

# The woman besieged – the female city

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The Spanish Constitution (CE) proclaims jointly in its art. 17 the individual and fundamental rights to freedom and safety. The safeguard of safety on the streets and the enjoyment of public liberties conform to an inseparable binary and both concepts are basic requirements for democratic coexistence.

Legal attributions and values proclaimed by the Constitution support in the first place the idea behind the concept of safety as a whole. This is crucial in a social State such as ours because, if the State is responsible (art. 9.2. CE) for creating and maintaining due public safety conditions, it is so responsible precisely and solely according to the Constitutional values: equality and freedom.

The final aim of “safety”, thus, is safeguarding the legitimate enjoyment of fundamental rights, where classic equality ought to be understood as solidarity, worthy treatment, as equity.

Nevertheless, what is safety? It is a physical, psychological and emotional state. Opposite to the “besieged man” is the man “*in place*”. Safety is a state derived from the “relation” of the man and his environment, becoming a basic element according to democratic development and civic coexistence. It is the *status* of subjective situations regarding man and/or his social environment: the *me and my circumstances* coined by the twentieth century Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. A man’s safety within “his circumstance” applies to safety both in personal and social relations.

Public safety deals mainly with the situation of a man in his civic relations, as a subject of the *civitas*, or *polis*, - the male city, the female city -, in group or social relations or collective meetings or events and within the sphere of communication and information.

How could we improve and ensure public conditions in terms of each person’s happiness? Here is where we find the City as a space full of possibilities and, therefore, a scenario to all encounters. It is also, however, a space full of contradictions and risks: it is in the urban space where all discriminations anchored on poverty, sex or disrespect of cultural identity emerge, while, at the same time, urban citizenship represents the best civic and social uses of solidarity.

It is quite usual nowadays, particularly among high intellectual circles, to make statements against gender discrimination, which is fair and useful in terms of social actions to promote equal opportunities among sexes and among different racial and cultural backgrounds. This, however, does not seem to reflect on town planning and architecture, oblivious of the uses, thoughts and needs of a real society. The circumstances of the feminine *me* in the city are not equal. Women safety “in her circumstances” – besieged – does not correspond with the safety of citizenship, which has to be factual, practical and living.

Women’s access to remunerated jobs has modified ordinary living plans in the city, changing alongside power relations between sexes within the family unit.

A brief analysis of the current situation, despite not accepting it as such, would allow us to consider ways in which town planning could contribute to making our cities more equalitarian social structures, not only between classes, but also between sexes. Therefore, also safer and fairer cities.

Housing policies tend to be based upon what has become a highly questionable scenario, affecting equally men and women: the basic living pattern is the family unit built around the couple. In fact, however, access to housing is conditioned at the same time by the difference of incomes and discrimination against women. The family patterns are increasingly varied: traditional family units, people living on their own, adults sharing a house, and family units comprising women and children.

The increase of households whose head is a woman is meaningful (the Moser report considers that a third of world households are headed by a woman. In urban areas this figure is above 50%).

Disregard for this – worldwide – phenomenon in housing policies leads to discrimination against women when they try to access it. The criteria for benefiting from funded housing are based on regular income and stable jobs, whereas in most cases women’s incomes come from informal occupations and unstable jobs. Also, living conditions in women’s households are systematically inferior to men’s households, in terms of quality of materials and of the assurance of housing legal conditions.

The location of the household within the city also affects women directly, since women have to harmonize daily their household and working tasks in different parts of the city. The dissociation of public services, working place and residence makes it difficult for women to carry out all those daily duties in time and in space and increases the risks.

Despite the fact that women are the most important actors in the harmonization between households and city structures, cities are planned oblivious to the specific requirements resulting from this harmonization. Thus, public transport is planned around mobility patterns between residence and working places, which does not reflect the different trips women have to make in order to fulfil their daily routines: public transport is planned around men's needs, to provide transport for a male working force with stable jobs. Women's needs, however, are much more diverse: taking the children to school, doing the shopping, taking care of the elderly, going to health centres...Therefore, the access of women to the professional market has multiplied the number of vehicles, which leads to a growing saturation and an increase in health problems.

On the other hand, home could be the site of remunerated jobs for women and the telematic future spreads this possibility regardless of sexes. In this sense, the importance for women of the place of residence as the place to carry out a remunerated job is also questioned by plans of property use and municipal regulations which strictly separate residential, commercial and industrial uses in many urban areas.

The lack of control over scattered building grounds defended by a liberalising point of view – urban incontinence – not only compromises the land for future generations, but also becomes one of the factors of social imbalance in opposition to the city, to an efficient way of living in the city, and which severely affects women and children.

Town planning does not take into account the specific needs of children, and, more recently, unregulated building has taken even further the negation of a city existence to children, forcing them to become part of the productive world of adults in enslaving conditions or throwing them onto the streets without necessary protection. Besieged “in the plot” or in the block of flats, among urban middle classes, television is the main baby-sitter for children in as much as the access of women to professional jobs outside home has not been acknowledged by a parallel development of childcare city services. It is obvious that children's playgrounds have to meet the requirements of the evolutionary psychology of boys and girls at different times in different societies, as it is also obvious that children have to meet their demands of autonomy in making use of urban spaces, precisely within a protective infrastructure, and, finally, their own right to enjoy a city's diversity by means of more flexible and dense transport nets.

Current official town planning is based on disregarding the economic and social realities of the city and using the imbalance between the real city and the legal city as a source of power and, frequently, power abuse.

New town planning and current public services have taken into consideration the individualization process which reflects the evolution of our societies. Different situations and requirements make necessary a wider range and personalization of solutions. We are facing a complex society in an uncertain future demanding a more reflexive management of the city, which would enable us to shift from a spatial specialization to the complexity of a city of nets, from simple spaces to multiple spaces, from simple functions to a comprehensive town planning.

If a city should embody a collective life system as well as being an information and communication instrument, the suppression of ghettos is essential, even if they are functional ghettos. Function classification and liberalising growth subdivides the land functionally, ignoring social confluence, this is, **social connectivity**. Isolation leads to marginality, discrimination and lack of safety on the streets.

Acknowledging the spatial convergence of women's different activities, particularly those linked to the protection – the safety – of children and the elderly, outlines a diverse city, both in terms of time and space, compact, interconnected and solid, regarding also anticipation and the future, and the means of building a humanitarian civilization, the true path for peace and development.

Thus, the real challenge to current cities is to ensure that certain values are not only rhetoric of promises or pious wishes that categories are not only abstract concepts in a cave; that the limits of power are not only a city illusion suffering from an unbearable lightness.

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