

Beyond Lighting and CCTV

Lessons on the impact of public space on women's perception of safety from the UN Women's 'Safe Cities' program in Latin America.

Explore Lab – research paper

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Abstract – Women worldwide are disproportionately affected by safety issues and fear in public spaces. In Latin America, where inequality is pervasive, scholars and activists have directed considerable attention to this issue. While several urban interventions have been proposed by local and international institutions to improve urban safety, their long-term effectiveness remains unclear. This study investigates how women perceive the impact of infrastructural changes implemented since 2011 as part of the UN Women's "Safe Cities" program in three case study cities: Medellín, Quito, and Montevideo. The article shows that the program has been important in supporting legal changes, transforming social norms, and broadening the debate on women's safety, including through data collection and analysis. However, the infrastructural interventions have received less attention and often fail to incorporate indications proposed by feminist researchers and activists. Based on four months' fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with thirty women, questionnaires, and extensive on-site analysis, the article identifies common themes in women's voices and issues in the process and outcome of infrastructural developments. From this data, we conclude that women's safety must be understood as a spatially and temporally continuous, collective experience and that this should be reflected in approaches to transformations of the built environment. Using this premise, the study proposes planning and design strategies that consider women's safety needs across six categories: temporality and sustainability, inclusive functional programs, equal access to localized and high-quality infrastructure, planning trajectories and areas of influence, supporting existing networks of care, and creating spaces for organizing and collective action.

Keywords – safety, women, Latin America, public space, UN Women, urban interventions

1 Introduction and problem statement

In Latin America, where the incidence of sexual violence ranks among the highest globally (Essayag, 2017) and nearly 5,000 femicide cases are reported annually (UNECLAC, 2022), struggles against gender-based violence have a profound societal impact. Beyond the actual danger demonstrated by the alarming data, a pervasive sense of anxiety restricts women's activity and participation in public spaces. (Stanko, 1990; Kern, 2021) This fear is an objective reality, but it is also commonly reinforced by pressures arising from social constructs, (Condon, Lieber, and Maillachon, 2007) which is manifested in the gendered division of public space (Falú, 2009; Taylor, 2011) and differences in how women and men use it. (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Pain 2001) The societal expectation that socializes women into 'invisibility' in public spaces, ostensibly for their protection (Pain 2001; Rivas 2009), results in nuanced entitlements to certain locations while discouraging their presence in others (Condon, Lieber, and Maillachon, 2007). Women face exclusion from certain areas of cities also due to inadequate planning that neglects safety considerations. This context underscores the importance of understanding how planning and design decisions influence safety experiences, ultimately shaping women's well-being and the long-term social sustainability of cities.

The UN Women's "Safe Cities" Global Flagship Program

UN Women's "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls" flagship program emerged as the first global response to violence affecting the lives of women and girls across the world. The initiative, commonly known as "Safe Cities," was launched to address gender-based violence in public spaces on an interregional scale. Over the past decade, it has evolved into a global endeavor, influencing more than 50 cities worldwide. (UN Women, 2021)

The establishment of UN Women on July 2, 2010, marked a significant turning point in unifying efforts to promote women's rights and in addressing funding challenges for related initiatives. UN Women integrated the endeavors of four UN entities, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, and the UN Development Fund for Women. This consolidation sharpened the focus and enhanced the impact of gender equality activities throughout the UN system. (UN Women, 2011)

The "Safe Cities" program, developed collaboratively with UN-Habitat, policymakers, and local women's organizations, evolved from the previous UN Women's initiative, the "Global Programme on Safe Cities Free of Violence against Women and Girls," established in November 2010 (UN Women, 2023). Drawing inspiration from a successful UNIFEM initiative in Latin America initiated in 2004 (iKNOW Politics, 2012), the "Global Programme" aimed to propose and test widely applicable models for preventing sexual violence in public spaces. (UN Women, 2011) The program's mission statement highlights a focus on public space and on global outreach, echoed in the subsequent "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces" Flagship Program. Launched globally, the "Safe Cities" extends the legacy of previous initiatives, underscoring the significance of a unified direction and incorporating contributions from diverse local and regional efforts.

“Safe Cities” in Latin America

An analysis of the introduction of the Safe Cities initiative in Latin America reveals its role as a focal point of cooperation between women and governments. Some researchers have seen in its emergence a possibility to continue and expand on the processes of collaboration, already underway in the region. (Falú & Segovia, 2007). However, concerns persist, with suggestions that the involvement of multilateral organizations may potentially diminish the influence of local women's organizations. According to Ciocoletto et al. (2019), the appropriation of this work by international organizations “was to some extent, reducing the strength that women's organizations had in their territory”. Entities like UN Women and UN Habitat, benefiting from greater resources and visibility, have taken over roles that were historically performed by local women's movements for decades.

While marked by a history of violence, armed conflicts, colonial invasions, civil wars, and organized crime, and still recognized as one of the most violent and unequal regions in the world, (Rettberg, 2020; Rivas Monje & Zunino Folle, 2019) Latin America is characterized by a long history of struggles for human rights, among them for women's safety. (Bednarczyk, 2021) Gender-based violence received a lot of attention from researchers in this part of the world. (Mesa and Aravena, 2008; Rivas Monje and Zunino Folle, 2019; Segato, 2020) Efforts against this systemic and persistent problem united not only feminist scholars but also a wide diversity of social groups. (Miller, 2010)

Women in the region pioneered a shift in the global understanding of gender-based violence. In 1981, they established the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on the 25th of November, and in 1994, they drafted and insisted on the governments to sign the first international law on violence against women, the Inter-American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment, and Elimination of Violence against Women. (Friedman, 2014) Since then, women's groups and non-governmental organizations have contributed to the political debate, and to the advancement of knowledge on gender-based violence with a vision of influencing public policies. (Falú, 2017) Red Mujer y Habitat, Repem, and Cladem, have been among the local organizations at the forefront of these efforts. (Falú & Segovia, 2007)

The objectives of this research paper

Through this study, I aim to critically review the long-term impact of the interventions carried out within the UN Women's “Safe Cities” initiative on women's perceived safety. Despite the program's significance, researchers external to UN Women have rarely conducted a thorough evaluation of past initiatives within its framework, whereas it can offer new, enriching perspectives. The main questions I address in this research explore how interventions in infrastructure and public space within the UN Women's program influence women's sense of safety and how women's perspectives on urban safety can be addressed through design and planning principles.

I demonstrate that the UN Women's program has been important in supporting legal changes, reshaping social norms, and broadening the debate on women's safety in Latin America, incorporating data collection and analysis. However, infrastructural interventions within the initiative have received less attention and often overlooked indications proposed by in feminist urbanism literature. In the concluding

sections of the research, I propose design strategies and planning principles grounded in women's experiences, encompassing six categories: 1) temporality and sustainability, 2) inclusive functional programs, 3) equal access to localized and high-quality infrastructure, 4) planning trajectories and areas of influence, 5) supporting existing networks of care, and 6) spaces for organizing and collective action.

2 Theoretical context

Planning and design for safety from a historical perspective

Some of the first well-known ideas about the intersections of urban safety, city planning, and design, originated in the early 1970s when criminologist C. Ray Jeffery (1971) and architect Oscar Newman (1972) independently developed theories proposing a set of design rules to encourage crime prevention through the design of urban environments. Earlier, in the 1950s, Elizabeth Wood, a housing advocate from Chicago, urged for small-scale projects instead of modern tall structures, to transform housing complexes into authentic neighborhoods. (Ceccato & Nalla, 2020) Another pioneer was the journalist Jane Jacobs, who in the 1960s criticized the inefficacy of public housing design in the United States. She coined the memorable phrase “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1961), explaining how for a street to be safe “there must be eyes on the street, eyes that belong to those we can call the natural owners of the street.” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35) In the 1980s, geographer Alice Coleman conducted research on the impact of modernistic large-scale social projects on safety, focusing on the size and scale of the built environment as essential factors. (Coleman, 1985) Over time, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, originating from Jeffery’s and Newman’s ideas, has evolved further, integrating concepts of public participation, health, and sustainability. (Mihinjac and Saville, 2019)

In recent times, there has been a growing commercialization of safety, where private companies offer standards for security, along with the growing use of monitoring technologies. Consequently, in many countries facing high crime rates, gated communities have become a long-term housing and safety solution. (Ceccato & Nalla, 2020) Early theories on planning and design for safety have largely been focused on housing complexes. Studies that give attention to safety in non-intimate spaces, including public space and mobility systems, are relatively new.

Criticism of the long-established theories

A claim that fear can be ‘designed out’ by interventions in the built environment, originating from Newman's (1972) ideas about ‘defensible space’ and Jeffery's (1971) notions of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, has been criticized for not considering the impact of social relations (Koskela & Pain, 2000; Ortiz Escalante 2014) and focusing exclusively on crime rates while neglecting fear of violence and perception of danger. (Wekerle, 2000) Often, in the research concerning safety, spatial features were evaluated in broad, dualistic categories like opened or closed, empty or crowded (Koskela & Pain, 2000), and well-lit or dark (Atkins et al., 1991; Struyf 2020) without considering the complexity of the urban settings. The broken windows theory, which states that minor signs of disorder in a public space, such as graffiti, vandalism, public drunkenness, or begging, lead to the increase of insecurity in a certain area, (Kelling & Wilson, 1982) has been denounced to reinforce social exclusion

and polarization. (Mitchell, 2003) Small-scale interventions, including better street lighting or widening pavements, proved to be insufficient in the longer term. (Atkins et al., 1991; Nair et al., 2000). Crime prevention interventions have often relied on CCTV cameras, while some researchers are skeptical about their effectiveness (Beebeejaun, 2009; Pedersen, 2020) and claim that seeing cameras can lead to feeling hyper-vigilant (Kalms, 2021). Gated communities were criticized as ensuring safety only for those who can afford it, instead of treating it as a human right (Ceccato & Nalla, 2020) and enhancing class-based spatial inequalities. (Low, 2001) Despite the criticism, all these concepts are still influential and widely applied in interventions aimed at improving urban security. (Cozens & Love, 2017)

A feminist approach to planning and design for safety

In recent years, feminist researchers made significant contributions to the critique of long-established approaches to planning and design for security. They have focused on the previously unrepresented perspective of women regarding safety in public spaces (Delgado, 2018; Toro Jiménez & Ochoa Sierra, 2017) and mobility systems (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). With the recognition of the gendered nature of urban safety, scholars devoted attention to understudied issues of street harassment, (Colectivo Catalejo, 2018; Fileborn 2021; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020) and fear of violence (Ceccato & Nalla, 2020; Condon et al., 2007), and identified them as political problems (Pandolfi et al., 2019). They have also drawn attention to the most extreme form of violence against women – femicide, the gender-based killing of women. (Radford & Russell, 1992; Tejada Puentes, 2016) The focus on women was later extended to other marginalized groups with an intersectional approach. (Kern, 2020; Ruiz-Tagle et al., 2021)

Departing from the feminist and intersectional theories, a community of academics focused specifically on spatial planning and architecture as important factors influencing urban safety. Contributions of those researchers include a criticism of the public-private dichotomy, (Whitzman, 2007) advocating for mixed-use and proximity of facilities, (Muxí Martínez et al., 2011) and promoting social mixing, coexistence, and diversity. (Falú, 2009; Segovia, 2002) Among the reasons for women's negative experiences in public spaces, scholars mention the exclusion of marginalized groups from participatory and decision-making processes (Ciocoleto et al., 2019) and the lack of transversal gender mainstreaming in city planning. (De Simone, 2018) Academics recognize the importance of reinforcing informal networks of care and social cohesion as essential for achieving urban safety and empowerment. (Bednarczyk, 2021)

The relation of the “Safe Cities” program to theories on women’s safety in public spaces

The “Safe Cities” program includes actions in four areas: data collection and analysis; laws and policies; interventions in public space infrastructure; and transformation of social norms. (Segovia, 2020) The theoretical background incorporates many of the contributions of feminist thought, including the recognition of women's fear as a relevant factor, focus on the issue of street harassment and the intersectional approach. (Falú, 2017; Segovia, 2020) These influences are particularly apparent in the descriptions of the program's motivation and the design of initiatives from three areas: data analysis, awareness-raising, and the legal sphere.

However, the interventions related to public infrastructure, not only in Latin America, do not incorporate many of the ideas developed by the feminist urban planning community, such as promoting mixed-use developments that encourage a diverse and active presence in public spaces throughout the day and evening or responding to the need for the proximity of public services which could be better achieved by offering dispersed networks of solutions instead of centralized, isolated interventions. Some infrastructural changes within the “Safe Cities” program, described in available reports include improved lighting in Delhi, Sakai, Villavicencio, Montevideo, and Popayán; installing CCTV in Sakai; maintenance of parks in Medellín, Montevideo, Villavicencio; gender-segregated buses in Mexico City; remodeling trolleybus stops as "glass corridors" in Quito; renovating market stalls and sanitation equipment in Port Moresby and Kigali. (Felipe Soria, 2017; ONU Mujeres Colombia, 2019; Segovia, 2020) In several cities, participatory processes with residents were carried out (ONU Mujeres Colombia, 2019) but their impact on the implemented solutions is not clear and the results often fall in the category of the above-mentioned simple urban interventions. As I will discuss further in this research, there is an opportunity to increase the impact of the “Safe Cities” program on women's safety by considering more complex approaches to public infrastructure, which seem to have received less attention as compared to the other three areas of the UN Women’s initiative.

3 Objectives of the research and methodology

Research questions

In this research project, I am delving into how women in Latin America perceive the impact of infrastructure and public space elements on their sense of safety. I also seek to understand how their experiences and perceptions of vulnerability can inform design strategies. To achieve this, I have formulated three categories of sub-questions. 1) I investigate how women view the issue of urban safety and its importance in their daily lives. 2) I identify which physical factors or transformations in public space are most relevant to women's safety from the local community's perspective. 3) Finally, I assess the UN Women's "Safe Cities" program and discuss the implications for future projects. I want to know if the community recognizes previously implemented interventions and if they have effectively improved women's safety. Moreover, I seek suggestions from local women on how to integrate their experiences into the design of public spaces.

Methodology

This research employs a methodology centered on evaluating the long-term impacts of public space and infrastructure interventions under the UN Women's "Safe Cities" program on women's safety. The process of evaluation is crucial for discerning successful solutions and identifying areas requiring further refinement. I use a mixed-methods approach, primarily relying on qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 female residents and experts specializing in gender-based violence across various disciplines. These interviews, conducted between August and December 2022, employ a flexible question framework to elucidate women's daily experiences, problems, and priorities. Additionally, a fixed-format online questionnaire supplements the qualitative insights. The inquiries

encompass general perceptions of women's safety in public spaces, changes observed in the past five years, and anticipated developments for enhancing safety in the future. Specific questions delve into the "Safe Cities" initiative, covering familiarity with the program, opinions on its objectives, and the perceived impact of its various elements on safety. The exploration extends to the participants' feelings of belonging and involvement in participatory processes within their neighborhoods.

The inclusion of participants from diverse age groups and occupations ensures varied insights. However, it's important to acknowledge that all represented the middle or upper class, due to difficulties reaching women from lower-income groups. This limitation constrains a full representation of the vulnerabilities faced by women in cities, particularly in areas lacking adequate basic infrastructure, which present distinct safety planning challenges. This underscores the necessity for further research.

Reflexivity and situated position

As my methodology is inspired by methods of anthropology, which are interpretive and less controlled, it is important to reflect on my position as a researcher, and how it might influence the results. The theoretical foundation draws from Polish-, English-, and Spanish-language literature, predominantly authored by feminist scholars. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of safety in public spaces, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from architecture, urban planning, criminology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, gender studies, political sciences, and law. Despite the interdisciplinary nature, my background in architecture and urban planning shapes the research's framing, interviews, and observations.

As a woman who has personally encountered fear and violence in public spaces, my study is propelled by a genuine connection to the experiences of the women I investigate. However, having resided exclusively in European countries, I acknowledge my outsider status in the context of Latin American cities. Thus, I depend on the perspectives of interviewees and their willingness to share their experiences with me. Thanks to the opportunity to spend three months on extensive on-site analysis in Latin America, I believe to have built a closer direct understanding of the context. I do not aim claim to speak for all Latin American women's experiences, but I hope to provide insights into the research problem.

4 Case study cities

This paper concerns interventions related to public infrastructure within the "Safe Cities" program in three case study cities - Quito (Ecuador), Medellín (Colombia), and Montevideo (Uruguay). The commitment to creating safer public spaces in these cities is manifested in their participation in the UN Women's program for more than 5 years, as well as through initiatives at a local, and municipal level and activity of bottom-up women's movements.

In 2011, Quito joined the "Safe Cities" global initiative as one of the five pioneer cities. The first step undertaken by program partners was a participatory scoping study. Following the research, Quito adopted new legislation to prevent violence against women. The Action Protocol for victims of sexual

harassment was developed and authorities were trained in its application. Trolleybus stops were replaced with new glazed structures, based on the rule "see and be seen, hear and be heard" and care services were developed in five of the main metropolitan transportation stations, to provide guidance and accompany women who have experienced sexual violence. A system to report sexual harassment through text messages, "Lower the harassment" ("*Bájale al acoso*"), was also developed.

Medellín followed as the first city in Colombia in 2015. The project began with a baseline study, through which data on women's experiences and perceptions of safety were collected. In the district of Manrique, a pilot project was developed. It included informative actions on 40 buses, with over 400 graphics and videos created by women. Awareness-raising live theatrical performances were carried out with the aim to transform cultural norms. A commitment agreement was endorsed between the local government and 28 bars to create secure spaces for women. The staff of the bars was trained and sensitized. The infrastructural changes included the organization of space and maintenance of parks.

In Montevideo, the large-scale project within the framework of the program began in 2018. Two areas were chosen for the main points of intervention of the initiative, Parque Rodó and the Unión - Villa Española neighborhoods. Participatory scoping studies were carried out. Data about women's safety and its perception were gathered and analyzed. Graphic signs and posters informing about the problem of violence against women and ways of acting were installed in the parks. The Department of Transport was asked to change the route of the bus, which stopped inside the park, and a larger pedestrian zone was created. The project included the change of lighting and organization of greenery.

5 Results

General observations on women's experiences and needs related to urban safety

Fear of violence is a frequently experienced and significant problem for women in the case study cities. In the interviews, many of them admitted that they experience high levels of fear, as can be seen for example in the statements of a 24-year-old political scientist from Quito: "Harassment is a constant in the city, not only in public transport but in all spaces. It is a constant.", or a 40-year-old municipality employee in Medellín: "Safety of women in Medellín, in general, is not very good, not at all, and neither in public transport." Only 12% of the survey respondents are not concerned about any threat to their personal safety in their immediate neighborhood. One out of three people who wanted to change their place of residence indicated safety issues as the reason for their desire to move.

People experience anxiety for a variety of reasons. 75% of survey participants are concerned that they may become a victim of a robbery. Almost half of the respondents fear verbal violence, hassling, teasing, and whistling. 37% are afraid of stalking, or someone touching them, and one third of respondents has fears of becoming a victim of rape. The frequency of experiences of violence also shows the scale of the safety problems. Of the 114 respondents, in the past two years, 77 had experienced or witnessed verbal abuse, 76 - whistling at women, 40 - stalking, 29 non-consensual touching, 21 - exhibitionism, and 7 - rape. Gender differences also emerged in interviews: "Women are not only robbed of their mobile phones, but also exposed to other forms of violence, such as rape, sexual aggression, and

harassment. And so, this means that we have been deprived of public space. I am afraid to walk around Quito. I think a lot before I leave my house, about the routes I must take.”

Of the 114 survey respondents and 30 interviewees, only 15 people did not answer the optional open question: “What changes do you consider to be the most important for your city to achieve safety for women in public spaces and transport in the coming years?” which shows the importance of this study for residents. In Appendix 1, I present the 30 themes that recurred most frequently in response to this question. Some of the suggestions can be related to urban planning and design directly, like providing more adequate lighting, effective maintenance of public space, and renovation of abandoned lots with high-quality infrastructure. People often mentioned the importance of accessibility, and intensive use of public spaces, activating them through inclusive, mixed-use programs, also at night. Some of the answers relate to functions that are needed and missing in many cities: creating places of women’s cooperation, safe places for discussion about gender-based violence, educational facilities where knowledge about the problem can be distributed. Some women expressed the need for spaces responding to their specific needs like places for breastfeeding or places of shelter and assistance for victims of violence. Several people advocated for creating more open spaces, or for connecting the existing public space so that it becomes continuous and “safe until the last mile”, as one of the survey respondents put it. The second most recurring theme focused on enhancing community involvement, through adequate reactions to violent events and the provision of care to the victims.

Overall conclusions on the UN Women’s program

This section includes the evaluation of the UN Women’s “Safe Cities” program and answers questions about women’s familiarity with the initiative, alignment with its objectives, perceptions about its implementation, and long-term impact. About half of the survey respondents are familiar with the program, while almost all interviewees were able to recall it, sometimes after a few hints. More than 90 percent of survey respondents say that information about it should be more widely disseminated. The “Safe Cities” program was important in contributing to a broader public debate about women’s safety and the transformation of cultural norms, as one of the interviewees put it: “Bringing sexual violence into the public discussion, which was something that nobody talked about before and which was sort of hidden, is always going to be good.” More than half of the people surveyed believe that the interventions have had a real impact on women’s safety, and 75 percent say they should be repeated or expanded. However, the interventions related to public space seem to have received insufficient attention in the program and the planning principles were often too simplistic. Some respondents expressed frustration with the program’s focus only on information campaigns and baseline studies: “The scope of what UN Women has done is limited. In other words, it is a qualitative diagnosis with the faculty that was very good, where they showed something that is obvious because it happens to everyone, which is that women go around the park because they go on safer circuits looking for light and movement... And so, they put some lights and something else in the middle of the park. But I can’t evaluate the impact of an intervention that is so isolated.”, or a survey respondent: “We need a system that really works, where everyone is engaged and not just words and posters.”

Women also expressed their disappointment with overly simple solutions introduced within the “Safe Cities” program, when much more important infrastructural changes are needed: “I don't see how the new designs were safer, I mean, basically it was just about repainting, placing some benches. That doesn't make the layout of the space protect you in any way or give you access to help or assistance. There is none of this.” One of the elderly women participating in the survey, when asked for her opinion on the UN Women's program, expressed the need for many more changes in the public space: “I believe that there must be material changes, improvement of public spaces in the most disadvantaged sectors. We need more squares, a better quality of passages, streets, with the coexistence of different people, light, trees, many games, and places for young people. So, let's say, there must be a strong investment in materiality. Secondly, we need strong management of artistic events, that there is music, and culture in public space is fundamental; that there is a design of places that have diversity”. The lack of an overall vision and connection to other areas of action within the program was also raised: “I don't know if it had a big impact. I think these interventions are done in isolation, that they are not connected with other actions that are important in terms of awareness-raising, education, and so they remain as works that do not change the dynamics of anything much.” Overall, despite the general support for the program, many voices were pointing out shortcomings in the approach related to public space and infrastructure.

6 Approaching women's safety with planning and design principles

Based on the evaluation of the UN Women's “Safe Cities” program and women's experiences shared in the interviews and surveys, I propose six categories of planning principles and design strategies aimed at improving women's safety in public spaces.

Temporality and sustainability

Time is a critical factor in city planning for women's safety. Anna Bednarczyk, a sociologist specializing in women's security in Argentina, emphasizes the variability of what constitutes a safe space. A location can be dangerous at certain times and with specific groups of people while being enjoyable and liberating at other times, depending on the activities performed there. (Mohebpour & Bednarczyk, 2023) This fluidity underscores the need for city planning to consider the temporal aspect of safety.

One key intervention identified as the most important by the largest group of survey respondents (46%) and often mentioned in the interviews, is the introduction of mixed functions that activate public spaces during the night. Often, public squares and parks are designed with minimal features, such as benches and green areas, which fail to encourage activities. Incorporating sports, culture, music, food, and other attractions that draw people after dark can significantly enhance safety. The field of designing for nightlife has not received enough attention historically but has gained a growing interest in recent years. In 2018, the First Latin American Conference on Managing the Urban Night took place in Bogotá. Notably, in 2022 in Katowice, for the first time the UN Habitat's World Urban Forum (WUF11), has concentrated its discourse and activities on improving the night in cities. (Barber, 2022) Amsterdam, is a global reference when it comes to night-time policies, with the establishment in 2003 of the office of the *Nachtburgemeester* (the Night Mayor), who serves as an active interlocutor for all participants in the

city's nightlife and the introduction in 2013 of the "24-hour license" to allow locations to open around the clock. The night mayor is now appointed in over 60 cities around the world, including in Latin America, where Cali became the first city to create the equivalent of this office in 2016.

A prevailing trend in planning for safety at night in Latin America has been to constrain nocturnal activity by introducing curfews or banning the sale of alcoholic beverages after a certain hour. These approaches have faced criticism for their narrow focus, (Seijas et al., 2017) suppressing urban activities and failing to sustain vibrant, secure nightscapes. (Seijas & Gelders, 2020) Often, including within UN Women's 'Safe Cities' program, in the nighttime planning the emphasis is exclusively on the lighting of spaces. While adequate lighting is important, some participants in this study argue against excessive illumination and instead advocate for creating a night atmosphere that fosters a sense of liberty without compromising women's safety, "I don't consider it necessary to over-light the public space. Night and darkness are necessary for human life: for women and for men. The magic of Medellin resides in having a cultural change at day and night. To me, we are traditional at day and progressive at night, this could explain the high quantity of bars and clubs that operate at night. Public space, especially open areas, should follow this magic, by giving to night this sense of liberty, without being a reason of danger for women, with a night atmosphere, not with invasive lighting."

In the report of the UN Women's Safe Cities program in Montevideo, there is a suggestion that intense nightlife can pose safety risks for women and girls: "It [Parque Rodó] is an area of nightclubs, with an intense nightlife, which has generated specific problems. The Secretariat for Youth and the Undersecretary agree that the "night-time logic" implies situations of greater risk. This is also in line with the quantitative findings, which suggest that it is necessary to think about those spaces, populated by mostly adolescent and young women." (UN Women, 2018) However, personal testimonies from women in Montevideo reveal that bars, clubs, and other night-time venues can enhance their sense of security: "I live in a fairly safe street, my street is full of bars and clubs, full of people at night. So, it's not a big issue to arrive at night." The presence of other women in these spaces, along with a staff that is sensitized to gender-based violence, contributes to a safer environment: "I feel much safer when people are in clubs or bars because people overflow onto the pavement. In the clubs there are men and women, I don't know if it's an equal number, but well, there is a good presence of women there. And as long as there is a presence of other women, I feel more confident." Therefore, it is crucial to consider the positive impact that such venues can have on women's safety and not overlook their potential.

Another dimension in which time is essential is the long-term sustainability of programs and interventions. Women interviewed for the study expressed positive initial perceptions of UN Women's interventions but noted a lack of resilience over time. Without proper management and maintenance, these programs can cease functioning, leading to re-victimization processes. As one of the interviewees said, "I believe that any plan, any project, and any program that can be established to reduce insecurity is valid. The problem is if it is sustained over time. The problem is if the population gives these projects the importance they require. I think these projects, as time goes by, are forgotten. We still don't have the capacity to sustain these processes in the long term." Management and maintenance of such programs are crucial and should be considered already during the design phase. The functioning of

these programs in the long term has a significant impact on women who rely on them, as illustrated by a woman from Quito, who referred to the system for reporting harassment in public transport, introduced within the UN Women's "Safe Cities" program: "I don't think anyone uses this. I have never used it, and I know for example of cases that were spread on networks or on Twitter, where some girls tried to use it and it was not that effective, because of the time of response. You are supposed to send the message and at the next stop, there should be a metropolitan guard to assist you. But in reality - a girl gets off at the stop and there is no guard. And again, she would have to explain what had happened to a person who was there and ask for help, in a victimizing way. And in the end, nothing was done."

Inclusive functional program

When revitalizing abandoned or underused urban spaces, it is common to introduce service points, restaurants, shops, and markets as part of the redevelopment efforts. These interventions aim to bring life back to neglected areas and create vibrant community spaces. For example, the "Pocket squares" project in Santiago de Chile involved reclaiming small vacant lots in the city through public-private partnerships that incorporated associations of food trucks. However, in many cases, these solutions prove inadequate for the economic capacity and local needs of the residents, often leading to their abandonment. This problem is particularly pronounced at night. In some Latin American cities, the absence of safe public spaces has resulted in the concentration of social nighttime activities in private spaces like shopping malls. This creates a restricted space where most interactions are dominated by economic transactions and consumption. Andreina Seijas (2017) highlights this problem, stating that contexts in which people need to purchase something to participate in leisure activities are common in many cities in the region. She claims that as a result, "the night becomes a highly restricted space, where the nature of most exchanges is economic and dominated by consumption." This overemphasis on economic exchange limits the inclusivity and accessibility of public spaces at night.

When planning spaces that are accessible to all regardless of economic capacity, it is crucial to ensure a diverse range of functions that attract people. Otherwise, these spaces often become dangerous, deserted, or dominated by violent groups. The importance of a diverse, inclusive functional program is illustrated by a woman from Medellin who compares her perception of parks and squares with public spaces belonging to the UVA (*Unidades de Vida Articulada*) program - aimed, among other things, to improve urban safety: "What happens in most parks, or in the public squares? For example, the Bolivar Square, what does it offer? Chairs, and that's it. So, in the perception of security, these places make women feel less comfortable. What has been the success of the UVAs, the Units for the Articulation of Life? Their success comes from the fact that they are filled with activities, it is a free, public space filled with activities, so there are open-air gyms, there is a library, then there are also some rooms for activities with children, and workshops for adults. An offer of activities ensures that they function."

To enhance safety, it is important to envision diverse and engaging functions. While commercial establishments have their place, freely accessible functions allow for a broader spectrum of community engagement. This approach is essential for building neighborhood networks, vital for community safety. Anchor points that remain open during the day and night can also contribute to strengthening social cohesion and may become partners in creating a network of safety within the community.

Equal access to localized and high-quality infrastructure

Tactical urbanism, a strategy that utilizes low-cost, and temporary interventions, is often discussed as a solution for vacant lots in cities. While experts recognize its value as a tool for testing ideas, women, in general, express a need for long-term solutions that provide consistent access to high-quality infrastructure throughout the entire city. Overcoming socio-spatial fragmentation and achieving equal access is crucial in creating safe and inclusive urban environments. Implementing distributed models of urban interventions, such as the UVA project in Medellín or the Bogotá Care System, establishes a network of quality infrastructure that provides care in various neighborhoods, ensuring proximity and accessibility, which is particularly important for women. Importantly, these initiatives involve residents in participatory processes to determine, among other factors, the functional program, which results in localized and diverse solutions within the network. Dan Hill, Director of Melbourne School of Design, notes that focusing on the provision of care and necessary infrastructure in disadvantaged neighborhoods represents a shift away from the traditional model, which relies on a central role of job creation which is believed to consequently also improve facilities. In the distributed model, “the aim is to prevent care from becoming an issue in the first place”. (Hill & Rodríguez Franco, 2022)

While public spaces should offer consistent quality, it is also crucial to consider local specificities, as standardized solutions that ignore local nuances can result in the abandonment of public spaces and frustration among residents. This becomes particularly relevant when participatory processes fail to effectively translate people's contributions into actual solutions, despite their involvement. Many respondents believe that there is a strong presence of women in the participatory processes but there is little sense of real impact, as a survey respondent highlights: “The reason why I didn't choose women's participation as an important factor to enhance safety, is because they are active partakers of participatory initiatives already. It's a question of decision-making, not access.”

However, some groups of women still feel excluded from participatory processes. One interviewee emphasizes the challenges faced by women who juggle multiple responsibilities, “To be able to participate you have to have time, and time is money. It is money to take care of your children, or money, if you are alone, to have free time. But if you have to work in a supermarket for six hours, and then in a shop for another eight hours, all you want when you get home is to sleep, and watch the stupidest film you can find, that doesn't make you think. We can't ask a woman who is in charge of her children, whose husband has left and doesn't give her a penny, who has to work double hours, and in the middle of that, remember the little one's homework at school, the doctor, and to put on a smart face at work the next day, we can't ask her to get involved and participate, can we?” To facilitate the involvement of a more diverse range of women, several ideas are proposed. These include providing childcare during workshops, establishing participation spaces that are dispersed and closer to where people live, or even reaching out to attendees' homes. Additionally, better information and evaluation of the participatory process are needed. Participants should have a clear understanding of the purpose, goals, and potential outcomes of their involvement. Regular evaluation of the process can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that participatory initiatives are effective and impactful. These measures can help facilitate the involvement of a more diverse range of women and ensure their voices are heard.

Planning trajectories and areas of influence

Mobility systems play a significant role in ensuring safety in cities by connecting isolated public spaces, increasing accessibility, and overcoming barriers posed by challenging topographies. In planning safe transportation systems, there is a potential in thinking of continuous movement trajectories instead of simply connecting points. Women's experiences highlight the need for this approach, as they perceive their journeys as a continuum, where the safety of each space along the way matters. It is not enough for individual points or modes of transport to be safe; the entire journey must be designed and maintained adequately to ensure safety, as one of the interviewed women explained: "If I leave my house, walk along a pavement, get to the bus stop, get on the bus, go down a staircase, get on the metro, I experience all these points as a continuum. All these spaces should be optimal because it doesn't help me if the carriage is safe but if I go up the stairs I'm going to be harassed; or if the whole metro station is safe and they rob me when I leave or I walk one block and then the next block is very dark or when I get home I have to ask my husband to go and meet me at my stop or else they rob me. So, I think yes, design the bus stops, but not only the bus stop: it is about the bus stop and when I cross the street and the pavement until I arrive. All the spaces I transit must have an adequate design".

Unsafe mobility routes can hinder access to safe public spaces, particularly for marginalized groups, as illustrated by a woman from Quito: "When we wanted to go to the Metropolitano park, we had to go in the car. But if a person doesn't have a car and wants to go to the Metropolitano... I wouldn't do it. Going all the way up the Guanguiltagua, the street near the park, is extremely dangerous. So, of course, they end up being spaces for the enjoyment of people who have more money and who have a car or who can pay for an Uber, but it is not available to most people who are poor." To promote safety and inclusivity, it is necessary to extend the impact of public transport networks thinking about their influence over a wider area, and design them with attention to safety.

Women often report experiencing violence and anxiety at public transport stops during the waiting time, emphasizing the need for thoughtful design and greater activation of these spaces. By integrating additional functions and amenities in proximity to public transport stops, the surrounding area can become less deserted, more vibrant, and as a result - safer. Examples of such well-functioning spaces can be found near metro exits in Medellín, where outdoor gyms have been installed, library points, or meeting places with board games and greenery, as well as points with access to the phone, Internet, and a charger. In Medellín, women often highlight the positive impact of the Metro system on their safety. They appreciate the good quality infrastructure, the variety of activities offered, and the easy accessibility due to the proximity of these small public spaces: "I think that the success of the public spaces of the metro comes from the fact that there are eyes that watch over you, these metro squares are always in movement, there are many people. There are small shops, which means that there is someone there, these watchful eyes that don't allow crime to happen. These spaces feel secure. And I also think that in Medellín there is a lack of public space and although there are several parks and open public spaces, they are not always so close and so easy to access as the metro squares. " Some women even noted that they would much rather seek help within the metro system than at a police station, in case they were threatened or experienced violence.

Supporting existing networks of care

Security is guaranteed not only by the administration and the law enforcement personnel but also to a significant extent by the collective efforts of co-residents. Social bonds, mutual care, and a sense of responsibility towards one another are the basis of safety understood as a community experience. Many women recognized the community dimension of their experience of safety. The support of neighbors or passers-by and the sense of responsibility dispersed among residents was the second most frequently mentioned factor in response to the open-ended question about the changes that respondents consider most important for improving safety in their city in the survey and interviews. The idea of strengthening community ties and recognizing each other as neighbors is seen as crucial for achieving safety, as a young woman from Quito expressed: "We should first strengthen community ties between the neighborhoods. In other words, we should recognize each other as neighbors and see each other. And from there, I think that's where you start to fight the battle on the issue of safety. For me, the issue of security is very much based on community ties. I am very anti-punitive, I don't believe in the logic that security means more police, in fact, everything indicates that this is not the case. So, we must look for alternatives that begin in the civilian sphere."

When the provision of security is no longer seen only as the responsibility of the state and the security services and becomes the diffused responsibility of all, it leads to the formation of networks of care that can respond immediately to violence, which can be extremely important. A woman from Montevideo shared an emotional experience where a young girl was harassed in the street, but people immediately reacted to protect and support her: "It happened to me... [sobbing] a young girl in the middle of the 18th [Street], right? she was harassed, basically, and well, right away it started... right, all of those, "Well, how are you?", It's not your fault!" - a lot of people simply aware of the problem. I don't know how to explain it. I think it's important because as long as it's known, it's not tolerated, we reach out to protect and to take care of ourselves. [crying] I got emotional because it was an ugly situation that a young girl had to go through, but immediately people reacted well, you see." The presence of individuals who are aware of the problem and willing to intervene creates a sense of safety and solidarity.

The physical cityscape can support existing networks of care by visualizing them, for example through signs on the facades or flags at balconies, as was done in Montevideo with the program introduced by the Municipio B, called "My feminist balcony" (*"Mi balcón feminista"*). As part of this program, the city council invited local illustrators to design different versions of the flag to be flown on balconies, and these were then distributed free of charge among neighbors so that they can participate and express their commitment to gender equality from their homes. A quote from a woman living in Montevideo can explain the importance of this type of action: "You can see that there are so many people who are part of this community of care and that you can ask for help. And in other neighborhoods, it came up spontaneously. My neighborhood is not in municipality B, and well, the neighbors came out, feminist neighbors, they put up a purple cloth and it's incredible, it's completely spontaneous." These visual markers signify solidarity and create a sense of community care. They serve as a visible reminder that help can be sought within the community. The program not only promotes gender equality but also fosters a sense of belonging and support.

Street art also emerges as a powerful means of expression for women in Latin American cities. Through graffiti and other artistic forms, women's voices and shared experiences are brought into the public space. Street art serves as a platform for visibility, allowing women to reclaim public spaces and convey their messages. It becomes a visual representation of their presence, struggles, and resilience, as a woman from Medellín expressed: "Street art helps women, people, feel a sense of belonging to the space. It creates a sense of security and makes it harder for perpetrators to enter spaces where there is a united community, and where people take care of their space. In the last few years, street art in Medellín started to show Afro women, represent more the people from here, and that also brings them together and people can also find a way in street art. So, yes, it's very powerful."

Spaces for organizing and collective action

Planning and architecture have the potential to create spaces that foster cooperation among women and address their safety concerns. In interviews, the role of education in raising awareness about women's fear of violence emerged as a crucial factor in transforming social norms. Education was consistently highlighted as the most important intervention to improve women's safety, both in interviews and surveys. Public spaces that display and disseminate information about women's safety can contribute to these transformative processes.

Designing spaces where women can gather, exchange knowledge, and discuss the issues they face in a safe and supportive environment can also facilitate collective organization and support women's empowerment. An example of such a space is the public square called Las Pioneras in Montevideo. Managed by various women's groups and feminist collectives, Las Pioneras serves as an open space for a wide range of activities. Women come together to prepare for protests, organize workshops, exhibitions, focus groups, and engage in discussions about their needs. The significance of these spaces was emphasized by women in interviews, with one expressing a desire for much more such spaces throughout the city: "What happens is that all of us who are feminists in Montevideo love it and find it incredible that there is a space like Las Pioneras. I wish there were eighty Las Pioneras in the whole city; it would be great!" Designing additional spaces like these can facilitate the political change necessary to address the systemic issue of violence against women.

Another aspect that emerged from the interviews was the importance of community action and collective initiatives in public spaces for sustaining a safe environment. According to a woman from Quito, by actively involving more people in public spaces, safety can be enhanced: "The good practices come from organized neighborhoods. (...) In order to have security, the more people you have in the public space, the safer you are. So, we made a commitment to improving public spaces in the neighborhood, and we organized a *minga*. I don't know if you've heard that word, but *minga* is an Andean, indigenous term for a collective effort, when many people get together and arrange things. (...) Everybody contributes to making a project that is communal. Community projects are projects that acquire sustainability because they are sustained by the people, there is a sense of care and belonging. So, what I have learned is not to wait for the municipality. Sometimes they have helped us, but what sustains us are the community practices." Collective efforts of residents are crucial for achieving greater safety in public spaces and need to be supported by offering adequate facilities to perform them.

7 Conclusions

City planning and design can play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of women in urban spaces. One key factor that must be considered is the temporal aspect of safety. It is essential to design public areas that promote diverse activities during the day and create vibrant and secure nightscapes. Rather than imposing curfews, an inclusive approach involves incorporating mixed functions and features that attract people. Furthermore, it is important to challenge assumptions about the inherent dangers of intense nightlife for women and acknowledge the positive impact that such venues can have on their safety. When revitalizing urban spaces, it is also crucial to consider the economic capacity and local needs of the residents. By providing engaging experiences and promoting non-commercial interactions, public spaces can become inclusive, vibrant, and conducive to community safety.

Women emphasize the need for long-term, inclusive, and high-quality infrastructure throughout the city. Distributed models of urban interventions that prioritize care and necessary infrastructure in disadvantaged neighborhoods offer a promising approach. It is important to consider local specificities and involve a diverse range of women in participatory processes. By addressing challenges such as time constraints and providing supportive measures, participation can be more inclusive and meaningful. Improved information and evaluation processes can further enhance transparency and effectiveness.

Mobility systems also play a significant role in women's safety. Planning for safe mobility entails considering the entire journey as a continuum and ensuring the safety of all spaces traversed. Unsafe mobility routes can limit access to safe public spaces, particularly for marginalized groups. By designing public transport stops with attention to safety and activating a larger area around them through the proximity of other functions, mobility systems can support the emergence of secure environments.

Community-based security goes beyond the responsibilities of the state and law enforcement agencies. When individuals collectively take on the responsibility of ensuring safety, a sense of solidarity and mutual support emerges. The physical cityscape can amplify these networks, for example through visual markers and street art. Integrating educational facilities plays a fundamental role in transforming social norms and raising awareness about women's fear of violence. These spaces become platforms for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collective organization, facilitating women's empowerment.

In conclusion, city planning, and architecture have the power to support the emergence of safer and more inclusive public spaces for women. By considering the temporal variability of safe spaces, revitalizing urban areas with inclusive functional programs and high-quality infrastructure, including mobility systems, prioritizing long-term sustainability, and fostering community-based security and education, cities can become safer environments for women and all residents.

Additional comment

The study was conducted in a post-pandemic context in which the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women's safety was highly cited. Many people in the interviews referred to the negative impact of the pandemic on their safety and indicated that the crisis caused also affected some of the interventions of the UN Women program. The resilience of these types of programs to crises of different kinds, and their performance in the face of them, is something that can be considered in further research.

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Appendix 1 – The most recurrent themes in response to an open question “What changes do you consider to be the most important for your city to achieve safety for women in public spaces and transport in the coming years?”

Topic	Survey responses	Interview responses
Education, awareness-raising	44	13
Supporting existing networks of care, citizen involvement	17	10
Workshops, sensitization of bar/transport personnel and police	20	4
Informative campaigns	17	3
Maintenance of public space	9	8
Solving structural problems (drugs, poverty, inequalities, homelessness)	6	11
Stronger laws and penalties	14	2
More adequate lighting	11	4
Reliable and perfectly functioning response protocols	11	4
More police surveillance	13	
Renovation of abandoned spaces	6	6
Accessibility, inclusive functional program	5	7
Women empowerment, leadership	10	2
Places of cooperation and discussion between women	4	8
Intensive use of public space, mixed-use	5	6
Planning trajectories, continuity of public space, “safe last mile”	5	5
Involving women in design and planning, participation in decision making	6	4
Activating public space at night	7	3
Spaces directed to women, designed specifically for women’s needs	5	5
Creating more open spaces	3	6
Safer public transport of better quality	4	5
Redistribution of financing, more resources for gender-equality programs	3	5
Bridging pay gaps, more jobs for women	5	3
Women as bus/taxi drivers, police officers	6	1
More arts/culture/sports in public space	4	3
Safe havens for victims, points of help	6	1
Developing existing programs, their continuity, and sustainability	3	3
Panic buttons	3	2
Changing the media narrative	4	1
More public transport at night, less waiting time	3	1