



## IMPACT STORY



# BUILDING A SAFE CITY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EL ALTO, BOLIVIA

Photo: UN Women Bolivia

When dusk sweeps down El Alto, surrounded by the Andes mountains, women are unlikely to be seen on darkening streets. That's because most women and girls are told to stay inside after dark for their safety. Still, many simply can't afford to stay indoors.

"It affects us a lot," explains Rosa Juana Quispe Vargas, a 42-year-old local vendor, single mother and community leader in the Lotes y Servicios zone of El Alto. I have a shop in the area, and I have seen women and girls getting assaulted by men several times—sometimes by their husbands. We haven't escaped that machismo even though we have Law 348 [a 2013 law banning violence against women]," said Quispe Vargas.

It's one of the pitfalls of living in this sprawling city just 15 km away from the Bolivian capital, La Paz. Once a desolate bedroom community, El Alto is the country's second biggest and fastest growing city.

A 2018 scoping study of El Alto conducted by UN Women identified streets, bars and public transportation as the sites where sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence were most likely to occur, and detailed women's coping mechanisms.

**Photo above:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Women Bolivia is contributing to making markets safe. Street markets provide essential income opportunities for women in El Alto, Bolivia's second biggest city.

"I look for [buses'] transportation union logos," recounted one young woman interviewed for the study. "I check if there are drunk people. I WhatsApp my family to tell them that I'm going into the bus. I look behind me to see if anyone is watching me and I hide my purse."

## PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

El Alto is among the more than **46** cities that are taking part in UN Women's **Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Flagship Programme**. The El Alto Safe City Programme was launched in partnership with the **City Government of El Alto** and **Fundación Munasim Kullakita**, with the financial support of the **Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation**. The programme was designed based on a scoping study conducted by UN Women in 2018 with the generous support of the **Republic of Korea**.

The innovative methodology behind this global programme was developed by UN Women using **regular resources**.

For more information about UN Women and our work, see the [Annual Report 2019-2020](#) and the [Regular Resources Report 2019](#).

The El Alto Safe City Programme is working to improve women's quality of life by identifying and addressing barriers in the creation of safe public spaces. For instance, Aymara women who migrated from rural communities described their experience in the city as confusing, threatening and overwhelming. For those who spoke only Aymara, street signs in Spanish were not helpful.

With the support of the city of El Alto's Urban Development Unit, Aymara women visualized the neighborhood from their daily experience. Using a map, they highlighted the transit routes they use to sell their products and to obtain services when needed as well as how they made decisions to avoid dangerous areas. The maps were then built to scale and placed in strategic locations throughout their neighborhood to help women identify safe transit routes and have better access to community resources.

Cecilia Enriquez, UN Women manager of the Safe City programme in El Alto is confident that the programme is succeeding. "At the request of the government, UN Women Bolivia is working on a project with UN Habitat to develop a City Policy that will adapt the Safe Cities methodology and replicate it in other cities," said Enriquez. "The Government knows that this programme delivers concrete results and has prioritized this work within the urban agenda," she added.

**"We want the community to shape municipal public policies... Women need their spaces to organize and demand change."**



*Aymara women identify safe spaces and community support in the city of El Alto. Photo: UN Women Bolivia.*



## SAFE CITIES AND SAFE PUBLIC SPACES






UN WOMEN GLOBAL FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME

For 10 years, UN Women's global initiative, **Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces**, has worked with leading women's organizations, local authorities and other UN agencies to develop, implement and evaluate comprehensive approaches to prevent and respond to sexual harassment against women and girls in public spaces in different settings. In 2020, the initiative has grown to include more than 46 cities across the world.

"We want the community to shape municipal public policies," said Ariel Ramírez Quiroga, deputy director of the foundation Munasim Kullakita ["Love you, Sister," in Aymara], a partner organization striving for the inclusion of women and girls in the fight against sexual harassment. "Women also need their spaces to organize and demand change. NGOs, foundations and institutions can give them the tools to advocate, but the decisions must be made by women in all their diversity."

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the precarious economic condition of women vendors in informal markets. The social networks established by the Safe City Programme in El Alto have made possible a number of rapid interventions, including the deployment of mobile information booths at the marketplace to make them safer and to preserve women's economic opportunities in the community despite the pandemic.

### FOLLOW UN WOMEN AT:

-  [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)
-  [www.facebook.com/unwomen](https://www.facebook.com/unwomen)
-  [www.twitter.com/un\\_women](https://www.twitter.com/un_women)
-  [www.youtube.com/unwomen](https://www.youtube.com/unwomen)
-  [www.instagram.com/unwomen](https://www.instagram.com/unwomen)