The Issue

Women and girls fear and experience various types of sexual violence in public spaces, from unwelcome sexual remarks and touching to rape and femicide. It is a universal issue. It happens on streets, in and around schools, public transportation, workplaces, public toilets, and parks in urban, rural, and conflict/post conflict settings.

This reality reduces women's and girls' freedom of movement and their ability to study and work, access essential services, participate in public life, and enjoy recreation opportunities. This negatively impacts their health and well-being.

In 2013, the United Nations Commission for the Status of Women (CSW57) identified various forms of sexual violence against women and girls (SVAWG) in public spaces as a distinct area of concern, and called on governments to prevent it. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has set “the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres” as one of its specific goals (Target 5.2). In 2016, the New Urban Agenda committed to promote a safe, healthy, inclusive, and secure environment in cities and human settlements for all to live, work, and participate in urban life without fear of violence and intimidation.

Our Strategy for Change


Participating cities commit to:

1. Identify gender-responsive locally relevant and owned interventions. Conducting a scoping study is essential as it provides specific data to ensure a deep understanding of local forms of SVAWG in public spaces. Key stakeholders reflect on the findings to develop programmes with a specific set of results based on the local context and joint accountability.
2. Develop and effectively implement comprehensive laws and policies to prevent and respond to sexual violence in public spaces. Through capacity building, awareness raising, community mobilization and other strategies, authorities, women’s grassroots and community partners are equipped to advocate, develop, and monitor the effective implementation of laws and policies, and to make sure that accompanying resources are in place to support this action.

3. Investments in the safety and economic viability of public spaces. A gender approach to urban planning ensures that the needs of women and men are taken into account across all municipal departments’ planning. This includes public infrastructure (investments in safe potable water, improved sanitation, lighting, creation of market stalls, provision of training on financial literacy) and economic development, focusing on opportunities for women’s empowerment.

4. Change attitudes and behaviors to promote women’s and girls’ rights to enjoy public spaces free from violence. Girls, boys and other influential champions are engaged in transformative activities in schools and other settings to promote respectful gender relationships, gender equality, and safety in public spaces.

UN Women is a strong technical partner in city-led programmes. At global level, a package of guidance notes and other tools are available which can be adapted to context. In collaboration with partners across cities, UN Women facilitates a Global Community of Practice for the FPI. It also convenes a biennial Global Leaders’ Forum to promote exchanges and advance knowledge on trends, and practices in safe cities and safe public spaces initiatives with women and girls.

• In Cuenca, Ecuador, a 2018 survey found that ninety per cent of women living in urban areas said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the last 12 months (UN Women 2018).

• In Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, a baseline survey found that 41 per cent of women and 39 per cent of men said that they had witnessed sexual harassment in public spaces (UN Women 2018).

RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

• Cuenca, Ecuador: Approved a local ordinance and action plan to strengthen action against sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women in public spaces in 2019.

• Alexandria, Egypt: In partnership with the Ministry of Social Solidarity and UN Women, two shelters were redesigned to ensure an inclusive, survivor centred approach.

• Guadalajara, Mexico: Two protocols were developed in 2019 on the prevention and punishment of sexual harassment in public spaces. Measures in place have increased the capacity of security personnel, and helped with the clearing of sexual violence cases.

Partnerships for change

AT LOCAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS: Government partners across sectors and ministries (economic development, urban and transport planning, women’s machinery, justice, police, sanitation, education, housing, health, etc.); grassroots women’s, youth, and men’s groups and research organizations, UN agencies, the private sector, media, etc.

AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL: Women in Cities International, Women and Habitat Network of Latin America, the Huairou Commission, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, UN-Habitat, UNICEF and other agencies.

FACTS AND FIGURES - ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

• In the US, a national study on sexual harassment reveals that 66 per cent of women said they experienced some form of sexual harassment in public spaces (Stop Street Harassment, 2018).