

Ann Frye, UK


Disability and Access Ambassador for Airports, appointed by the UK Minister for Disabled People

Ann Frye has a BA (Hons) in French and Italian from the University of London and has over 30 years of experience at senior levels of government in the UK working on meeting the mobility needs of disabled and older people. She was the Head of the Mobility and Inclusion Unit at the Department of Transport from 1981 to 2006 and was responsible for introducing legislation to make transport accessible to disabled people, to promote the mobility of disabled and older people and to promote social inclusion.

Ann chairs the sub-group on disabled air travellers (PRMs) of the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC) and co-chairs the US Transportation Research Board sub-committee on International Activities in Accessible Transportation and Mobility. She has led Europe-wide projects for the European Commission and the European Science Foundation to develop

standards and best practice in accessible buses and heavy rail services. She is currently working with the United Nations and the International Transport Forum on the mobility implications of a global ageing population.

She is a Visiting Professor at University College London. She is also a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and of the Institution of Highways and Transportation in the UK and an honorary Transport Planning Professional.

1) The more girls and women that we can interest in the transport profession, the more that these problems will start to solve themselves because there will be a balance of voices around the table.

2) All the things that are being introduced in the name of smart mobility and sustainability are actually or potentially having a detrimental effect on many disabled and older people.

Could you briefly tell us something about your background, and your area of expertise in the field of transport with gender and diversity? What field are you currently working in?

I joined the civil service after I graduated with a degree in Modern Languages and ended up in the Department of Transport. I also started volunteering at a youth club in North London that was a mix of kids with and without disabilities and I got very passionate about the fact that some of

these children were taken to a special school on a school bus. Other than that, they didn't go out and were indoors at home all the time. Luckily, I was the Private Secretary to the head of the department at that time and I started pushing for us to do something about this. So, he asked me to set up a unit specialising in disability, and the issues facing disabled people in the transport world, concentrating on what government could or should be doing. It really went on from there. At its height, my unit had about 60 staff, including

engineers, occupational therapists, scientists and policymakers, and we then spread our remit into issues like gender and diversity at large.

I left the department in 2006 and set up as a one-woman business, primarily focussing on accessibility for older and disabled people, but also, of course, touching on many of the gender issues that are part of that same process.

In your area of expertise, what have been the greatest breakthroughs with regard to increasing gender and diversity in mobility?

I think one of the biggest factors is that we are seeing more and more women as highway engineers, mechanical engineers, and policymakers reaching senior positions where they can actually influence design decisions. When I first started in the transport world, you really didn't see women anywhere at all, and visiting manufacturers as a young woman, it was always sort of running the gauntlet, as well as patronising attitudes. So, I think more women making it into the right professional capacities has been a huge contributing factor.

Have there been any policies that have been useful for promoting this or anything else in terms of gender?

I think some of the broader policies, like the STEM programmes, i.e., promoting science and technology in schools. I've done quite a lot of work with London schools on that and with girls when they were doing GCSEs coming up to high-level decisions, there was still a great feeling that transport is oily, it's dirty, it's heavy, it's not a profession for women. So, STEM programmes, which can use women as role models and help to educate young women in transport, planning and engineering, all of these things are fabulously interesting professions with lots of opportunities for them. So, I hope that has helped. But I still sense an underlying feeling amongst quite a lot of girls that transport is a man's occupation and that's really sad.

What are the biggest challenges to going forward, especially in relation to smart mobility and maybe the smart cities agenda?

Well, if I can talk a little bit about disability as well

as gender, I think there are a lot of potential tensions and conflicts going on. If you just look at the sustainability agenda, if you look at e-scooters, where do we start on that subject? If you look at electric vehicle-charging points, low traffic neighbourhoods, all of these things that are being introduced in the name of smart mobility and sustainability are actually or potentially having a detrimental effect on many disabled and older people. I mean we don't need to spell out the risks of e-scooters or electric vehicle-charging points with trailing cables to people with low vision or lack of confidence.

So, I think we risk having a model that is suitable for young people in a hurry to get where they want to go that is actually potentially much less conducive to the needs of many women, many older people and many disabled people.

I think there is such a huge political impetus to be green and to be tackling the sustainability agenda, that in quite a lot of cases it is being done almost without looking at the wider picture. Involving women in those decisions leads to better results because if not, there's a real risk that you forget why you're doing this. It's all about the people, the passengers, the pedestrians. And if you're disadvantaging them, then you're doing the wrong thing.

An example I often give is shared space, which is now thankfully being rethought. But many of the shared space schemes are based on the brilliant idea that you take away all the barriers and you let the cars and pedestrians find their own level. However, an awful lot of older disabled people, people who are nervous, stop going to those areas. So, what did the researchers do? They went out on the street after these ideas had been introduced and interviewed the people who are on the street, who all said yeah, that's fine. Nobody has been and interviewed what I would call the displaced people, the people who are stuck indoors because they've lost the confidence to travel. And that's the kind of intuitive engagement that very often I think women are better at than men. Not exclusively, obviously, but very often, there is a need to go back to



grassroots and say, who are we doing this for, instead of what agenda does this follow.

What road maps need to be set out to increase gender and diversity in mobility at national and EU level?

I think a lot of the road maps and the agendas are there, but very often we don't seem to be learning from them. When I was in the Department for Transport, we identified a lot of things like the fact that women make different types of journeys, they don't go straight from A to B, they do all the dropping the kids off, picking up dry cleaning, all very different journey patterns and journey needs. These are now being announced as brand new 20 years on, so we don't seem to have learnt from the research that was done. So, I think we need to look back at the clear body of research evidence. I think we know what the issues are. What we need to do is move them out of the research pocket and into the policy and delivery pocket.

I think the more girls and women that we can interest in the transport profession, the more that these problems will start to solve themselves because you will get balanced voices around the table. Clearly, women don't have the absolute voice on sensitivity and empathy but very often that's where the more intuitive thinking about people's needs is coming from. So, I would just strongly encourage women and girls to look at the transport professions, whether it's as a mechanical engineer, a highway engineer, or a policymaker.



This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N° 824349

Disclaimer: This document reflects only the author's view. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the authors. The Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA) and the European Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.