Recommendations into Action Brief COVID-19: Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls

Photo: UN Women/Fahad Kaizer

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive disruptions to daily lives and the operation of businesses and services, especially to health, social services, transport, hospitality, economic development, education, and recreation sectors with various measures in place in countries across different waves of the pandemic including: lockdowns, quarantines, curfews, social distancing, etc.

The pandemic has exacerbated violence against women and girls in public and private spaces. While some may assume that given the current context public spaces must be safer, however emerging data demonstrates the contrary. As women continue to use and be present in public spaces, especially those working in health and essential services, and in the informal sector, they face heightened risks to sexual and other forms of violence, with fewer bystanders and witnesses in public spaces. In online spaces, an overreliance on technology for communication and other transactions has also seen a rise in sexual harassment and other forms of violence facilitated through these channels.[1]

The year 2021 commemorates the 10-year anniversary of UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative, the first global programme that aims to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence that women and girls often experience and fear in public spaces.[2]

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1 UN Women (2020). Online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19 (pgs. 2-3); WebFoundation (2020). There's A Pandemic of Online Violence against Women and Girls.

2 Promundo and UN Women (2017). Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa, p. 16; UN Women (2020). Infographic: COVID -19 and Sexual Violence in Public Spaces.

It has inspired and supported comprehensive action through multi-stakeholder partnerships established at the local and global level with women in decision making roles, involving local and national governments, women's rights organizations and other civil society groups, the UN, and other partners.

The Global Iniative began with five founding city programmes (Kigali, Rwanda, Quito, Ecuador, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Cairo, Egypt, and New Delhi, India) fostering an integrated approach to address the neglected issue of sexual harassment (focusing on women's economic empowerment, political participation, and ending violence against women and girls). It now spans 50 city initiatives to date, including in urban and rural settings, and those affected by conflict.

Sexual violence in public spaces negatively impacts the health and well-being of women; reduces their freedom of movement and ability to participate in school, work, and public life; and limits their access to essential services and their enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities. In turn, women, families, workplaces, communities,

and economies suffer. This issue is now widely recognized in broad frameworks, including the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (5, 11, 16).

This brief details some of the ways safe city partners from different sectors, in a short six months, have taken action in line with the recommendations set out in UN Women's Policy brief on COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls. Leaders within and across countries, cities and communities continue to demonstrate their resolve as they work to implement their holistic Flagship programmes and ensure that the prevention and response to sexual harassment in public spaces and other forms of violence against women is firmly embedded in development and recovery plans. This action forms part of each city's multi-year comprehensive safe city and safe public spaces initiative with women and girls.

EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES FROM GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Local governments positioned closest to the ground know that sexual violence in public spaces undermines progress of the sustainable development goals and recovery.

Despite a decade marked by strong backlash to women's rights, high rates of violence against women and girls and a devastating global health pandemic with enormous pressure on urban governments to respond (including competing demands on their time, voice and resources), continued investment in catalytic Safe City and Safe Public Spaces programmes can be seen in many countries. Below are some examples of how comprehensive safe city programmes with women and girls are implementing action attentive to the current context.

LEADERSHIP, PARTNERSHIPS, AND LOCAL DATA TO INFORM THE DESIGN OF SAFE CITY AND SAFE PUBLIC SPACE INITIATIVES WITH WOMEN AND GIRLS

- In **Colombia**, safe cities free of violence against women has been embedded in the local development plans of five cities with initial allocations of $1.3 million (USD). The Mayors of participating cities in Colombia (Bogota, Cali, Medellin, Popayan and Villavicencio) in the Global Initiative signed a political declaration of commitment recognizing the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women in private, public and virtual spaces, while reaffirming that they will "Reduce, prevent and comprehensively address sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women in all spaces". Each city initiative will continue to ensure a gender perspective in urban planning and transportation; implement measures to change social norms; and strengthen women's rights organizations with a mainstreamed focus on those groups of women and girls who are most at risk of sexual violence.

- In **Canada**, the City of Halifax, which has just begun its participation in the Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative has included a section on COVID-19 impacts on VAWG in a scoping study that is being conducted to inform the future direction of the city's programme. The City of Vancouver, through a review of policy, programmes and literature in the city' scoping study on sexual violence in public spaces being conducted and in evaluating the impacts of COVID-19, disproportionately impacted populations most at risk of sexual violence including women, Two Spirit, trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people who are homeless or precariously housed, substance users, and/or sex workers have been identified, enabling the city to respond to their immediate needs. For example, through washroom trailers and provision of personal hygiene and harm reduction supplies, there have been significant improvements to health, safety and well-being.

- In **Chile**, with a view to ensuring women's safety and reactivating the economy during the crisis, a scoping study was undertaken to better understand the nature and extent of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces. Adapted online methods to capture the views and expertise of women's organizations and civil society groups and other stakeholders were used alongside a desk review of available research and data on sexual harassment. The heavy reliance on technology for educational purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic also prompted city partners to support a large-scale study currently underway to assess online violence against women and girls.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the City of Banja Luka was undertaking a scoping study on sexual harassment when lockdowns were implemented as part of COVID-19 measures. Rather than stopping the research, methods were adapted with careful attention in continuing to uphold the ethical and safety principles for violence against women data collection (see Brief: <u>Violence against women and girls data collection during COVID-19</u>). Drawing on the findings of the study, a participatory programme design workshop was held that integrated recommendations made by diverse grassroots women, local government departments, women's organizations and other civil society groups. The Banja Luka Safe City programme design was validated by these multi-sectoral partners and includes the following objectives: enhance legal and institutional frameworks on the prevention and response to sexual harassment; implement gender-responsive urban planning that takes into account the needs of all women and men and support social norms change programming to promote the rights of women and girls in public spaces free of sexual harassment. A detailed implementation plan with a rigorous monitoring and evaluation framework is currently being developed in cooperation with the Banja Luka City Administration.

- In the **Ukraine**, the City of Rubizhne adopted a comprehensive and tailored programme on ending sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces. The programme was designed and validated by representatives of the Rubizhne City Council, representatives of social and health institutions, the National Police, Luhansk Regional State Administration, international experts, and representatives of women's rights NGOs and civil society groups. The methodology of the Global Initiative and the participatory planning process in Rubizhne has recently inspired a similar planning process in four other cities affected by the conflict, including Toretsk, Soledar, Novoaidar and Zolote.

PLANNING PUBLIC SPACES THAT ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

- In **Canada**, as part of efforts to create a safe city with women and girls in Edmonton, in line with the principle of leave no one behind of the Sustainable Development Goals and the findings of the city's scoping study[3] on sexual harassment in public spaces, the Institute of the Advancement of Indigenous Women (IAAW) received funding from the City of Edmonton and the Province of Alberta to support the IAAW "Safety in the City project". This included support for: training of IAAW on safety audits, the implementation of women's safety audits to inform planning of safe spaces, and a survey on women's safety in taxis.

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3 The scoping study summary report is available at: https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/PDF/safe-city-exec-summary.pdf
   The community consultation report is available at: https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/PDF/COE_Safe-City_Community-Collaboration-Committee-Recommendations2020.pdf

- In **Ecuador**, the Municipality of Cuenca launched a 'Guide for the Design, Use and Regulation of Inclusive and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls: Parks and Markets' developed with the active participation of end users, including women with disabilities, and in consultation with urban planning and gender experts and Municipal departments. It details how a gender responsive approach can be applied to infrastructure to meet the needs of all women and enhance services for survivors/victims.

- In **Japan**, the City of Sakai has established a Steering Committee in 2020 composed of managers across diverse departments to define strategic and evidence-based approaches to mainstream women's safety across the departments of the

Photo: UN Women/Iván Lara González

city government in their COVID-19 recovery plans. In October 2020, the city provided information on the concept and approach of safe cities with women and girls based on local and global experience during a consultation related to Japan's National Resilience Programme.

- In **Papua New Guinea**, in the City of Port Moresby, free and safe transport services are provided to women survivors during lockdown as part of the Port Moresby Safe City for Women and Girls Initiative.

- In **Morocco**, the City of Rabat, in partnership with the NGO Jossour Forum des Femmes Marocaines completed a neighborhood revitalization initiative Fleurir Ma Medina (Flower my Medina) engaging grassroots women and volunteers. As part of this effort, architects, local government representatives and civil society organizations participated in capacity-building workshops on gender responsive urban planning and public investments. Young women and men students in architecture and engineering were also mobilized in gender responsive design challenges and hackathons to prepare them as future leaders in planning inclusive spaces.

PREVENTION AND ADVOCACY

- In **Ecuador**, the Municipality of Cuenca launched a campaign entitled "24/7 without sexual harassment" mobilizing men champions and informing citizens on what constitutes sexual harassment and how it affects women's ability to exercise their rights to the city.

- In **Egypt**, a far-reaching multi-media communications campaign "Our Mental Health is a Priority Initiative" was developed with Safe Kids and Shezlong (a mental health platform) in partnership with the National Council for Women and launched to provide practical tips on: balancing life's demands, positive parenting and healthy household dynamics. Local NGOs (House of Counselling and Shezlong) were also supported to provide free-of-charge support groups and online professional therapy sessions.

- In **Mexico**, in partnership with the University of Guadalajara and representatives of indigenous peoples' groups, a community campaign was developed using primarily radio to raise awareness on COVID-19 and violence against women. Campaign messages were made available in five languages using an inter-cultural and human rights-based approach.

- In **Ethiopia**, the City of Hawassa in partnership with Norwegian Church Aid as part of the dissemination of personal protective equipment (PPE) for COVID-19 and health information, messages in local languages were shared as part of community outreach to prevent and respond to violence

Photo: UN Women/Iván Lara González

against women. Messages appeared written on supplies distributed, were communicated by trained youth volunteers and broadcasted via three television channels over a 12-week period.

- In **Kenya**, in the rural areas of Kericho and Bomet, a multi-lingual, multi-media (posters, radio talk shows and social media) communications campaign on the prevention of COVID-19 and violence against women was strategically paired, reaching the community. Male champions who devised "Men's Guidelines for Staying at Home in COVID-19" to prevent gender-based violence (including sexual harassment) and COVID-19 also engaged directly with community members to sensitize them on the guidelines.

See the brief on Prevention: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19

ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS/VICTIMS

- In **Belgium**, the City of Brussels, in partnership with Garance[4], is conducting training with women and men police officers so they can better understand the nature and extent of sexual harassment in public spaces and have the skills to respond effectively.

- In **Egypt**, a surge in reports to the helpline run by the Women's Complaints' Office prompted the establishment of a dedicated WhatsApp modality together with training of an emergency intervention team to facilitate timely and effective referrals for support. In the underserved areas of Alexandria and Damietta, economically hard-hit women were provided with skills-building sessions and other training paired with information on COVID-19 preventative measures. Similar information was provided to women's shelters through various government platforms and broadcast through national television. Together with the Ministry of Social Solidarity, four shelters were re-designed ensuring a survivor-centred approach adapted to COVID-19.
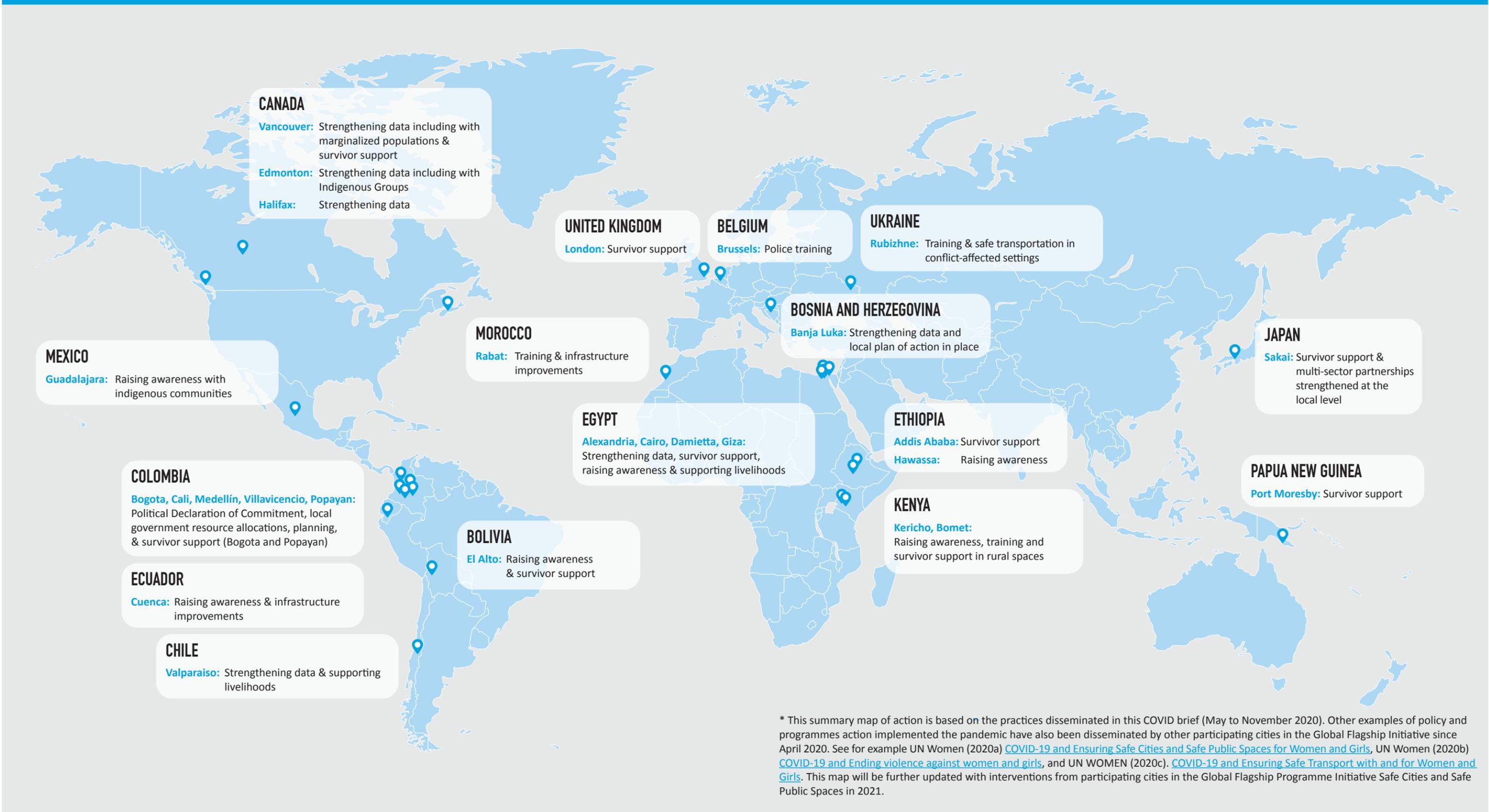
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4 http://www.garance.be/

- In **Bolivia**, the City of El Alto, brought together representatives from neighborhood councils and school boards to increase awareness around COVID-19 and including a tailored digital media platform providing information, guidance and care for survivors/victims of sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and COVID-19. The initiative will be accompanied by a communication strategy to prevent cyberbullying and ICT facilitated sexual violence. The city also developed communication materials and an "Active Online Listening" initiative with the women's rights organization Kullakita and #TeAyudamos Platform to provide survivors of online sexual harassment and other forms

Photo: UN Women/Iván Lara González

of violence with care, guidance, how to report it and information on COVID-19.

- In the **United Kingdom**, the Mayor of London led a partnership of frontline voluntary sector agencies to support those that were fleeing violence during the first 'lockdown'. A network of accommodation spaces was implemented across the city with wrap around support which included counselling and help to move survivors/victims and their children on to more permanent housing. The city also distributed much needed funding to organisations to enable them to adjust their services to provide support to women remotely. Extra funding was also used to distribute food, PPE, and sanitation products at refuges and other places of work.

- In **Colombia**, the City of Bogota created a network of 630 stores, supermarkets and pharmacies, 37 gas stations and seven cafes where women could report their abuse to receive guidance, seek institutional accompaniment and access referral pathways for multi-sectoral support. The City of Popayan has instituted the same measure with a network of 50 pharmacies.

- In **Ethiopia**, in the City of Addis Ababa, in partnership with the Association of Women's Sanctuary and Development and the Ethiopian Network of Women's shelters, adjustments were made to ensure that safe accommodations remained available. During this period, the first transitional shelter with comprehensive support services also opened its doors.

- In **Japan**, in partnership with the Sakai Women's Organization, women and their children facing abuse during COVID-19 are provided accommodation, including through hotels in the City of Sakai.

- In **Kenya**, in Nairobi and Mombassa, five shelter facilities were assessed to strengthen capacities and continue supporting survivors. In partnership with the Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), tele-counseling services provide psychosocial support to accommodate social distancing measures in one-on-one sessions and group therapy, informed by the *COVID-19 and Essential Services Provision for Survivors of Violence against Women and Girls*.

OVERVIEW OF SAFE CITIES AND SAFE PUBLIC SPACES POLICY AND PROGRAMME ACTION DURING COVID-19*

CANADA

Vancouver: Strengthening data including with marginalized populations & survivor support

Edmonton: Strengthening data including with Indigenous Groups

Halifax: Strengthening data

UNITED KINGDOM

London: Survivor support

BELGIUM

Brussels: Police training

UKRAINE

Rubizhne: Training & safe transportation in conflict-affected settings

MOROCCO

Rabat: Training & infrastructure improvements

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Banja Luka: Strengthening data and local plan of action in place

JAPAN

Sakai: Survivor support & multi-sector partnerships strengthened at the local level

MEXICO

Guadalajara: Raising awareness with indigenous communities

EGYPT

Alexandria, Cairo, Damietta, Giza: Strengthening data, survivor support, raising awareness & supporting livelihoods

ETHIOPIA

Addis Ababa: Survivor support

Hawassa: Raising awareness

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Port Moresby: Survivor support

COLOMBIA

Bogota, Cali, Medellín, Villavicencio, Popayan: Political Declaration of Commitment, local government resource allocations, planning, & survivor support (Bogota and Popayan)

BOLIVIA

El Alto: Raising awareness & survivor support

KENYA

Kericho, Bomet: Raising awareness, training and survivor support in rural spaces

ECUADOR

Cuenca: Raising awareness & infrastructure improvements

CHILE

Valparaiso: Strengthening data & supporting livelihoods

* This summary map of action is based on the practices disseminated in this COVID brief (May to November 2020). Other examples of policy and programmes action implemented the pandemic have also been disseminated by other participating cities in the Global Flagship Initiative since April 2020. See for example UN Women (2020a) COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls, UN Women (2020b) COVID-19 and Ending violence against women and girls, and UN WOMEN (2020c). COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Transport with and for Women and Girls. This map will be further updated with interventions from participating cities in the Global Flagship Programme Initiative Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces in 2021.