

Local governments combat violence against women in the public space

INTRODUCTION

The International Observatory of Violence against Women (↪[OIVF](#)) presents in this factsheet theoretical thematic elements to understand the impact of violence against women in the public space, while sharing practical examples of local governments to combat them, with the aim of encouraging other territories to adopt them and take measures against this kind of violence.

Violence in the public space: understanding the scope and danger for girls and women

Violence in public spaces is an everyday reality for women and girls around the world and can take different forms.

According to ↪[UN Women](#), **it ranges from harassment, unwanted sexual comments and gestures to rape and femicide.** *“It happens on streets, in and around schools, public transportation, workplaces, public toilets, water and food distribution points, and parks as well as in the surrounding areas.”*

Statistics underline the scale of the problem. In 2021, a United Nations survey showed that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 6 out of 10 women believed that sexual harassment in public spaces had worsened.

Sexual violence is condemned by several instruments of international law, including:

- **The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**, adopted in 1979, which recognises women’s right to live free from violence and discrimination.
- The **Beijing Platform for Action**, adopted in the World Conference on Women 1995, which highlights the need to eliminate violence against women, including in public spaces.
- The **United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights**, although it does not explicitly mention violence against women in public spaces, enshrines the right of every individual to personal safety and protection against violence.
- The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the “↪[Istanbul Convention](#)”, adopted in 2011, obliges Member States to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women, including in public spaces.

In 2013, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (↪[CSW57](#)) identified various forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces as a distinct

area of concern and called on governments to address them. In this context, the UN expressed “*deep concern about violence against women and girls in public spaces, including sexual harassment, especially when it is being used to intimidate women and girls who are exercising any of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.*” The Commission therefore called for further action to protect women and girls from violence, sexual harassment and intimidation through improved urban planning, infrastructure and public transport; public lighting, social and interactive media; as well as through laws and assessments to identify unsafe areas – involving local communities.

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (“Agenda 2030”) has established as one of its specific goals to “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres” (Goal 5.2 of [↳SDG 5](#)). In 2016, the [↳New Urban Agenda](#) committed to promote a safe, healthy, inclusive and protected environment within local governments to participate in urban life without fear of violence and intimidation. The [↳UCLG report 2013 on SDG 55](#) highlights that local and regional governments are committed and acting in this direction by joining international networks, signing charters and conventions, making commitments and setting objectives to combat gender inequalities and violence against women in cities.

Violence in public spaces: what are the consequences for women and girls?

According to the [↳World Bank](#), **violence against women in public spaces is higher in cities, and especially in informal neighbourhoods, than in rural areas.** The impacts of this violence are profound and long-lasting, affecting all aspects of women’s everyday lives in cities around the world.

The main consequence of this violence is the reduction of women’s and girls’ freedom of movement, undermining their *right to the city*. To avoid this violence, women and girls may limit their movements or increase their dependence on third parties, which affects their right to education, work or even their participation in political life. This violence can also restrict their access to essential services and cultural and recreational activities. Violence in public spaces therefore has a detrimental impact on the health and well-being of women and girls, thereby compromising their overall development.

Violence against women in urban public spaces thus constructs a new urban geography and “[↳topographies of fear](#)”, which lead to unequal mobility between women and men in cities.

Local governments must measure the magnitude of the phenomenon in their territory, highlight this violence and take the necessary measures to protect victims.

Constructing a local response to violence in public spaces: understanding the geography of fear

A few decades ago, the city was still considered a neutral, egalitarian space, independent of the social, physical and economic situation of its inhabitants. However, today it is recognised that the notion of “city” goes far beyond its geophysical characteristics and its main functions, since it offers a set of experiences to each of its inhabitants.

Gender is an important element to study and understand spatial violence in the urban space. Several feminist geographers and architects talk about the [↳geographie of fear](#), which designates the place where the fear of moving, of inhabiting, of being physically and of living, is most evident; and points to a “sensory landscape”, whose

characteristics can awaken emotions such as vulnerability or insecurity in public spaces, creating a continuum between violence in the public and private spheres. For example, a dark public space where violence has been perpetrated provokes fear in women who pass by because they anticipate the risk of sexual violence, or even rape. Therefore, it is important to *geo-reference the lack of safety*, both real and perceived, to include violence against women as a priority issue of citizen safety on the territorial agenda. The aim is to give greater visibility to women's rights to enable local governments to [↳specific programmes](#) adapted to the local context.

In this respect, mapping plays a crucial role: for example, the exploratory walks with women are a participatory tool that offers a gender perspective on public space. Created in Montreal in 1990 to support policies to prevent violence against women and girls, these walks have [↳spread since then around the world](#). They involve a number of participants who walk around their neighbourhood to share experiences, questions and opinions regarding their perception of safety while proposing solutions.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Mapping fear through exploratory walks – Iztapalapa, Mexico, and Municipio B, Uruguay

Several Latin American governments, such as Iztapalapa and Municipio B, invite women to walk around the streets to observe and identify the different variables that make cities and neighbourhoods more welcoming and safer. While walking, active

observation allows them to focus on criteria such as proximity to services, accessibility and safety, to create a “feminist” map that establishes an initial diagnosis to propose and implement local actions to combat violence against women in public spaces.

The Feminist City: urban planning and public services by and for women

According to UN Women, violence against women in public spaces is most likely to occur around toilets, schools and bars. In informal neighbourhoods, women and girls are at greater risk when they walk alone to use toilets located far from their homes. The built environment can also increase the risk of violence. Lack of lighting, crowded public transport, deserted areas or, conversely, closed spaces further facilitate violence and provoke fear, especially at night.

A feminist city must commit to creating public spaces where women can move freely and without fear, and change from a “citizenship of fear” to a “citizenship of well-being.”

In this respect, the Women's Right to the City [↳Manifesto](#), developed by the Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C), promotes cities free from violence against women in both the public and private spheres, seeking to guarantee equal use of public spaces and common goods, ensuring freedom of movement for all residents. The Manifesto advocates that women must have an active and decisive voice in the process of planning, design, production, and use and occupation of urban space.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

"Caminos Mujeres Libres y Seguras" (Chemins des femmes libres et sûres) – Iztapalapa, Mexique et Nicoya, Costa-Rica

Iztapalapa (Mexico) revived 145 urban walks that have been named [↳Caminos Mujeres Libres y Seguras](#) with extensive public lighting and superb murals on houses on the subject of gender and social memory, along with other installations (video surveillance, emergency buttons, security agents) to guarantee women's right to the city through «tactical» development (street furniture, creation of green areas, etc.). Following the example of Iztapalapa, Nicoya (Costa Rica) also

managed to create a network of 16 safe spaces for women to combat violence against them and sexual harassment on the streets, a project supported by local companies and organisations. The safe spaces for women are designed based on a network of pre-identified places (shops, businesses, transportation, temporary housing) where women can take refuge and seek help when they are harassed on the street or find themselves in dangerous situations.

Ordinance against sexual harassment on the streets – Santiago, Chile

Santiago City Council supports the [↳Ordinance against sexual harassment on the streets](#) on the streets, which includes, on the one hand, sanctions for those who commit harassment and, on the other,

awareness-raising work for a cultural change necessary for equality between women and men and the protection of women's rights.



Women's mobility in the city: violence on public transport

Public transport is an essential element for women to travel without fear and to guarantee their access to services and fundamental rights. Soto Villagrán's studies have shown that acts of violence against women in public spaces coincide with the three moments that generate the greatest feeling of insecurity: the journey itself, the walk before and after the journey, as well as the wait. This underlines the importance of guaranteeing good material conditions around these journeys and waiting places.

The [↳mobility and transport infrastructure](#) are fundamental for the everyday and professional life of women and girls. Inequalities among women are significant, for example among those living in the periphery who face more problems than those living in the centre. These problems are linked in particular to the lack of sufficient, safe and efficient public transport, which often has an impact on access to employment.

In addition, women often take on household chores, care and assistance for the elderly and children (↳[the needs of children have a profound impact on mothers' mobility](#)). As a result, women's journeys are often punctuated by multiple destinations (daycare, school, healthcare) and increased use of public transport, leaving them more exposed to violence and sexual harassment.

The transformation of infrastructures and its development contributes to progress towards greater equality between women and men through equal access to their political, cultural, social and economic rights. In this respect, integrating transport into urban planning through a holistic approach promotes **the proximity and closeness of public services** (schools, health centres, etc.). This can also stimulate women's creativity, participation and engagement in urban life without fear of violence.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Free travel facility for women – Delhi, India

The ↳[city of Delhi](#), in India, has introduced a free public bus facility for women based on the idea that their increased presence on transport will help reduce insecurity. This measure aims to increase women's sense of security through greater numbers and seeks to raise social pressure on aggressors by contributing to a cultural

change through the normalisation of women's presence on public transport. The measure also means that women's needs can be considered and better assessed in terms of security and accessibility, while responding to the challenges of women's financial precariousness.

Ordinance against sexual harassment on the streets – Santiago, Chile

In Quito, the campaign “↳[Cero Acoso](#)” (Zero Harassment), through a system of text messages and emergency buttons, allows people to warn the driver about a situation of sexual violence or harassment. The driver must then block the doors of the vehicle until a police officer arrives. Similarly, the initiative ↳[Ruta Libre de Violencia hacia a](#)

[las Mujeres](#) (Route Free of Violence against Women) in Iztapalapa organises training and awareness sessions directly with bus line users during journeys. This is part of a set of coordinated actions to prevent sexual violence against women, in partnership with the Mexico City Transportation Department and the police.

“Stop on demand” on all bus lines – Île-de-France region, France

The “↳[descente à la demande](#)” (stop on demand) involves offering anyone who so wishes to get off between two bus stops to get them closer to their destination.

This service, especially relevant when the stops are far apart, helps reassure female passengers by avoiding long journeys on foot and thus combating the feeling

of insecurity in public spaces and on transport. The Higher Council for Equality between Women and Men has shown that **↳100% of female users of public transport have been victims of sexist harassment at**

least once in their lives. Female victims on public transport can call a free number to report any assault or act of harassment on the transport network.

The role of awareness-raising

Rewriting the history of the city means giving women a voice in urban planning, addressing the inequalities and oppressions that prevent their empowerment and access to their rights. It also means building spaces for women's full development in cities, creating a new way of living in them and replacing power relations with caring for others.

Prevention and awareness play a fundamental role through campaigns, contests, urban installations, film debates, radio programmes, and so on. This contributes to the sustainability of the policies and programmes implemented, as well as to awakening the political will of local decision-makers to address these issues. The implementation of these programmes will allow progress towards the principles of gender equality at each stage of public policy development (design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation).

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

The campaign *Métele un Gol al Machismo*, several local governments in Latin America, *Fundación Justicia y Género*

Several local governments in Latin America, such as Nicoya (Costa Rica) and the Prefecture of Pichincha (Ecuador), have joined the **↳*Métele un Gol al Machismo*** (Score a Goal against Machismo) campaign to promote a culture of peace. Organised in several Latin American countries, this campaign includes radio programmes

on masculinities that respect human rights, audiovisual materials to raise awareness about the impacts of machismo, as well as online content to promote equality between women and men and prevent various types of harassment in public spaces, with special attention to violence against women in sports events.



And you, what are you doing on a local level? Tell us about your experience!

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