The City Seen by Women: The Appropriation of Public Spaces from a Gender Perspective

Avril Andrea Cázares Cortez, Jose Luis Jordan Chávez, Rebeca Aimeé Arreola Mejía, Saad Salomón Castillo Galindo, Iza Sanchéz Siller

November 2022

MASTERCARD CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH
The Center for Inclusive Growth advances equitable and sustainable economic growth and financial inclusion around the world. The Center leverages the company's core assets and competencies, including data insights, expertise, and technology, while administering the philanthropic Mastercard Impact Fund, to produce independent research, scale global programs, and empower a community of thinkers, leaders, and doers on the front lines of inclusive growth.
mastercardcenter.org

MUNK SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS & PUBLIC POLICY
The Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto brings together passionate researchers, experts, and students to address the needs of a rapidly changing world. Through innovative teaching, collaborative research, and robust public dialogue and debate, we are shaping the next generation of leaders to tackle our most pressing global and domestic challenges.
munkschool.utoronto.ca

Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentor listed last.
Cover photo: Outside view of the community centre in Lomas Modelo Norte: a painting of a *muñequita Lele* (traditional Mexican doll) decorates the wall (Credit: Avril A. Cázares, 2021)

Contents

Executive Summary

Public spaces in cities are built according to who dominates them, that is, men. The feminist approach to urbanism calls for the reconstruction of cities so that public spaces are created from an inclusive perspective that considers the experience of all people. But to achieve that, women must have access to decision-making processes to ensure their needs are addressed.

We investigated two neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the city of Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León, in Mexico: Lomas Modelo Norte and Colonia del Topo-Fomerrey 49 to learn how women are taking back public spaces. These two communities of Indigenous migrants are irregular settlements with alarming levels of violence and other forms of insecurity in both private and public spaces, where women and girls are most vulnerable. In both communities, women have taken action to overcome government abandonment, increasing insecurity, and substance abuse. Despite their lack of education and precarious work as housekeepers with limited power and opportunities outside the community, they seek to enhance the safety of public spaces to further their communities' development.

We consider how, despite being uneducated full-time mothers and working as homemakers with limited power and opportunities outside the community, women's leadership in public space enhancement programs improves safety in their marginalized communities. They continuously search for better opportunities for their own children and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood through community work in conjunction with government actors, civil society organizations, and academia.

We also examine the obstacles that women face in community leadership roles and their influence on the growing poverty of their neighbourhoods in the context of urban development, thus focusing our research on public spaces and security from a feminist perspective.

We analyzed community decision-making processes in which women were not only participants but leaders — where their own perspective was the foundation for action. We asked how including women's experiences influences the community's perception of security and how better security increases the community's quality of life. Using participant observation (active and passive), focus groups, and in-depth interviews, our fieldwork lasted from September 2021 to June 2022. We conducted six interviews with academics and civil society workers, four with women from the community, and two with community committees. The interviews and discussion groups were held in person and through Zoom meetings and phone calls as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted.

Context: Indigenous Women, Violence, and Discrimination in Mexico

> Women's perceptions of cities are holistic and inclusive because inequality and mutual dependencies are understood from denied experience.
>
> — Zaida Muxí Martínez[1]

According to United Nations data, countries like Mexico, with high concentrations of Indigenous populations, have the highest rates of poverty and insecurity in the world. Indigenous people's precarious living conditions have been worsening. The National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) report of 2021 found that 43.9 per cent of the Mexican population lives in poverty. One of the main reasons for this continued state of poverty in Indigenous communities is discrimination, which

leads to social exclusion and inequity. Women are the most affected. In addition to being excluded and discriminated against for their ethnicity, they also face discrimination for the simple fact of being women.

Although gender discrimination has historically been a reality, with Mexico's entry into the neoliberalization process and its economic opening during the 1990s, the distribution of work underwent an important change in the lower classes of Mexico. Before industrialization, the community and household economy were a shared responsibility between men and women. But with the shift of industrialization and the division of labour by gender — men were sent to the factories while women were limited to homecare — the power dynamics shifted, with a new narrative that men brought the money home and therefore held power over women. With manual labour activities now replaced by machines that men were taught how to use, women were relegated to their homes as domestic caregivers. This "private" space limited their possibilities for professionalization but also increased the risk of domestic violence in the home, where the state traditionally does not have access.

According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "some women's problems are compounded by their uniquely disadvantaged position in society as members of national, racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities that are targets of discrimination."[2] Taking that into account, it is possible to begin to describe the context of the "hardest-to-reach" community that our team worked with.

We worked with two communities: Lomas Modelo Norte and Colonia del Topo-Fomerrey 49, both located within the metropolitan area of the city of Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León. In

---

1   Zaida Muxí Martínez, "Las Ciudades de las Mujeres," *Artigrama*, 33 (2018): 140.

2   "Meeting the Challenges of Discrimination Against Women from Minority Groups," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner Statement, March 2006. ↗

Lomas Modelo Norte, in the western area of the municipality, Otomí families originally from Santiago Mexquititlán, Amealco, and Querétaro migrated to Nuevo León for economic reasons in the 1980s. The neighbourhood between Cerro del Topo Chico and Sierra de las Mitras is composed of two more communities that include 741 homes. According to data from The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the total population in 2012 was 2,357 inhabitants, of which approximately 70 per cent are Indigenous.

We worked with Fomento Educativo Intercultural, a nongovernmental organization focused on intercultural appreciation and educational equity to overcome discrimination and exclusion to promote social transformation. It values identity richness, interculturality, the appropriation of public space, and citizen participation.

According to Francisco Zamora, the organization's founder, the first families who settled there were vulnerable because of their lack of literacy and their Indigenous status and they were tricked into buying the land without legal documentation. As a result, the residents of Lomas Modelo Norte are a settlement of "irregular" Indigenous migrants in the eyes of the law. They therefore lack government support, basic infrastructure, services, and adequate accessibility. Because the authorities have denied their attempts to legalize the land and get essential services the residents acquire electricity, water, and drainage services clandestinely.

When families were forced to settle in peripheral, non-urbanized neighbourhoods without the minimum standards of services, they gradually became disconnected from their community's cultural history. Their lack of integration into the metropolitan dynamics and experience of discriminatory dynamics from the population outside the community has been reflected in new generations' rejection of their culture. Men have been relegated to blue-collar jobs and women,
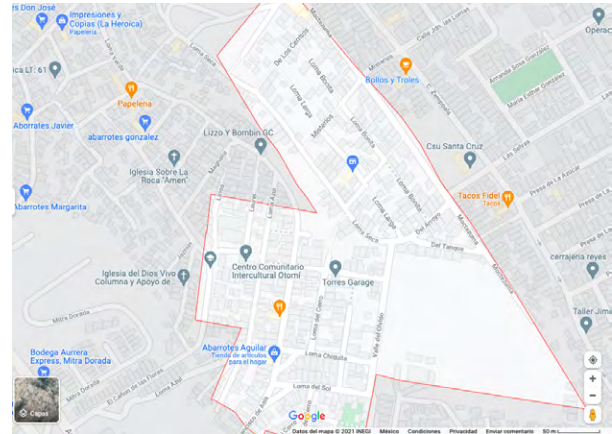
Figure 1. The geographic location of Lomas Modelo Norte (Credit: Google Maps, 2021)

if they work outside the home, are confined to informal commerce or cleaning work.

The second community, Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49, is located at the top of Cerro del Topo Chico, in an area composed of several neighbourhoods inhabited by descendants of both Nahuas and Otomí migrants from San Luis Potosí. Because they also settled in an irregular territory, they too suffered from a constant lack of government support, basic infrastructure, and essential services. They similarly deal with inappropriate accessibility, which hinders their integration into Monterrey and they get discriminated against in public spaces outside their communities for their skin colour, clothing, and Indigeneity.

They have also made multiple attempts to regularize the land and obtain essential legal services without any success. The community believes that authorities deny their rights and basic needs because of their Indigenous status. The uppermost part of the community "Cerro del Topo Chico" has also found it necessary to clandestinely acquire access to electricity, water, and drainage services after failing to obtain assistance from the government.

Both communities live in a context of poverty and social inequality derived from marginalization,

discrimination, bureaucratic obstacles to formal employment, and lack of education. According to in-depth interviews conducted in the community, only one woman in the neighbourhood's history has achieved a university degree. It is more common for young men to enter university but we were unable to obtain official figures from the government.

Social criticism tends to be very strong for not fulfilling gender roles. When men feel the burden of having to provide for their family as well as the constraints of machismo's requirements to appear strong, emotionless, and hard-working, they sometimes turn to drugs or alcohol as an "escape" from their precarious situations. In all field visits, we observed men taking drugs or drinking alcohol on the community centre esplanade, which is the only public space common to the entire community.

While women's rates of consuming harmful substances is not as high as men's, we were told during a field visit that the last two suicides were women. Domestic violence is an all too common problem and some of the girls and adolescents in the community have depression. Given their constant domestic work, women do not have social alternatives beyond community work.

In addition to these challenges, bureaucratic work practices prevent community members from gaining industrial or technological knowledge. There are no nearby universities or clusters of companies and those few who apply to a company are discriminated against for their ethnicity. Although Monterrey is the second most important city in Mexico, the community structurally does not have the necessary resources to be able to compete for jobs that increase its level of productivity and human development.

Public Policy: Urban Development and Marginalization

We chose to analyze the "Nuevo León State Development Plan 2022–2027" public policy regarding public space development, especially in relation to the first, fifth, and sixteenth Sustainable Development Goals proclaimed by the United Nations. We compare the reality of Indigenous women's living situation in marginalized urban areas with the goals in local, national, and international development agendas.

The basis of a good public policy acknowledges the multifactorial nature of the problems to be addressed. We recognize that a gender perspective is one of the most relevant considerations when formulating a public policy because half of the population are women, and they need to be accounted for. But because a person has overlapping identities (gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) and experiences, they also face interdependent systems of discrimination. Therefore, an effective public policy formulated from a gender perspective must incorporate intersectionality (the framework for conceptualizing a person affected by simultaneous discriminations and disadvantages by their overlapping identities). Incorporating intersectionality to achieve gender equality can diminish the degree to which the multiple exclusion systems affect women's function, as Ruth Mestre, professor of philosophy and specialist in feminist theory, explains.[3] The UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda seeks to achieve gender equality in all its goals and action areas from an intersectional approach. It acknowledges that the barriers all women and girls face to develop their potential involve overlapping issues and that, in effect, makes certain women more susceptible to suffering

---

3   Ruth Mestre, "Feminisme, dret i immigració: una crítica feminista al dret d'estrangeria," PhD thesis, 2005. 🔗

violence than others. This is certainly the case for the women we met.

For our study population — lower-class Otomi Indigenous women who live in segregated areas of the city — violence limits their opportunities, options, and right to the city and the threat of violence prevents them from being equal citizens. Geographically, they have been excluded from the logic of the city. And metaphorically the unpaved roads that surround the neighbourhoods and connects them to Monterrey Metropolitan Area are full of fallen branches and garbage which can be interpreted as a further disconnection. But more than anything, the biggest barrier is the view of "citizens" who see Indigenous people as a "threatening" other. Their view identifies certain characteristics (Indigenous from a poor community) that typify "second class citizens," or those who in the social imaginary "deserve" to be excluded.

Because such barriers are a daily phenomenon in public spaces around the world, we consider the "Plan Estado de Desarrollo Nuevo León 2022–2027" (Nuevo León State Development Plan) as a critical public policy to address public space issues, security, and social justice, with an intersectional feminist approach. The "Nuevo León State Development Plan 2022–2027" is the source of public policy that the administration proposed for the state. The document establishes the specific objectives, items, and metrics for all areas of governance in Nuevo León. It is the guideline for the current six-year term in the state and establishes the central issues the government will focus on.

The Nuevo Leon State Development Plan (NLSDP) breaks down the strategic points on poverty reduction and social inclusion in the "equality for all people" section. To protect women and girls, it focuses on labour rights and economic policies for reinserting women into these sectors. However, these are superficial perspectives on the wage gap and the reduction of unpaid work hours without mentioning any

strategy or alternative to achieve it. For example, reducing underpaid work is problematic. Since this care area is indispensable for families, no state can legislate reduced hours for housework. However, the state can provide facilities to support women seeking to enter the workforce, such as daycare centres, maternity leave, food vouchers, and decent working conditions. Rena Posen, an urbanist and professor at Tecnológico de Monterrey, told us how women are confined to their homes, contrary to their traditional life:

> Where are those bigger things that they may not have in their houses that they could do together? [referring to community infrastructure, as community kitchens] … Instead of everything being for decoration [i.e., the installation of recreation spaces with "children's playgrounds" that, on many occasions, are vandalized due to their abandonment], I think we must go back a bit to make a utilitarian space rather than a recreational space. Because the truth is that, yes, if you are Indigenous in Monterrey and a woman, you do not have time for recreation.

We compare this to one of the NLSDP's objectives, which seeks:

> To procure effective access to channels for care, comprehensive protection, to social justice for women and, with this, promote the enjoyment and full exercise of opportunities to develop fully and comprehensively in all aspects of their lives without distinction based on their ethnic or national origin, sex, gender, age, disabilities, social, economic, health, legal status or any other reason.

Connecting the issues of public space and urbanism recognizes the need to create opportunities to take up space. It is possible to affirm a need for infrastructure created from a

feminine point of view: recreational spaces (which represent only one element of development), transform into a utilitarian quality, which attends to the different aspects of the women's holistic development and therefore society's as well.

If women have better infrastructure that allows them to fully develop, their children will have access to better shared public spaces. A traditional example would be a community kitchen, which, while allowing them to enjoy the company of other women, can also help them to market their products together. Likewise, without the need to replicate gender roles, a community engineering workshop would be a great space for obtaining knowledge, recreation, and entrepreneurship. Both examples suggest how a recreational space could become a functional space for women's development as the basis of community social development. They take into account how it is women who are in charge of educating new generations, managing social supports and community resources, and who dominate in the private sphere.

A later section of the NLSDP mentions a significant disconnection between public policies for urban growth planning in the central and peripheral municipalities of the Metropolitan Monterrey Zone (MMZ) and the daily mobility needs of the population. We contrasted the NLSDP public policy with the Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5, and 16 which prioritize social justice, poverty reduction, and gender equity. Although the NLSDP aims to address these target needs, a fundamental part of its approach involves strategic alliances and government intervention. But even when the international guidelines seem to be met by the NLSDP, its effectiveness is contrasted by the reality of the state of the neighbourhoods on the city's the outskirts, disregarded by the government's plans.

The women of the communities perceive that the government does not pay attention to their requests for government assistance. They said that

the government has abandoned them and that they are used only during electoral campaigns to favour political parties that can give them immediate social support without intervening in a future-oriented development project.

On one occasion, an official from the municipality of Monterrey visited the community to observe the state of its streets. The women of the committee led the visit and seized the opportunity to articulate their neighbourhood's needs. When we inquired about the public policy implemented in Lomas Modelo, one of the committee women hinted that there is no active government participation or work within the community's boundaries.

The focus group with residents of the Colonia Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49 told us how the occupation of streets for community activities, such as markets, workshops, or events, is out of the question because of insecurity in the area. As Elena put it, "If we keep waiting for the authorities or government to come and help us, we wouldn't be able to move forward (with our community activities)."

They told us of their communities' marginalization on the city's outskirts. The government's ignorance of the consequences of the poor state of public spaces leaves those living in marginalized areas vulnerable, especially women, children, and the elderly.

Transforming neighbourhoods by creating community systems enhances the individuality of the space according to its particular history, natural resources, and the people who inhabit it. Reconstruction from the perspective and participation of women gives rise to a sustainable community social development approach. It needs to start with how its inhabitants currently use the space. The goal must be creating a neighbourhood that can provide for all but it also has to be made by everyone. An example of this is providing security mechanisms to use public

spaces. According to UN Habitat, the street is also a part of the public space.[4] For this reason, all people must have access to it in a dignified manner without feeling afraid to use the area.

Hardest to Reach

In August 2021, a group of students from Tecnológico de Monterrey in the semester-long program called Leadership Modality for Social Development (MLDS) were selected for the Reach Alliance and divided into two groups. Our group was team Jiadi, which means *sun* in Otomi. We would work with the Otomí community of the Lomas Modelo neighbourhood and implement a social project to promote development in the community while identifying an opportunity for improvement in public policy within its limits.

Our professors and mentor introduced us to the community and accompanied us during observation visits and interviews. Using participant observation (active and passive), focus groups, and in-depth interviews, our fieldwork lasted from September 2021 to June 2022. We conducted ten in-depth interviews and two focus groups: six interviews with academics and civil society workers, four with women from the community, and two with community committees. Two team members conducted each of the interviews. One recorded and supervised everything, following the protocol to ensure everything was carried out properly, while the other developed the interview. The interviews and discussion groups were held both in person and through Zoom meetings and phone calls as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted.

To compare our findings from the Lomas Modelo neighborhood with another community with similar characteristics, in the second semester

we visited the second community in Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49. Despite the relative geographic distance between the marginalized communities of Monterrey, it was possible to observe similar conditions of exclusion and violence. In gathering information about people's day-to-day lives, we sought to observe the power relations, security conditions, and gender factors influencing them.

In the second group of interviews at the academy, we focused on professors and experts in gender and feminism, as well as in security and urban planning, to evaluate the selected public policy. In the third set of interviews we spoke with civil society actors who work in communities. We hoped to hear their experiences and evaluate the shortcomings of public policies applied in the community from a pragmatic point of view.

During the period of our research, Mexico still implemented restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited our investigation. We had to find other means to collect information since in-person interviews were limited. It was also a challenge locating people, and we faced a lot of scheduling and transportation conflicts.

There were also risks unrelated to the pandemic. Community visits involved drug exposure, insecurity, violence, and health risks. Although Monterrey is considered the industrial capital of Mexico and therefore, a "rich and developed" city, the violence rate measured by the "criminal traffic light" of the prosecutor's office of Nuevo León is red. Nuevo León is the second most dangerous state for women in Mexico. The country ranked 137th out of 163 in the 2022 Global Peace Index. Because Mexico is a misogynistic country, developing research with a gender perspective meant that men were not often interested in discussing the issues, and women were reserved when answering our inquiries. There is little

---

4   Gora Mboup, *Streets As Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, 2013). ↗

academic or government data regarding women, especially Indigenous migrant women.

Even though we wanted to question government officials, none were accessible or willing to discuss the issues openly. There was also a degree of danger in questioning authority in a city where governmental corruption reigns.

The women of Lomas Modelo and Topo have suffered both physically and emotionally from the violence of the patriarchal structure that prevails in the city. We therefore wanted to analyze the construction of the city seen by women. We explore the regularization of public space, respect for their rights, and access to opportunities for their comprehensive and equal development. Our study focuses on the safety of public spaces, which have been monitored over time by the women leaders of the Indigenous communities who work in community committees. How might women's leadership in public spaces improve safety in their marginalized communities?

Women are the ones who use most of the community space, whether public or private, because men typically leave the community to work. Women also educate the new generations. With this in mind, our study proposes that promoting the development of community spaces considering the female perspective promotes the development of the entire community. It is therefore necessary to create a shared development plan that includes their needs and experiences, as well as the obstacles they face in leadership roles in the community. The plans need to consider the dynamics of gender exclusion and its influence on the perpetuation of poverty and insecurity in their neighbourhoods.

Figure 2. Entrance to avenue Cañón de las Flores from avenue No Reelección (Credit: TEC Team, 2021)

Into the Communities

Accessible Cities

To get to the Colonia Lomas Modelo, it is necessary to drive along a wide avenue called No Reelection. Cañón de las Flores, an alley intersecting this street, is the main entrance to the neighbourhood. The cobbled road runs up the hill. It was challenging to reach the community during winter because there was a lot of mud. Visitors see garbage lying around and hear *cumbias* (a type of regional music from northern Mexico) playing in houses. People meet outside their homes and talk. There are small businesses, like informal clothing stores and *tiendas de la esquina* (corner variety shops), as one climbs the hill to reach the neighbourhood's community centre — a one-room building with an esplanade at the front.

Monterrey's citizens refer to regions like Lomas Modelo as "Houses of the Hills," which they differentiate from the valley of the metropolitan area and consider dangerous zones. These houses are painted bright pink, green, and blue — distinct from the more staid house colours in the rest of the city. When we asked one of the women of the community if she felt part of the city (metropolitan area) of Monterrey, she replied:
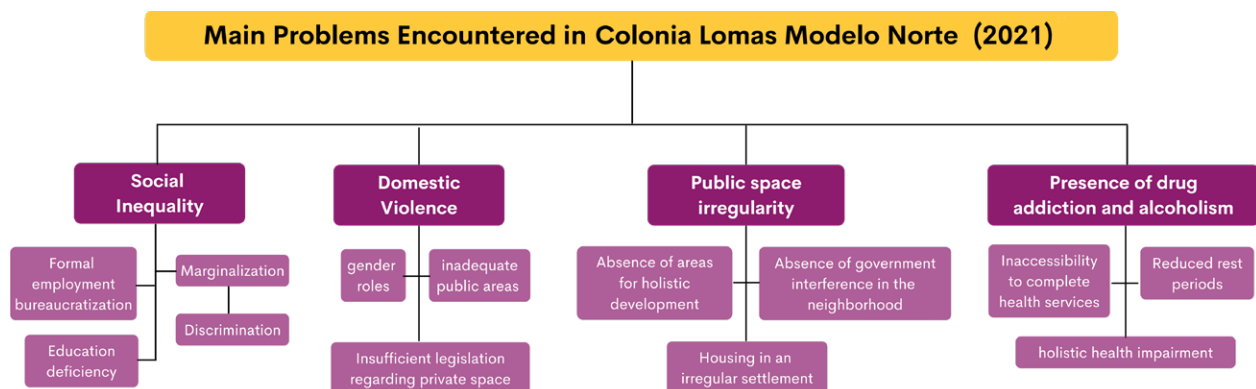
Hmm, well, I think that ... it is very difficult to answer. But I feel that many people, for example, they just go to work and come back and so ... they don't involve us, both in what happens outside. For example, these issues of improvements or participating in public policies ... I feel that there is a lack of more involvement in everything outside. It's just how you go to work, and then you return, or to the children's school, that is — you know — the basics. (Juani)

Concrete stairs with metal tube railings are the only way around the community, which, according to the residents, limits the mobility of pregnant people and older adults who struggle to go down to the city. The community's only flat space is the community centre's esplanade. On our visits, we noticed the regular presence of two groups there. On the entrance stairs to the community centre building was a group of men doing drugs — some lying down in a state of unconsciousness. During each of our visits, we encountered around five to ten drugged people. A large group of children between 6 and 15 years old regularly played soccer in the community centre's esplanade. We also observed a group of five to eight stray dogs the community lives with and cares for.

The women of the community mentioned that the only flat public space was not safe for them to carry out activities. They found the presence of drug addicts and alcoholics who wandered around and lay on the stairs problematic. One woman commented:

There is this situation of young people who take drugs or are in a condition of alcoholism — who are drugged or are drinking — and we talk about the space being very close to the community centre. For example, it has happened to us that … when we leave someone ... if they don't know her, they go and approach her and say things like "oh, how beautiful" ... things like that. And really, well, they don't flatter you — they don't make you feel good — you know? On the contrary, you feel threatened, so, in that part, it is more insecure for women because they see you there and it is very easy for them to approach you … It is not the same as a man being there and "oh, let me go and *chulearla* [catcalling]," which for them is like [innocently] "*chulearla*," but … not really — you are harassing me. (Joan)

There are many dark places at sundown because the neighbourhood lacks public lighting. When asked about safety issue in public spaces, a

Main Problems Encountered in Colonia Lomas Modelo Norte (2021)

- **Social Inequality**
  - Formal employment bureaucratization
  - Marginalization
  - Education deficiency
  - Discrimination
- **Domestic Violence**
  - gender roles
  - inadequate public areas
  - Insufficient legislation regarding private space
- **Public space irregularity**
  - Absence of areas for holistic development
  - Absence of government interference in the neighborhood
  - Housing in an irregular settlement
- **Presence of drug addiction and alcoholism**
  - Inaccessibility to complete health services
  - Reduced rest periods
  - holistic health impairment

Figure 3. Map of the main issues of Colonia Lomas Modelo Norte (Credit: Proyecto Jiadi, TEC Team 2021)

resident confirmed that sexual harassment was one of the main problems in the community and often ends in rape, which occurs in dark areas. She told us that one of the women in the community who was bullied had considered suicide. This is how she thought the situation could be improved:

> I think it would be convenient to restructure the public space to include women because I think it's worth doing more things that make them feel safe … Maybe, I would tell you that women should always be accompanied, but then no. That is, it is not common for someone to always be by your side so that you are safe because that should not be … But you can work with other people so that they respect — that they know, for example, that if you approach a person in such a way, it does not mean that that person likes it … [We need] to make other people visible, to sensitize them … You cannot make the other person change. Still, yes, give a background — that they have a workshop that explains, "if you do this, then the person is going to feel bad." (Juani)

The community centre in Lomas Modelo is the one place where workshops take place, as well as meetings about the community's administrative decisions. The room serves as a community warehouse as well. We saw unused donated computers as well as educational materials from the NGOs that work there. Outside were bathrooms, but they were constantly flooded and full of mosquitoes, making it difficult for the community to use them.

Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49 is a neighbourhood with a similar profile to Lomas Modelo. Here, we encounter a community where social transformation also lies in the hands of a group of organized women. Founded on the slopes of Topo Chico Hill, it belongs to the

Figure 4. View from the streets of Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49 (Credit: TEC Team, 2022)

municipality of Escobedo, but is still a part of the metropolitan area of Monterrey.

Despite the neighbourhood's location on the outskirts of our city, we could not frequently visit, given the distance and the lack of Tec's intervention in the area. We first established contact with Mrs. Elena through phone texts, calls, and zoom meetings. Later, she invited us to accompany her to a session of the community committee, where we could meet and interview other residents. We set up a visit to conduct a focus group with the women who participate. The two female team members went since we felt that a women-only conversation would create a safe space to talk.

To reach the community, we had to cross a road representing an obvious division between social classes. On one side were private neighbourhoods and shopping centres, while run-down houses and businesses lined the other. One of the main access streets up the hill was strewn with significant quantities of trash.

We quickly saw the similarities with Lomas Modelo regarding public space distribution and marginalization. The access to the colony is complicated as it is uphill, with very steep slopes. The road is paved, but the asphalt has potholes.

We met at "Salón de la Virgen," a small one-room building at the very top of the hill that served as a space for various activities of the women's committee. (We had to leave our cars lower down — they could not reach the building because of the steep slope.) Although it was not a community centre, the women thought it might someday become one.

It was colourfully painted on the outside and very simple on the inside where the only light came from sunlight. Several shelves were lined with books, craft materials, and clothes at the back of the room. We also saw large folding tables occupied by cement crafts and simple folding chairs arranged in a circle at the room's centre, where the focus group would take place.

In the focus group we learned about some security issues in public spaces that affect people. The women identified how the lack of police or public safety increased risk:

> Before, the ones who used to come were the [institute] of crime prevention —they were the ones who did activities with the youth. It was when everything was calmer because the police came. There were not so many conflicts or robbery attempts in the neighbourhood. (Elena)

But police presence was not the only source of safety. Attracting young people to recreational activities prevents them from committing delinquent acts. As they were speaking in the past tense, the women later mentioned that the authorities no longer take these actions in the community and couldn't take up such strategies.

The committee also mentioned that in recent years the authorities' interventions had not only

been limited, but on occasions, they had also been inefficient and ineffective:

> They come and give us talks about violence when we already know what violence is. Or they tell you, "oh, we can help you," but when we asked for support for one of the women [a neighbour], they didn't give her an answer. They ignored her, and it wasn't good because she really needed the support — more than anything, the help. If someone comes and tells us "this is this" that is what is done [referring to the intervention in violence protocols]. (Elena)

The government and police intervention protocols in cases of violence have been insufficient for women's needs. The only intervention they have received recently is limited to the promotion of the government's action plans, such as the "Plan Estado de Desarrollo Nuevo León." However, because the residents have not heard any detailed explanation of these action plans, the community's distrust toward the authorities has been growing.

Even when security issues affect the neighbourhood, people tend to respect the "Salón de la Virgen." The women mentioned that drug addicts and thieves stay away:

> In a certain way, they have always respected here [Salón de la Virgen] because here we leave our things. You see that the materials stay here. It has never happened that they have stolen anything from us or even forced the door. Even though they have broken into people's houses, here they respect us. (Elena)

In other words, there's a greater level of respect for the community space than for any private households. One woman (María) commented, "if we didn't feel safe, we wouldn't be here so peacefully … I think we feel safer here than at home."

The first impression of both neighbourhoods and the testimony of its residents painted the picture of how unsafe marginalized communities are, and how women and children are the most vulnerable to violence. Violence against women and children is a human rights violation of pandemic proportions in public and private spaces worldwide. Although the violence in private spaces is major and significant, a report published by the World Association of Major Metropolises: Women and Cities International (WICI) in 2018 reveals that urban spaces are also sites of significant inequalities.[5] Gender identity further defines the experience of public space and its risks. Violence limits girls' and women's opportunities and options, especially their right to the city and equality as citizens.

The barriers limiting women and girls from developing their potential encompass intersectional factors, including poverty and inequality. The first goal of the UN's 2030 agenda is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, while goal number 5 is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. But for the goals to be completed in the context of Mexico, the 16th goal is also essential. It promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development by providing justice for all so that women and girls have the same rights and opportunities without the limitation of gender, ethnicity, religion, or other identity factors.

To improve the quality of lives of women and girls it is crucial to create new spaces for participation to revalue their contribution in the public arena. Cármen Expósito explains that, contrary to men, women have generally assumed informal or low-profile leadership, with tasks

that are not valued or substantive, due to the existence of "glass ceilings" — unwritten rules within organizations that make it difficult for women to access senior management positions. The so-called glass ceiling's invisibility results from a belief system based on machismo, which allows the idea of women's supposed inferiority to be replicated without further questioning because it has historically been accepted as true. Primarily, this persists mostly in societies without access to information, where the state has not been able to bring resources or provide "skills" to its population.[6] It's therefore crucial that public policy management strategies guarantee women's access.

Considering the inequality issues that women and minorities face, we were inspired by the theories of Jane Jacobs and Zaida Muxí to explore gender urbanism.[7] The approach calls for the reconstruction of cities from an inclusive perspective that considers the experience of all people. To achieve this, women must have access to decision-making processes to address their needs. Zaida Muxí argues that the city is a hostile environment where women are victims of inequality and dependency caused by "denied experiences" defined by gender roles which, in effect, have limited their opportunities to advance.[8] Women and minorities need access to urban planning to incorporate their experiences to improve public spaces and daily life. Urban planner and activist Jane Jacobs argued for the importance of residents' involvement in developing their communities. She based the appropriation of public spaces and planning of cities and buildings on democratic processes so that they are sustainable.

---

5   "Seguridad y espacio público: mapeo de políticas metropolitanas con visión de género," WICI report, October 2018. ↗

6   Cármen Expósito, "¿Qué es eso de la interseccionalidad? Aproximación al tratamiento de la diversidad desde la perspectiva de género en España," *Investigaciones Feministas*, 3 (2012): 203–22.

7   Jane Jacobs, "Downtown Is for People," in *The Exploding Metropolis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 124–31. ↗

8   Muxí Martínez, "La Ciudad de las Mujeres."

Women Organizing in the Communities

Francisco Zamora, leader of the Asociación Civil Fomento Educativo Intercultural, told us that the community committee of Lomas Modelo Norte, even though it is open to the whole community, is currently made up entirely of women who are mothers. The committee makes alliances with the different levels of government on behalf of the residents. It also administratively distributes social support from the government or civil society organizations. Likewise, it manages relationships with the universities that conduct research in the neighbourhood. Its legitimacy comes from its members' status as residents.

A group of approximately 11 women, depending on the volunteers who attend, carries out the community's administrative tasks, political representation, and alliances, but there are three main members — the president, a secretary, and a treasurer. The committee meets every Saturday at 9:00 AM on the community centre's esplanade. The meetings can't be held inside the centre because of the unbearable heat and in the rainy season, the room gets flooded.

Mrs. Elena told us that the committee of Colinas del Topo was founded during the pandemic to make community decisions when no general community meetings could be held. These meetings discuss projects or issues in the colony where any decision must be unanimous. They organize activities focused on resolving problems. Women aged 20 or older who participate in any way integrate into the committee. Like Fomento Educativo Intercultural in Lomas Modelo, the civil association Zihuame Mochilla has been present in the neighbourhood for 15 years. They aid in creating the committee and have been supporting activities and the formulation and accomplishment of their community's development agenda. Zihuame Mochilla has

mainly provided human rights and justice workshops, teaching the community about conflict resolution and fighting discrimination, primarily Indigenous and gender issues.

The reports concerning the progress made by the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations and UN Women show inequalities arising from gender discrimination in all dimensions of sustainable development. Women and girls experience multiple forms of discrimination that are interrelated in the process of exclusion, limiting access to critical variables for well-being and dignified life. Although women are not minorities but half of the population, the United Nations recognized women's increased vulnerability, particularly women from minority groups such as Indigenous or marginalized communities. Because of persistent gender discrimination, these women struggle for self-determination over their bodies and destinies. CONEVAL also reported that of the total number of people in poverty, women make up 44.4 per cent.

According to the National Survey on Discrimination in Mexico,[9] women are the sector most affected by discrimination, evidence of the culture of inequality that prevails in the country. Discrimination is a manifestation of violence in physical, sexual, and psychological forms. These multiple forms of violence place women and girls at constant risk of the abuse of power. Gender-related norms also limit their full ability to participate in society. The result is the continuity of inequality and underdevelopment of the person and society. Therefore, discrimination highly relates to safety in public spaces.

The women of Colinas del Topo have struggled to be heard by some community members. Some residents believe they are wasting their time or seeking personal gain and refuse to recognize their work to better the community. To change this perception, the women have organized

---

9   "Así es la pobreza en México," *Expansion*, August 5, 2021. ☑

lotteries to encourage community involvement but use their own money to buy prizes. They also organize different activities such as workshops in collaboration with Zihuame Mochilla.

Although the work can be challenging, all the women agree that being on the committee has helped their personal development more than anything. They are given space to learn and develop skills to help them earn money for their families, like the workshop on making piñatas. Although the women participating in the community committees do not have electronic devices for administrative work, they have learned accounting and administrative methodologies for the correct distribution of social aid and the organization of community activities. Likewise, they maintain an orderly registry of the families and know the struggles and needs of each family.

In the focus group in the Lomas Modelo neighbourhood, one of the women told us that one of the main problems they face is *machismo*, or misogyny:

> It is necessary to adapt to a schedule ... We are always the ones who pick up the children from school, the ones who have to cook the food. For example, something that happens to us is "damn, I'm leaving because my husband is here and I have to serve him dinner." There is that part of "I'm leaving" or this question of "well they did give me permission" or something similar, "but I have to go back before my husband arrives because he has to have the food ready" … It could be said that the man, perhaps as such, is not a macho, but there is structural "machismo" from within the family. (Juani)

Other women mentioned that if they do not comply with their household activities, both men and women classify them as "crazy" and "whores." That is why they must help with community service and work as housekeepers. They said that

machismo shapes the situation of their homes and the participation of women in the community.

The misogyny also translates to private spaces. When asked who the properties and lands of the community belonged to, the women informed us that it was bizarre for any woman in the community to have a deed. However, they considered it unfair since they did not receive payment for their domestic or community work:

> Having men, because it will be up to him to take care of us, but taking care of us is also that … he will be the one who will keep my things that I have worked on ... They do not contemplate women because women are supposed to get married ... Well obviously, it is going to be with a man, which is also assumed, then my assets will be owned by someone else — by a man. (Juani)

While the community committee is not exclusively for women, the community's specific characteristics accentuate the sexual division of labour. The community's main economic activity involves the sale of seeds. Men sell seeds outside establishments in the city, while the women are responsible for housework. One of the fundamental activities of the committee is the sale of food and home utilities donated by the mobile food bank of Cáritas Monterrey, which takes place every two weeks. The only men who help with this activity are the drug addicts and alcoholics at the community centre.

Gender roles and the idea of femininity — where women supposedly find fulfillment in their lives as housekeepers and mothers — has limited women's active participation in their social context, restricting their rights and political action. Housekeeping is considered a woman's responsibility instead of a job. Women's work is limited to the care of the home and the family unit and does not require education. It is a silent role restricted to the private space and disregards

women as persons with rights and desires of self-realization and willpower. Mexico is a patriarchal country with misogynistic social structures that echo these patterns. The binary, hierarchical, and patriarchal construction manifests in public and private spheres, perpetuating patterns of violence through gender discrimination. That is why Muxí declares the city as a hostile environment that segregates humans by gender: "In the social distribution of roles, we know that the female gender has been assigned a nonvisible and relegated place in which to perform tasks that are not valued and that, nevertheless, are the sustenance of all human and material existence. This assignment of place and task has denied women, as a result of that distribution, public space, the right to the city."[10]

According to the Mexican Institute INMUJERES (Mexico's federal government entity that coordinates gender-related public policies), to create a safe environment for all, it is only through opening participation for women in public and private spaces, assuming leadership in decision-making leadership, accessing opportunities, and acquiring new responsibilities and family, professional, political, and economic benefits that the construction of sustainable human development will be sustainable.[11]

The feminist approach to urbanism seeks to construct integral and accessible cities through inclusive urbanism that recognizes and values women's and minorities' voices. Public spaces must be designed from the experiences and lifestyles of all citizens to welcome them. This approach requires that minorities and women have leadership and decision-making roles, with open participation where they can share ideas to

construct a safe environment. The appropriation of public spaces and urban planning are democratic processes to achieve sustainability. It begins with community activism because of the importance of the residents' involvement in the development of their communities. The focus is on the betterment of livelihood in the communities.

Jacobs positions the housewife's participation as a necessary factor for social and public development because, in urbanism, women are the ones who think about what is close to home: the streets, neighbourhoods, and the community. They recognize the importance of small spaces, while men typically have a national and global perspective. Because they were socialized within the so-called feminine mystique, women learned to care for others before themselves and recognize others' needs.

Writing over fifty years apart from each other, Jacobs and Muxí agree that the city's reconstruction from the "bottom-up" perspective requires citizen participation to align social, economic, and environmental justice. Any space's restructuring must start by observing the residents' use so that the community space can provide for all by being created by everyone. Because human rights are the foundation of governance, active citizenship becomes the way of appropriating public space for citizens. To eradicate social injustice from the social structure, a system must allow everyone to participate.

Both neighbourhoods live with inequality and poverty, increasing discrimination, and gender issues, including violence. They also live without efficient public services. There is a risk of violence because of the high presence of drug and alcohol abuse by community members, which creates an

---

10   Muxí Martínez, "La Ciudad de las Mujeres," 132.

11   "Desarrollo local con Igualdad de Género," *INMUJERES*, 7 (2012)

Figure 5. Outside of the Salón de la Virgen, Colinas del Topo-Fomerrey 49 (Credit: TEC Team, 2022)

unhealthy environment. During the focus group in Lomas Modelo, we asked the community committee about their motivation. They explained that as children, they suffered abandonment by their parents who left them alone all day so they did not want that for their children. The children are easily victimized by their context because they don't receive an adequate education or opportunities to develop personally and professionally. From the women's perspective, the main issue is the lack of safety in public spaces.

The irregularity of public spaces, the precarious state of streets, and the absence of proper community areas to hold community activities for the holistic development of the community result from the government's neglect. Therefore, women aim to keep their children safe from drugs or "falling into bad steps" (referring to criminal activity). Their efforts go hand in hand with their role as mothers. They lead the committee as "community mothers" to promote the healthy development of their children. In the words of one of the members (Vanessa) who spoke about her sons and daughters: "We would like to

transcend in this way, from being an Indigenous person with a dialect and everything to being an [Indigenous person] with a degree."

While the women were concerned about funding for their activities and described how carrying out all these activities without remuneration is difficult, they face even more significant challenges: the gender roles that limit them to the role of mothers. But in both neighbourhoods, the women in the committees have transcended their role as mothers of their families to become mothers of their community, gaining legitimacy and respect within their communities to act as leaders, and push forward their development agendas.

Women's Right to the City

Urban planning from a gender perspective incorporates the daily experience of minorities and women. It makes visible the needs associated with paid work, domestic work, care of people, the home, and the improvement of society. It

also challenges traditional urbanism by favouring groups that do not necessarily have to be part of the productive sphere of paid work to enjoy the benefits of the city.

In both Lomas Modelo and the Fomerrey 49 Topo Chico hill, we saw the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of both communities during visits. We saw how the irregularity of public space and the lack of active citizen participation led to growing insecurity and violence against women.

In the communities, women participate in the design, maintenance, and use of public spaces equally — improving existing social structures within their communities is necessary. Just like the community committee, changes need to make visible the knowledge and contribution of women to society and promote activism through it, as well as the right of women to the city. Needs assessments should be informed by the experience of the area's inhabitants to address women's development and concerns.

The government must facilitate women's access to resources that allow them to carry out their activities in synergy with the rest of the city through the appropriation of spaces and the strategic use of land, especially talking about how women have organized in their communities — being care providers, constructing a safe space under the roof of the community centres, and organizing activities to enhance the neighbourhood's quality of life.

Public policy must introduce gender criteria and women's daily experience within decision-making and transformation processes to grant women access to elementary services and infrastructures in good condition and increase their mobility options. A woman in the community who experienced such social mobility is Juani. She has lived in Lomas Modelo since an early age and she has always been interested in helping her neighbours. Juani was given the opportunity to study toward a career, and now she is a

lawyer who cooperated with Fomento Educativo Intercultural at the beginning of their work on the community centre by being part of the committee and one of our key informants. Currently, she works with the local government of Monterrey.

Women's current lack of safety affects their optimal development within public spaces. Different urban actors have roles to play in creating safe places for women — whether it's the city council, local organizations, civil associations, or private and academic actors — to ensure that in the development and implementation of personalized action for each locality, they will no longer face violence and insecurity.

Creating inclusive spaces through gender-informed urban planning brings us closer to obtaining equality within social structures, which is reflected even in planning areas within cities. Women's leadership in public spaces' improvement programs is essential to enhance safety in their marginalized communities. It is also needed to continue creating awareness and visibility of human rights and keep promoting brigades with educational purposes, cultural promotion, or even healthcare. NGOs that are brought by alliances with the community committee are an example of the cooperation needed to enhance the development and quality of life in the communities.

Public policies must offer a better quality of life to women, children, and vulnerable groups affected by patriarchy. Women can lead community actions to reduce discrimination, insecurity, and gender violence. The key is developing a strategic plan to transform community public space by using a gender perspective.

There is leadership on the part of women who want to provide a better standard of living for their children and inhabitants of the area through the educational and recreational use of their public spaces. However, more work is needed to include a gender perspective. Governments

need to incorporate not only the phases of empowerment and inclusion of women in the diagnosis but also ensure that a space is established where women and the population of the community can directly intervene in changes for a new design and urban transformation.

The hierarchies that prevent the local knowledge of women from being considered for planning public spaces must be disrupted, allowing women to take on a role as facilitators when experts, government, and civil associations want to create an intervention within their areas.

As Rena Posen so succinctly put it, "the importance of public space has nothing to do with whether it is beautiful or ugly; it has to do with whether people use it." Achieving a fundamental change in the public spaces of marginalized communities involves bringing real benefits to their inhabitants; it involves commitment at the political level in favour of urban planning with a gender perspective, followed by the specific training of all personnel involved in urban planning. Each step has to incorporate binding participatory processes where the residents of the community, particularly women, can contribute their experiences and be active agents in the urban processes' diagnostic, transformation, and evaluation phases.

Research Team
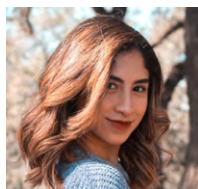
Avril Andrea Cázares Cortez is an undergraduate student in social transformation at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Monterrey, concentrating in leadership for social development with a minor in global affairs. As a member of the society of students in social transformation 2020–2021, she held the position of social responsibility, directing the student sustainability program of the student body's executive committee after serving as the project's coordinator for the program from 2017 to 2020. She trained in "The Climate Reality Project," focused on leadership in action for the climate crisis, and is an active member of the UNAI Millennium Fellowship focused on implementing projects for the development of the 17 sustainable development goals. She is the co-founder of Project Jiadi, art therapy for children of Indigenous communities. She is currently in an exchange program at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea, studying social welfare.
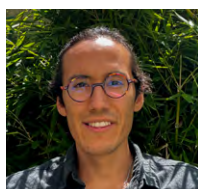
Jose Luis Jordan Chávez recently graduated with a bachelor of business administration and strategy at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Toluca. He participated in the marketing concentration and the leadership for social development modality, working together with internationally recognized companies such as General Motors and La Moderna Cookie Factory, as well as civil associations such as Fomento Educativo Intercultural. He is currently an intern in the marketing area for DataExpress Latin America, implementing a general marketing and communication strategy for the company. He has recent experience in content creation and social media management for restaurants, travel agencies, and other businesses. He is the co-founder of Project Jiadi, art therapy for children of Indigenous communities.
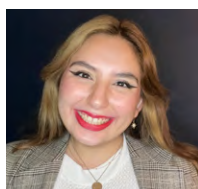
Rebeca Aimeé Arreola Mejía is a student at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Monterrey, finishing her senior year of a bachelor's degree in social transformation. Following courses in leadership for social development, she is currently minoring in political studies. In the Society of Social Transformation Students, she served as the director of strategic planning and projects, implementing collaborations and social projects in conjunction with the students' board. For four years, Rebeca was the general coordinator of a group of over 100 adolescent women in a religious group, "Movimiento de Juventudes Cristianas," whose goal is to seek integral formation through encouraging leadership based on formative and practical activities. She is the co-founder of Project Jiadi, art therapy for children of Indigenous communities. Rebeca is currently in a study abroad program at Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá, Colombia.
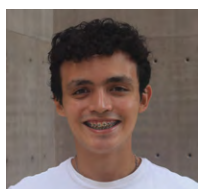
Saad Salomón Castillo Galindo is an undergraduate student in international relations with the Leaders of Tomorrow full scholarship at the Tecnológico de Monterrey. He works as an intern in the enterprise risk management department at the CEMEX international headquarters in the city of Monterrey, as well at the Tlalpan Innovation District in Mexico City. He was part of the student senate of the Federation of Students of the Tecnológico de Monterrey (2020–2021), of the

youth senate representing the state of Nuevo León (2019), of the World Class Youth program in Hamburg, Germany (2019), and of the program Youth in Action of the Embassy of the United States in the cities of Washington DC and Seattle (2017–2018). He is the co-founder of Project Jiadi, art therapy for children of Indigenous communities.

Iza Sanchéz Siller is a professor at Tecnológico de Monterrey. She graduated in law from the Tecnológico de Monterrey and holds a PhD in social sciences, with a specialization in migration and public health, having completed research stays at Mississippi State University and University of Trento in Italy. She has recently taught courses on citizenship and democracy, sociology, gender, society and human rights, political participation and sociology of identity, and qualitative research methods and coordinated the semester of "Leadership for Social Development." Her current work on social development focuses on gender and violence from a sociological and legal perspective, especially with domestic migrants, through projects with Indigenous communities within the Monterrey Metropolitan Area. Sánchez Siller is co-founder of the program "Promoting Gender Equity in Adolescents and Young Women in Rural Areas" in Mitunguu, Kenya, a program that works with local high schools to reinforce the importance of higher education and decision making.

The Reach Alliance began in 2015 at the University of Toronto as the Reach Project, a student-led, faculty-mentored, multidisciplinary research initiative. The Reach Alliance has since scaled to include the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School and Blavatnik School of Government, the University College London, and Tecnológico de Monterrey. Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardest-to-reach populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.

Reach Alliance