

Get on your bike!

Bicycle- and traffic lessons for foreigners in Tilburg, the Netherlands

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Summary:

In the Netherlands, riding a bicycle is a very common form of transport. To the outsider, it seems everybody rides a bike. The truth, however, is that many inhabitants of the Netherlands do not know how to ride a bicycle. And although a large number of foreigners living in the Netherlands have acquired the skill, many of them can not or dare not face the traffic in the streets. Some foreigners are helped by friends or colleagues. Others are trained in bicycle riding and traffic rules at community centres and centres for foreigners. One of the places in the Netherlands where such training is given is the Centre for Foreign Women in Tilburg.

In our presentation we will use quotes and examples to make clear why foreign women wish to learn how to ride a bicycle in Tilburg, and how they acquire the necessary skills. In the course of years methodologies have been developed for the theoretical part as well as the more practical issues of signalling, balancing and being part of the traffic.

This presentation is relevant to all those who wish to stimulate the acquisition of bicycles and bicycle riding by foreigners in their respective countries, cities or villages.

Our methodologies are also useful for organisations in countries where women generally do not ride bicycles. They will get an impression of the way in which bicycle courses may be developed and they will be given recommendations on how to deliver courses successfully.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, riding a bicycle is a very common form of transport. To the outsider, it seems everybody rides a bike. The truth, however, is that many inhabitants of the Netherlands do not know how to ride a bicycle. And although a large number of foreigners living in the Netherlands have acquired the skill, many of them can not or dare not face the traffic in the streets. Some foreigners are helped by friends, colleagues or members of their families who have arrived in the country earlier. Others are trained in bicycle riding and traffic rules at community centres and centres for foreigners. One of the places in the Netherlands where such training is given is the Centre for Foreign Women in Tilburg.

The initiative for these lessons was taken at the beginning of the 1980s when migrant women expressed their need to learn to get around on a bike to their teachers of Dutch at the Centre for Foreign Women¹. One of their teachers reacted and found a group of volunteers willing to start and teach women how to ride their bicycles.

At present women may apply at various meeting points in town, where they are trained in groups of nine. On the average, 35 women follow the course weekly. There is a lot of demand for the course, as the waiting list of 50 women shows.

2. From bicycle lessons to Cycling Centre

I became an active member of the bicycle project of the Centre for Foreign women in 1991. At that time, the volunteers started to realise that learning how to ride a bicycle involved more than acquiring the necessary motor skills, that conquering the fear of being part of the traffic was an important issue as well. Many women were scared when on the roads and this was partly due to ignorance of the traffic regulations. The importance of teaching those regulations became increasingly clearer. It appeared, however, that there was no course material cut to the needs of our target group. Many women could not read or write Dutch well enough and learnt best by studying pictorial representations of traffic situations. With the aid of various subsidies we were able to develop and publish our own course material by 1996. We sell the course material nation-wide and have sold it to over 300 clients in the Netherlands.



Image 1: Get on your bike! A traffic course for foreign cyclists at the beginner's level.

We combined the introduction of the course material to a symposium on 'safety in bicycling and in traffic for foreigners'. This was our first step towards presenting the phenomenon of bicycle lessons for foreigners to the outside world. The symposium netted us enthusiastic responses from course providers in other cities. Following the symposium we have built up a network and organise workshops, we train trainers and course providers and volunteers and give advice on the telephone. All these activities resort under our Cycling Centre.

Right after the introduction of our course material we were taken seriously by members of the municipal Department of Road Safety in Tilburg. They provide us yearly with extra funding to enable us to organise and execute the courses in a professional manner. At the same time we have started to work with other organisations in Tilburg that buy our courses. In 1999 we had 88 participants who, on the average, needed 15 bicycle lessons and 8 traffic regulations lessons to finally take part in traffic independently and safely.

3. The methodology of bicycle-riding

It's strange but true: there is no description of how to teach an adult how to ride a bicycle, at least not in the Netherlands. We have devised a planning in phases which teachers can use to determine which step a certain participant can or should take, with the relevant exercises for each phase. There is much interest in our methodology in the Netherlands. We have searched for more funding so we could have an instructional videotape made. This video is meant for instructors and course providers. We aim to distribute this tape in the Netherlands in the autumn of 2000.



Image 2. A number of women during their bicycle lesson.

4. The reasons to take bicycle lessons.

All applicants for the bicycle course come voluntarily. Unlike the lessons in the Dutch language bicycle lessons are, strangely enough, not obligatory. The people who come to our centre are from highly different backgrounds. There are women from many different nationalities, such as Moroccan, Turkish, Somalian, West Indian, Iraqi and Iranian women as well as women from Afghanistan, Venezuela, Portugal, Greece and Ghana. Some are young girls, others young women and some are elderly. Some have a high level of education and others have not ever followed a course. There are working women, housewives, women looking for jobs, students. Some women are sportswomen; others have never practised a sport. All these women have different reasons to wish to learn how to ride a bicycle.



Image 3: Why did you want to learn to cycle?

Juliet from Liberia says: "Biking is good for me, I would have problems getting transport if I did not ride a bike. My husband had to come and pick me up when my work was done, and the children would be alone at home, sleeping. Now I can bike home on my own. The bus is too expensive, too."

Lanny from Indonesie says: "It is good for your health and it is important to be able to cycle in Holland. It is also good and nice in a social way."



Image 4: Why did you want to learn to cycle?

5. What about foreign men and boys? Don't they want to learn how to ride a bike?

99 % of bicycle courses in the Netherlands are organised for women. For many years this has been taken for granted. The stereotype image is that women should be lured from their isolation, that they were often not allowed to engage in activities such as bicycling, etcetera. Now that the courses for women are getting more publicity and people are beginning to recognise their success and value, men are asking to be involved as well. The well-established view that foreign women apply for courses and information from a disadvantaged position does not appear to hold true, rather they have a head start. Presently we are working towards courses in bicycle-riding and traffic regulations for men and boys as well.

6. What is the scale of things we are talking about?

So far, no research has been done on the phenomenon of bicycle courses and lessons about traffic regulations in the Netherlands. As to the scale of the activities I can only make an educated guess based on the information I have. There are 220 centres, (these are community centres, centres for women, centres for refugees etc.) that I know of where such courses are given to foreigners. My estimation is that, on the average, 20 people are taught at every centre. This means that at least 4400 foreigners follow a bicycle course in the Netherlands every year. In most places there is a lack of funding and there are not enough good teachers. Time and money are wasted because people set out to re-invent the wheel, so to speak, and we aim to change all that. By publishing and distributing our methodology we hope to contribute to the improvement in quality of the courses elsewhere. Publication will also help to make the courses visible to a greater public and to show that they are essential for many foreigners if they wish to fully integrate in Dutch society.

7. Why have our courses received more interest and more subsidies only recently?

It has taken approximately fifteen years, from the early 1980s to 1996, for our courses to get the necessary extra subsidies that allowed us to organise and execute them in a professional manner. In many places in the Netherlands there is still no extra budget to do so. I would like to list, briefly, a number of possible reasons for this rather lukewarm appreciation of the work:

- Civil servants, politicians and sociological researchers do not know the phenomenon 'bicycle and traffic lessons' exists;
- The position of foreign women and their organisations in Dutch society is marginal and high invisible;
- In general, road safety is approached in terms of physical measures instead through an educational approach;
- Bicycling is simply too common in the Netherlands, most people did not stop to think that there might be people who do not know how to or dare to get on a bike²;
- The attitude of many larger organisations for foreigners in the Netherlands, bicycles are seen as low-status and therefore has a low priority;
- For cycling organisations, on the other hand, stimulating foreigners to ride a bicycle has a low priority.

8. Invitation and recommendations

We would like to invite all policy makers, managers and politicians to think along with us and help diminish the gap between theory and practice. Where stimulating foreigners to ride bicycles is seen by many as worthwhile, few actually take steps to make it happen in practice. This is a pity as knowledge of the subject and experience in teaching it have been built up over the years. We ask everybody to make use of this knowledge and experience and of the network we have built up. We would like to recommend the following:

1. For City Councils and organisations both within the Netherlands and abroad: Do not try to re-invent the wheel but contact us. We offer course materials, training and workshops, which we can apply to the local situation. In many places bicycle courses are already given. Support these courses with the money needed to provide good quality.

2. For organisations in countries where women generally do not ride bicycles. Use our methodology and our materials in as far as they are applicable to the local situation. We will be glad to advise you concerning this.

We like to share our knowledge and experience with other people!

Notes:

1. We are no longer dealing with migrants exclusively, but with growing numbers of people from the West Indies and Surinam and refugees from all over the world. This is why we choose to speak of 'foreigners' in this paper.
2. Besides foreigners, many Dutch people do not dare (any longer) to cycle. Among these people are persons with a phobia, mentally impaired people, elderly people and others who, for one reason or the other have not cycled for a while. For them the hectic traffic of today is quite forbidding.