

Communication in the Fe



ng Vessels eminist City

Ana
Álvarez



I'm 14. I'm standing outside my high school, wearing my school uniform. I peer into the front entrance with my back to the street. Suddenly, a man comes up from behind. He touches my buttocks and vulva. I freeze. A friend sees him, screams; others start chasing him. He runs away. I'm speechless.

I'm 20. I'm sitting on a microbus, wearing jeans. Suddenly, I feel a hand sliding through the gap between my pants and the small of my back. The hand continues in until it touches my arse. I scream; the man jumps off the bus. I feel rage. The passengers, motionless.

I'm 23. I'm walking down the street in the *Centro* of Mexico City. I'm wearing a dress. A man passes by and says with a cynical smile: "estás manchada" (you're stained). I glance at my dress to see that he spit on me. I scream and chase him among a sea of people walking around me, oblivious to what just happened.

I'm 24. I'm walking through the city, trying to dispel a knot of sadness. A naked woman appears, walking through a sea of traffic. I break down with her. A woman from the kitchen of a local restaurant runs out to cover her.

I'm 25. I walk through the city with relative freedom, but defensively with all my senses on high alert, always attentive to my surroundings. I always have several plans for reaction and self-defence ready – for myself or other women around me: things to shout, objects to grab, kicks to give. I'm still afraid of male hands, bodies, and gestures in the street, but I refuse to give up wandering. I work out my schedules, clothing, and routes. I advise women arriving in the city: the subway is divided and you have to pay attention to where the "women-only" cars are. And, yes, you better not wear those shorts here, you could have a bad time.

I'm 27, 28, 29, 30, 35, 40, and the aggression in the street continues – although less physically and more verbally. I have to admit, it affects me less. I have probably adapted to it. However, I'm irritated that they advertise a bus exclusively for women: is this the only way to avoid aggression? By segregating us? I do feel that something is beginning to change collectively. Groups of women are organizing to go on the subway with little clothing and defend their right to be in public as they please, without anyone putting their hands on them. I learn about the monstrous dimensions of public and private harassment of women in Mexico through social networks and #MiPrimerAcoso. Conversations on the subject quickly enter the different women's circles to which I belong. It runs through all of us, we begin to weave ourselves together.

I'm 41. It's 8 March 2019. I walk down *Reforma* Avenue to join the march for International Women's Day and I see monuments wrapped in plastic, "protected" against feminist action. Despite that, further ahead I find the sculpture of a naked woman, soft and delicate, a perfect patriarchal representation of femininity, mediated with a green handkerchief in favour of legal abortion and graffiti on the pedestal that says: "Tira tu miedo y defiéndete" (Lose your fear and defend yourself; see photograph on the right). I feel a shift. I realize that this intervention disputes the public representation of women and is a means of self-representation. Another message painted on the street responds to a bank advertisement in the bus shelter: "No nos felicite, cuestiónese: matan a 10 mujeres al día" (Don't congratulate us, question yourself: 10 women are being killed every day). Months later, at another feminist protest, the base of the Independence Monument and its winged Greek goddess of Victory is covered with graffiti. Politicians and others write in the media that the monument must be restored, condemning what they call vandalism. "These are not the pranks of a few girls," writes the *Restauradoras con Glitter* collective, which defends the altered state of the monument. The message must be maintained loud and clear: in Mexico women are being killed, therefore, "primero las mujeres, después las paredes" (first the women, then the walls). "Fuimos todas" (It was all of us), because we all resonate with their messages. The feminist movement begins a dispute with the state as to what public monuments should represent. Who writes the city becomes an intense public debate.

Breaking the patriarchal pact

I'm 42. We are a few days from 8 March 2020. We wake to the news of the brutal feminicide of Ingrid Escamilla at the hands of her partner. The sensationalist and revictimizing media coverage – which exposed her mutilated body – leads to an important discussion about the narratives and representations of violence against women. We need to talk about it in a different way; we need to address the forms of violence without perpetuating them and to recognize what is structural in them. In the coming years, these other means of communication will flourish in the city.

An unprecedented decentralized protest is organized: feminist groups call for an event in front of Ingrid's home, in a neighbourhood to the north of the city. Along the way, neighbours join the march by hanging banners from their windows and doors, and by coming out to support the mobilization. During the event, several teenage girls from the area are encouraged to take the microphone and to publicly denounce the aggression they have experienced at the hands of family members or strangers. The city taken by women helps to break the silence, the patriarchal pact. It is the feminist protests that allow the voices to flow, making public space truly public in a very radical sense, disrupting the idea that violence against women is a private and individual matter.

A few days later, on 8 March, we leave our homes and recognize each other along the way. For the first time, the subway does not reserve cars for women because the whole train is ours; this time nothing will happen to us; we are together, we sing, we shout slogans, we laugh. Rivers of demonstrators stream out of the *Revolución* metro station. We are so many that it takes us hours to start marching; the range is wide: from the direct-action black bloc to those who are marching for the first time in their lives. On the road we read on our bare backs and on banners: "Mi cuerpo, mis reglas" (My body, my rules); "No nací mujer para morir por el hecho de serlo" (I wasn't born a woman

to die for the fact of being one); "Este cuerpo no se viola, no se toca, no se mata" (This body is not to be violated, not to be touched, not to be killed). The fountains of the Alameda Central park are dyed red, creating a powerful image, especially with the accompanying message: "México feminicida" (Feminicidal Mexico). One contingent holds a Mexican flag, with the moon and a purple stripe replacing the eagle and the red stripe. The march is a large collective body, united but heterogeneous, vast in resignified symbols, with a voice that speaks to society as a whole.





“We want to be free, not brave”

I'm 43. We have been quarantined for almost a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, with children out of school. Domestic violence against women has increased substantially. International Women's Day is approaching again. Two days before, images appear in the news of an imposing wall in front of the *Palacio Nacional* that stretches across the entire *Zócalo*, leaving only one entrance from the south. “Are they that afraid of us?” ask women on social networks. It is unusual. The

Interior Ministry argues that it is to protect monuments, and historic buildings, and the women themselves; the president calls it “el muro de la paz” (the wall of peace). That same night, feminist groups project messages from the central *Zócalo* square onto the facade of the *Palacio Nacional*. “México feminicida” (Femicidal Mexico), “Somos las mujeres, somos una voz colectiva” (We are women, a collective voice), and with white paint they begin to write on the metal fences the names of the victims of femicide, acid attacks, disappearances, rapes, and harassment. The wall is collectively

transformed into a memorial, a collective intervention that contains the strong and legitimate reasons for the feminist protest.

The next day we joined hundreds of women in putting flowers in the peepholes of the fence, candles, embroidered, hung, pasted, painted messages: “Ponen muros en un país donde las paredes hablan” (They put up walls in a country where the walls speak), “No le temo al COVID, sino a ser mujer en México” (I don’t fear COVID; I fear being a woman in Mexico), “En las calles queremos ser libres, no valientes” (In these streets we want to be free, not brave). There’s room for all forms of understanding the feminist struggle in Mexico. Links are strengthened: “Ellas me cuidan” (My sisters look after me), “En mi lucha caben todas” (There’s room for all women in my struggle). Passers-by read in shock.

The *Zócalo* is transformed into an urban collage with diverse historical and symbolic layers: there are the emblematic pink crosses to protest the femicides in Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s; the “Ni una menos” (Not one less) slogan that arrived from Argentina in 2015; the “Antimonumentas” (Anti-monuments) that since 2019 have spread throughout the country and function as urban memorials to demand justice. This is a dynamic movement with strong roots, there is memory and reinvention. The city serves to insist and expand: “Ni calladita, ni bonita, ni calmadita, ni tuya, ni de nadie, ni una menos, ni una más, ni una más” (I won’t be silent, or pretty, or calm. I won’t be yours or anyone’s. I won’t be one less, nor one more. Not one more).

The pandemic encourages other forms of protest outside the *Zócalo*. Women open windows to sing feminist songs from their homes, hand out posters in neighbourhood streets, paint on the asphalt: “Vivas nos queremos” (We want ourselves alive), and organize to take over numerous public spaces. The river has become a delta of manifestations branching out spatially and temporally. Any moment, any corner, fence, pole, wall, or sidewalk is an opportunity to express oneself, in all kinds of formats, and with multiple messages.

Building the feminist city

The feminist movement is attentive to the writing of the city; it is meticulous in its reading; it does not allow a colonial sculpture to be removed only to be replaced by another monument of the state that equally denies self-representation and symbolically passes over women. It rejects the invented face of a universal and allegorical indigenous woman made by a man. It takes the initiative and places on the pedestal, where until recently there was a statue of Christopher Columbus, the silhouette of a girl with a raised fist painted in purple.

The “Antimonumenta” that bursts into *Paseo de la Reforma*, the avenue of monuments in the city, is baptized as the “Glorieta de las mujeres que luchan” (Roundabout of Women Who Struggle) and on the fences are inscribed names: “Madres de feminicidio” (Mothers of Feminicide Victims), “Buscadoras y madres de desaparecidas en los 70s, 80s, 90s” (Seekers and Mothers of Those Disappeared in the 70s, 80s, 90s), “Mujeres indígenas” (Indigenous Women), “Madres de Ayotzinapa” (Mothers of Ayotzinapa), “Afromexicanas” (Afro-Mexicans), “Defensoras de agua y tierra” (Defenders of Land and Water), “Creadoras” (Female Creators), “Mujeres periodistas” (Female Journalists), “Mujeres históricas” (Historic Women).

The messages that spread throughout the city are powerful, sharp, and territorially relevant: a small sticker claims that: “No tener miedo también es un privilegio” (Living without fear is also a privilege) beside a police panic button that is supposed to protect us.

The activity on social networks jumps onto the street; the viral video of a young woman returning a smoke bomb to the police behind the wall of the *Zócalo* is transformed into street posters in which she, attacked on social networks for her physique, appears vindicated in her strong and brave body. Now it is *La Reinota* or Big Queen who appears on

a purple landscape, holding a bomb from which flowers come out with a clear message: “lo vamos a tirar” (We’re going to take it down). The feminist graphic counter-narrative on urban walls affirms women as what they are: protagonists of social transformation.

In the urban territories of aggression, but also of the imaginary of fear, where women are the ones who have to avoid being assaulted, it is shocking to read on the cyclone fence of an abandoned building: “Eduquemos a no violar, no a cómo protegerse de una violación” (Let’s educate about *not raping* instead of how to protect ourselves from rape; see photographs on this page). This small piece of embroidered cloth resonates strongly, its power is inversely pro-



portional to its size. We began to put our bodies and voices in the streets, to express ourselves publicly in massive groups, small, or alone. We build, even if only for a moment, the feminist city, where networks of visible and invisible women support us, open the space for us to express ourselves. There are messages from, for, and by us. They sprout in every corner and form, strident or discreet, a current that cannot be contained. The city becomes our megaphone, palimpsest, embrace, song, fabric, whisper; communicating vessels to resist and challenge the patriarchy.

