

A mother, urban planner, and avid cyclist from Nairobi, Kenya, Cyprine Odada is working to transform African cities to cycling cities as the Organizer of Critical Mass Nairobi, the largest gathering of non-competitive cyclists in Africa.

# Cyprine Odada

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
CRITICAL MASS NAIROBI

KENYA

## **In your view, what is a feminist transport system?**

A feminist transport system is a human-centered transport system designed with the understanding that men and women have very different travel patterns, behaviors, and experiences. It empowers a pregnant woman, a mother, a single woman or group of young teenage girls to navigate the city without fear or favor. It accommodates multipurpose trips which include stops at the grocery store or daycare along the way. It does not trap, impoverish, or objectify them. It does not force them to craft creative modes of survival to keep themselves and their children safe, to avoid being harassed.

## **How does the experience for women and girls in Kenya influence your work?**

Our transport systems reflect the societies that govern and construct them. In Kenya, women's needs are perpetually disregarded because of the disproportionate distribution of seats at the decision-making table. Women are made to be voiceless and money is directed to roads, expressways and cars. There is little thought to pedestrians and cyclists on our roads – even though they are the dominant road users. My hope with Critical Mass is to dispel the myth that cycling is a poor person's mode of transport or an elitist sport but rather an active mobility choice that is an inclusive, accessible mode of transport with a variety of socio-economic, environmental, and personal benefits.

## **Why Critical Mass?**

We are a community of over 1000 cyclists that meet to take over the streets of Nairobi. A critical mass of people – a woman in the company of other women, kids in the company of other kids – changes how people view, experience, and interact with bicycles. There is safety and power in numbers and as we grow, it will be more and more difficult for policymakers to ignore us.

## **Have you had a transformative experience that has guided your work?**

Weaving across Nairobi on a bike up until almost eight months pregnant with my first child. It was an exhilarating experience; I enjoyed it so much that I repeated it while pregnant with my second. I felt empowered while simultaneously being confronted with very stark barriers to access and safety as well as the unwarranted and intense disapproval and judgment from men. Women, on the other hand, felt inspired and challenged by my presence – if a pregnant woman can do it, so can I! And that is what I aim for: to break the glass ceiling and give other women the confidence to start cycling.

It's my mission to make sure that when my little one is old enough, she can safely experience the joy of riding bicycles without fear of intimidation.





**Who is your feminist role model?**

I try to be unapologetically feminine in my leadership. I wear dresses on bikes. I ride when pregnant. I mock the idea that cycling is a man's sport. My feminist role models would be Cleopatra and Wangari Maathai. Both of these women used their femininity to stir change and break down barriers to create space for other women.

**What advice would you give your younger self if you could?**

Have thick skin. There are a lot of people who won't want you there because you're a woman. Your womanness will be used against you – you'll be told you're not strong enough, you're a mother, you shouldn't be out by yourself. Flip it and show them that being a woman is one of your greatest assets.