EDITORIAL

The Need for Study of Women's Travel Issues

Recently the U.S. Department of Transportation, in cooperation with the National Research Council of the National Academy of Science, sponsored a research Conference on Women's Travel Issues. The British Social Research Council is making plans for a similar effort to occur in the spring of 1979.

The U.S. effort was met with a wave of criticism and hostility, whose intensity was both interesting and surprising. Yet the research work presented at the U.S. Conference and the substantive discussions that occurred there more than legitimized this issue as an important, and indeed, critical research topic.

Women are moving into the U.S. work force as both part- and full-time workers in unprecedented numbers; this trend has been characterized by a major Urban Institute study as the "subtle revolution" in American social life. Currently, 54% of all married American women are engaged in salaried labor outside the home, more than double the post-World War II rate. Just as significantly over one-third of all households in America are headed by women alone. There is indisputable evidence that the overwhelming percentage of women currently in the paid labor force work because they "have to", that is, because they contribute a significant amount of total household income.

The growing involvement of women in the paid labor force raises significant questions for transportation, housing and even environmental planners. Yet, surprisingly, the questions that should be addressed have not been asked with any seriousness and in some quarters, such questions are considered irrelevant.

What kind of housing choices will families with two paid workers make? Will higher income families still tend to live further away from the central city, as is the current U.S. pattern, leaving one worker (presumably the male) with a longer home-to-work commute, the other worker (presumably the female) with the shorter worktrip commute? Or will two salaried worker households locate homes, or even jobs, to effect a compromise in worktrip lengths? Will such households continue to seek certain type of housing stock (in the U.S. typically detached single family houses) in the child bearing years? Will the necessity of fulfilling domestic responsibilities in less disposable time create a demand for higher density living in places with mixed land uses in order to facilitate access to needed services?
What impact will either employment or residential location decisions have on household allocation of travel resources; who will get the car, will a second car be purchased, who can or will use mass transit or join a car pool? What impact will the performance of household domestic and child care responsibilities have on the mode choice of either or both workers?

It seems incredible that any urban transportation planner making decisions about the long range commitment of either public or private resources could fail to ask these significant questions, let alone fail to seek their answers. But those U.S. planners who have even peripherally addressed these issues, have routinely assumed that new workers entering the paid labor force will behave much the same as historical members of the work force and that their behavior can be predicted by the usual social indicators of income, education, occupational status, etc. and not at all by gender.

On the basis of evidence presented at the U.S. Conference on Women's Travel Issues, it is far more likely that "new" female entrants into the work force will not, as they do not now, behave the same as their male counterparts, even when all relevant variables are held constant. To answer the significant questions posed above, gender or the variables for which it may act as a proxy, is indeed a legitimate concern. Whether it is the travel behavior of women workers which is in question, or possible long-run changes in the decision-making processes of the entire household, such concerns are central to the planning and development of responsive and equitable transportation systems.

Some planners feel that the observed differences in the travel behavior of men and women workers, if not explained by traditional variables, are then historical artifacts whose impacts only temporally coincide with gender. Such differences will, they argue, disappear as wage and occupational differentials between the sexes disappear or as social roles change significantly. I find these arguments unconvincing for several reasons; first, empirically such differentials are changing extremely slowly in the United States. Secondly, there are a growing number of households headed by females, without the presence of another adult. Preliminary empirical indications are that such households behave very differently than somewhat similarly situated families headed by a working male, (with spouse present) when all the traditionally relevant variables are held constant. Traditional indicators are inadequate to explain and/or predict the travel behavior of this growing number of single-adult families. Although there is some current publicity about the growing number of such families headed by men, empirically such households are only a tiny proportion of those in question.

Lastly, these arguments are unconvincing because they do not take into account important intra-household or role decisions which appear to be relatively unrelated to traditional socio-economic variables. Several of the studies presented at the U.S. Conference on Women’s travel issues found that