more slowly for women?	31	29	25
Good to train women to ride?	11	14	15
Why few or no women riders?	No strength 25 No interest 7 No support 2	No strength 16 No interest 10 No support 3	No strength 26 No interest 21 No support 11

Interestingly (and contrary to the Liberia study findings), few women raised concerns relating to the risk of being more vulnerable to sexual harassment if becoming an operator and riding on isolated roads with male passengers. Perhaps this was because of the good experience women had with MCTs as users: *No, we have not heard of such [harassment] in this community and [if there were such cases] it would be treated seriously by the chieftom authorities.* Using MCT operators who are known to the community (preferably a resident MCT operator) helps here. Or in the case of female operators, only providing services to someone known to the operator may limit the risk of sexual harassment.

MCTs and MCT unions

When the MCT phenomenon started in Sierra Leone, straight after the end of the civil war, the most common set up was that of an urban-based businessman purchasing one or more motorcycles. These would in turn be rented out for a daily or weekly fee – often on hire purchase terms – to an operator (*master-biker*). In many cases the operator assembled one or two additional operators to keep the MCT on the road for long hours each day, to maximise profits and meet the repayment arrangements. Having paid back the full amount of the agreement – which normally takes between 8 and 12 months – the operator becomes the owner of the motorcycle (*owner-rider*). Again, the new owner may choose to rent out his motorcycle occasionally to a friend, if he has other business to attend to. These operators without a motorcycle (*winers*) rent the MCT for a daily fee, but in the end hope to save enough to buy a motorcycle of their own. MCTs in rural areas have a limited life-span (2-3 years is not uncommon) and maintenance costs rise quickly. On the other hand, this allows a *winner* to pick up an old motorcycle quite cheaply and take a first step in becoming an *owner-rider*. With the introduction of motorcycle taxis, MCT unions started to emerge. These represent the interests of their members, providing a number of benefits which often include hospital costs and negotiating with the police whenever a motorcycle is confiscated. They sometimes provide training programmes for their members as well. Some unions function better than others. Their power can be significant, as is evident from politicians attempting to co-opt them for their own interests.

Training women as MCT operators

One of the main obstacles for women in becoming MCT operators is the lack of capital to purchase a motorcycle and/or the reluctance of business people to rent out motorcycles to women, since there are no successful precedents: *[Women] do not have the money to buy [motorcycles].*

Figure 2: Female Apprentice MCT Operator Taking Lessons from Kenema MCT Union⁴



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In Freetown, the first female operated passenger tricycles (auto-rickshaw) appeared in 2017. The rural equivalent is the cargo motor tricycle, which requires driving skill rather than strength. Furthermore, it physically separates the operator from his/her passengers. To promote the spread of female owned MCTs and female operated MCTs (and cargo motor tricycles), a credit scheme for women cooperatives for the purchase of these intermediate modes of transport by women should be created, according to the focus groups: *If we accept to learn or train to ride a [motorcycle] will you provide [motorcycles] for us? Will it be possible if [a project] can provide cash or loan [to buy a [motorcycle]]?* One of the major MCT unions (Kenema branch) has already started training a cadre of female MCT operators. Some women cannot wait: *If really [we were to have] access to [motorcycles] we [would] love to ride because it is a means of earning our daily bread and [supporting] our families; when can we have [motorcycles] here? When are we expecting training?*

Summary of Project/Background

ReCAP commissioned Swansea University and AKA Research to undertake a gender mainstreaming project in Sierra Leone 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 around the provincial Sierra Leonean towns of Bo, Kenema and Makeni was conducted using a mixed methods approach (qualitative and quantitative data collection methods).

The study found that there is a growing appetite for female operated motorcycles and tricycles in rural Sierra Leone, and the policy recommendations should focus on providing mechanisms that enable women to lease and purchase vehicles in order for them to become owner operators, and for the MCT unions to scale-up training of women. If there is a critical mass of women motorcycle operators, they are less likely to attract criticism from the community and become mainstreamed into society.

Figure 3: Female NGO Workers often Ride Motorcycles



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⁴ 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.