In the previous edition of Gender Keys we learned that Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is the result of existing gender inequality in metropolitan areas (where urban disparities are more evident) and one of the most serious - and most tolerated - human rights violations worldwide.

VAWG takes place everywhere: at home, at work, in public squares, parks, markets, streets, and in the public restrooms of our cities and metropolises; it occurs on public transport, as well as in our own governments, institutions, and even online, on social media and other platforms. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated VAWG in urban spaces, both in public and private spheres, including violence in politics and online.

According to UN Women, as the Covid-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress, coupled with the restricted movement and social isolation measures put in place, gender-based violence has increased by 25%, even doubling in some metropolitan areas.
The pandemic and the violence against women and girls

Periods of global crises and distress do not affect women and men in the same way. Women suffer from multiple types of violence across:

- **PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES**
- **POLITICS AND ONLINE SPACES**
- **THE GENDER DATA GAP**

UN Women estimates that **243 million** women and girls have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner in the last year. Many women and girls are being forced into ‘lockdown’ at home with their abusers, while services to support survivors are disrupted or made inaccessible.

As a consequence, **in some urban areas, reports and calls to hotlines are decreasing as women are unable to leave home or access help online or over the phone.**

Current measures to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic have decreased the number of people on the street, resulting in a heightened risk of sexual violence. According to Plan International’s study, almost **60%** of women report feeling unsafe in urban spaces, affecting women’s autonomy and access to employment and essential services during lockdown. **Women limit their movements in public spaces, adapting their itineraries, routes, schedules, and activities according to their perceived level of safety.**

Violence against grassroots leaders and political representatives remains one of the main barriers preventing women from full and effective participation and decision-making. Around the world, women are persistently under-represented in leadership positions, including in local government, in which **women’s participation is estimated at 36% of seats.** Likewise, women leaders face a range of threats and constraints, with higher levels of pressure and scrutiny in comparison to men, and greater difficulty in becoming candidates or accessing electoral funds, alongside an unequal division of unpaid care work, and much more.

More than ever, both during the pandemic and in the context of lockdowns worldwide, the internet has become a public square and space for accessing critical information and participatory processes. However, it’s not an egalitarian space: gendered misinformation and disinformation, sexual harassment, sex trolling and zoombombing, among other types of violence, have limited and censored women’s rights during the Covid-19 pandemic, including:

- access to online services
- education and employment opportunities
- women’s voices and participation as active digital citizens

The lack of statistics reflecting the lives of women and girls living in metropolitan areas renders many aspects of gender inequality invisible. In the context of Covid-19, accurate sex-disaggregated data is an essential tool to understand the virus and quantify its impact. Currently, only **45%** of the data needed to measure violence against women and girls is available.
What challenges are we facing?

To turn the crisis into an opportunity to free our cities and metropolises from gender violence, we should start focusing on 7 main points.

1. Integrate a gender-responsive and gender-sensitive approach to research, analysis and assessment to identify gaps in policies to respond to VAWG.

2. Ensure sex-disaggregated data is collected at a metropolitan scale to understand the impact of Covid-19 on VAWG and inform the response.

3. Guarantee financial and political investment by governments and partners to close gender data gaps.

4. Develop a coordination mechanism between government departments as well as strengthen multi-sectoral partnership during the emergency and recovery stage.

5. Ensure services for survivors are regarded as essential and remain open, and place a high priority on police and legal responses.

6. Adapt public spaces and transport across the entire metropolitan area to match women’s perception of safety, ensuring an equal access to health, food security and shelter.

7. Include women’s and girls’ voices in recovery plans and budgetary decision-making, seeking gender balance in leadership positions, to achieve long-term transformation.
The Interministerial Conference on Women's Rights, which brings together 12 ministers, aims to strengthen coordination and collaboration between different levels of power in order to guarantee women's rights in all areas of their daily lives, with a special focus on domestic violence. [+info]

In the context of social, preventive and compulsory isolation, the Buenos Aires City Government has recently added a new channel to provide information, support and advice on gender violence. Now, through ‘Boti’, the City's WhatsApp, those who need help can request it automatically via chat, without needing to speak on the phone. [+info]

The Government of Mexico City has broadened the number of crimes to provide further powers to its Digital Reporting System - also available on the CDMX App. The number of crimes that can be reported digitally now includes domestic violence, psycho-emotional violence, and crimes in relation to economic and sexual and reproductive rights. [+info]