The full exercise of the right to the city and all common space by women cannot be understood without the right that all women should have to live a life free of violence.

How does the patriarchal system determine the right of women to common space?

Male violence is evident in all corners of the city and in all common social space, both created by the patriarchal system. The fear of suffering sexual assault and/or harassment in public spaces by women and girls severely restricts them exercising their right to the city, as it limits their mobility and the use of some spaces. If to this we add other factors of oppression such as an irregular administrative situation, functional diversity, age, working as sex workers, gender and sexual identity, ethnicity, etc., then exercising this right becomes even more restricted. Feminism has brought to light and denounced the fact that in the patriarchal system, girls are socialised in fear and, this fear of being assaulted learned from their childhood, acts as a control mechanism with a loss of autonomy and freedom.

Despite the fact that male violence, and therefore sexual violence, is of a structural nature, many of the answers offered are individualising policies that are oriented from a perspective of individual action versus collective action. The diverse expressions of male violence seen in cities highlight the fact that the public space is a political space where people play out hegemonic gender roles and where power relationships are not only present but shape these spaces.

There is an explicit sexual violence with sexual assault and harassment that coexists alongside an implicit sexual violence that “teaches” women not to be raped, to avoid certain places at certain times, to not dress as they want and to avoid certain spaces, instead of teaching men not to rape. This is a culture that makes women feel guilty for being assaulted. Fear and guilt as a mechanism for controlling women and as a form of oppression.

Explicit sexual violence occurs due to a context of symbolic patriarchal violence which, as defined by Rita Segato “is the mortar that holds together and explains the hierarchical structure of society”. In other words, it is a violence that converts the exercising of social inequality into something natural as the patriarchal construction turns symbolic violence into something natural, thereby eliminating any possible resistance by the oppressed group.

To achieve safe cities for all women it is necessary that the 2030 Agenda and public policies on safety and urban planning in countries relinquish androcentric approaches whereby if there is no criminality there is automatically safety. Because the majority of sexual assaults and cases of harassment suffered by women are not classed as an offence in the criminal codes of different countries. It is therefore essential to break with the division between the public space and private space in the design of policies on safety and urban planning and integrate the gender and feminist perspective when drafting these.

What feminist initiatives that facilitate the right to the city do we know about?

There have been many diverse initiatives that have emerged from feminism to guarantee women’s right to the city, from the “Take Back The Night” initiative that was started in the 70s by groups of women in the USA, where they encouraged women to occupy the streets, to the Jane Jacobs Walk, which are walks by residents through their neighbourhoods where they observe, an-
In opposition to the neoliberal and patriarchal city in which there are “cities without citizens and citizens without cities” (Enrique Ortiz) and Smart Cities, feminist urban planning proposes the caring and feminist city. This is a city that permits you to care for and be cared for, a city free of all types of violence, and also of male violence: a city that is inclusive of all diversity and more viable for its citizens.

Why do we need a new global governance?

Thanks to popular and social movements and to the women’s and feminist movement, it has been possible to include the Right to the City in the draft outcome document of the declaration of the New Urban Agenda Habitat III. Nevertheless, it is still the States that decide on the New Urban Agenda without the substantive participation of the cities. The same is happening with the 2030 Agenda where the cities, that are primarily responsible for its implementation, do not have the competence to decide. They continue to take a backseat in global governance in spite of the fact that large urban areas are home to the majority of the world’s population. Typically, cities across the world have no competence over migration policies and/or refugees and, furthermore, they are underfunded, even though they are where the greatest global challenges of the world population are to be found.

A new global governance is required where cities and their citizens participate in decision-making, and also a global governance where organisations of women’s and the feminist movement are represented, participating and making decisions in a substantive manner.

What is the city we want?*

Rethinking the city from a feminist perspective is to stop producing spaces from a productivist and mercantilist logic and start thinking about environments that prioritise the persons that use them (Blanca Gutiérrez Valdivia). Feminist urban development demands that persons must be at the centre of the design and planning of cities giving greater prominence to and revaluing care and reproductive work, acknowledging that we are all interdependent: we are persons who are carers and we are persons who are cared for.

The design of cities is not neutral, but rather is determined by and reproduces the hierarchical relationships found in patriarchal societies where some activities are given greater value than others. In the cities we inhabit the movement of private vehicles has been prioritised over the public and they are designed giving priority to routes dominated by men whereas, in the care work carried out by women, the journeys are shorter and more numerous during the day and usually made on public transport.

* We want a caring city, a feminist city.