Spatial Resistance and Feminist Urbanism: Rethinking Gender-Based Violence Prevention in the University Micro-City of Medellín

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Gender-Based Violence (GBV) within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by conceptualizing the university campus as a "micro-city" and a contested territory. Utilizing a critical-social paradigm and a qualitative methodology grounded in feminist autoethnography and Standpoint Theory, the research reveals that institutional planning is not a neutral exercise. Instead, it often projects power structures that prioritize a "universal subject" while precariousness is imposed upon intersectional identities. The investigation identifies several structural barriers to justice, including the "culture of simulation," normative "purplewashing," and the metaphorical figure of "elevator holders": gatekeepers who ensure institutional indemnity for aggressors. Additionally, the study addresses the emergence of the digital "manosphere" as a sophisticated, collective form of misogyny that infiltrates the academic environment. As a pedagogical counter-proposal, the research presents the "Women's Virtual Agora" as a practice of "acuerpamiento" (collective embodiment) and resistance, designed to transition from individual malaise to collective dignity. The paper concludes that effective GBV prevention requires a fundamental paradigm shift toward an "ethics of care". This shift is essential to guarantee the right to the university city as a secure refuge rather than a landscape of risk.

Keywords: *Feminist urbanism; GBV; university micro-city; spatial resistances; pedagogy of care*

1. Introduction

The bridge is broken/ With what shall we mend it?/ With eggshells/ … Let the king pass/ He must pass/ The count's son Must stay behind.

(Traditional Colombian children's rhyme)

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The planning of our cities—and by extension, our institutions—is not a neutral exercise. It is a projection of power that has enthroned a universal subject: the "King" from the children's rhyme: that white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, male, property owner; for whom space is designed like a red carpet.

Under this logic, the Universidad de Medellín stands as a situated micro-city, a small universe that condenses the tensions and violences of the world.

While the 'King' transits fluidly, intersectional identities—the traditional 'count's son' (re-signified here as us, the count's daughters)—are the ones who 'must stay behind,' relegated to inhabiting infrastructures designed neither by us nor for us.

This structural violence exposes the core objective of feminist urbanism: to deconstruct the false neutrality of space and demonstrate how physical architecture materializes heteropatriarchal domination. By scaling down the right to the city to the dimension of the university micro-city, the campus reveals itself as a mirror of macro-urban exclusions.

A glaring symptom of this is the pedestrian bridge, an infrastructure that epitomizes the violent tension between dominant privileges and what Rita Segato (2018) conceptualizes as 'defective bodies' (las defectivas). Far from being neutral connectivity tools, pedestrian bridges are architectures of exclusion:* they are poorly lit, structurally neglected, and unsanitary traps that force pedestrians to exert immense physical effort, climbing two or three flights of stairs just to cross a street. For individuals with disabilities, they represent an absolute architectural barrier; for women, entering them at night means placing both their financial property and their physical cuerpa—their sexual autonomy and life—at imminent risk of assault or rape.

The ultimate perversion of this design is that the pedestrian's safety and vitality are sacrificed to privilege the car owner, who cruises underneath without braking, comfortably seated and enclosed in air conditioning. Capitalist and patriarchal planning prioritizes the fluid speed of private property over human vulnerability. When transposed to the university campus, this conflict shows that institutional space is not configured to sustain life, but rather to protect a facade of progress,

* This concept was extensively discussed during the panel 'Urbanismo feminista', broadcast by Radio UNAL (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) through the Urban Government Observatory. The specific analysis of this phenomenon can be retrieved at minute 26:40 of the official recording. To listen: Urbanismo feminista

forcing marginalized subjectivities to constantly negotiate their survival within an infrastructure of risk.

It is imperative to address this issue today, in a national context where femicide rates are unrelenting and the information system seems to be collapsing.* With an underfunded Observatory of Femicides and months of state silence regarding official figures in Colombia, academia can no longer remain a passive spectator. Femicides are neither isolated events nor system errors; they are the final symptom of a patriarchal, racist, and classist machinery reproduced in classrooms and hallways. To presume that the academic environment is, by definition, a space of respect is to ignore that within the university—just as on the streets—women and diverse identities are not safe.

This paper emerges from an emancipatory and denunciatory political position, framed by the power of the fourth wave of feminism (Cobo, 2025), to unveil how silence sustains impunity. Throughout this text, we will explore the relationship between feminist urbanism and the pedagogy of care on campus. By identifying barriers such as the "elevator holders" (Rendón, 2025)—those gatekeepers (Viaene, 2023) of impunity—and proposing resistance mechanisms like the "Virtual Agora" (Corporación Para la Vida Mujeres Que Crean, 2023), the goal is to transition from a "culture of simulation" (Huacuz, 2022) toward the effective prevention of gender-based violence, ultimately guaranteeing that the campus is a territory of freedom rather than a scenario of risk.

2. From Cultural Violences on Bodies to the Right to the University Micro-City of Medellin

Understanding cultural violences on bodies (Rendón, 2025) requires acknowledging that sexism and exclusion are not merely external aggressions, but symbolic processes that inscribe and mold the materiality of those who inhabit the space. In women and diverse bodies, this violence manifests through the configuration of the cuerpa—understood as a center of experience and a map of resistances—which ultimately somatizes the patriarchal mandate through compliant behaviors, such as

* The country has been without data for five months because the lack of funding for the Colombian Observatory of Femicides temporarily suspended its monitoring: https://www.elespectador.com/genero-y-diversidad/las-igualadas/no-podemos-seguir-sacrificandonos-el-observatorio-colombiano-de-feminicidios-detuvo-su-conteo/

taking up little space or avoiding causing discomfort to others, leading to chronic impacts on physical and mental health (Rees et al., 2011).

This disciplinary dimension of violence seeks to reduce subjectivity to a state of submission; it impacts the 'configuration of the self'—Configuración yoica—(Corporación para la Vida Mujeres que Crean, 2022, p. 58) and transforms the vital experience into a trail of scars and traumas that condition the way one inhabits and moves through the world. Ultimately, we manage to survive, but at what cost? This constant state of alertness and resistance cracks our biological and emotional landscapes, proving that survival under patriarchal structures is never free; it is paid for with our mental health, our bodily autonomy, and the structural erosion of our peace.

However, this cultural inscription is not exclusive to the victims; it manifests specularly in the aggressor's body, which is configured as an artifact of power and a tool of domination. In men, cultural violence molds a corporeality that rejects vulnerability and the ethics of care, stagnating in an aesthetic of force (and abandonment)* where shouting, intimidation, and lascivious gazes act as mechanisms of identity reaffirmation. This somatic dominance allows male bodies to aggressively occupy more physical and symbolic space, controlling the city, the night, political arenas, and executive positions.

At its most extreme, this architectural and spatial sovereignty manifests through brutal territorial markings over women's cuerpas, from those who hurl acid onto faces,† to domestic tyrants who push women off balconies.‡ In a city like Medellin,

* According to Catalina Ruiz-Navarro (2024), Latin America stands as the region with the highest rates of paternal abandonment in the world. For a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon and its socioeconomic impacts, see her article 'Los padres ausentes de América Latina,' published in *Volcánicas* magazine (June 15, 2024). Los padres ausentes de América Latina - Volcánicas

† For an in-depth journalistic account of the structural violence faced by survivors of chemical attacks in Colombia, see Samuel Bregolin's report, 'La lucha por vivir de las víctimas de ataques de ácido en Colombia,' published in *El País* (March 9, 2023). The piece details both the physical trauma and the institutional abandonment experienced by these women. https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2023-03-09/la-lucha-por-vivir-de-las-victimas-de-ataques-de-acido-en-colombia.html

‡ For a comprehensive regional analysis of the systemic nature of gender-based killings, see Lorena Arroyo's investigative report, 'Feminicidios: la guerra invisible que mata a 12 mujeres por día en América Latina,' published by *Connectas*. The piece details how structural violence operates as an invisible war against women across the Latin American landscape. https://www.connectas.org/feminicidios-la-guerra-invisible-que-mata-a-12-mujeres-por-dia-en-america-latina/

this predatory masculinity extends to systemic, structural degeneracy. Official data from the Ombudsman's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2024) reveals that commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents has turned into an exponential criminal enterprise that generates revenues comparable to narco-trafficking, systematically targeting the most vulnerable, including migrants, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ youth. Strikingly, 80% of these sexual aggressors are men, while 75% of the victims are young girls and female adolescents, explicitly linking this epidemic to structural gender-based violence*.

These dominant male bodies view the university micro-city not as an isolated ivory tower, but as just another territory where they can replicate the same practices of impunity, surveillance, and violence that they exercise daily over the macro-urban landscape.

This spatial appropriation is structurally reinforced by the panoptic mechanism of the male gaze—a concept deeply illuminated by Siri Hustvedt in her work A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women (2016), which deconstructs how the masculine eye historically positions itself as the absolute, observing subject while reducing the feminine to a scrutinized, subaltern object. Within the campus, this gaze ceases to be a mere aesthetic stance; it mutates into a disciplinary apparatus of surveillance.

Through it, the academic aggressor monitors, assesses, and stalks the cuerpas that transit the faculty hallways. By enforcing this patriarchal gaze, dominant bodies transform the university's architectural landscape into an extension of the street, proving that the epistemic violence of the classroom and the physical threat of the dark alleyway are calibrated by the exact same machinery of visual and territorial control

Thus, cultural violences traverse all bodies in the university micro-city: while some are disciplined for fragility and silence, others are trained to act as instruments of the system, perpetuating an order that prioritizes masculine privileges and emotional distance over the sustainability of life.

* Regarding the escalation of systemic violence in the local territory, the Colombian Ombudsman's Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) issued an urgent appeal for intervention due to rising cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Medellín. See the official statement, 'Por casos de explotación sexual comercial de niñas, niños y adolescentes en Medellín (Antioquia), Defensor del Pueblo solicita medidas urgentes' (March 27, 2024). https://www.defensoria.gov.co/-/por-casos-de-explotaci%C3%B3n-sexual-comercial-de-ni%C3%B1as-ni%C3%B1os-y-adolescentes-en-medell%C3%ADn-antioquia-defensor-del-pueblo-solicita-medidas-urgentes

Inhabiting this university micro-city is like walking down a lonely, poorly lit street. Nevertheless, from feminist urbanism, we have learned that safety is not a technical issue to be solved simply by installing a couple of extra lights in a dark hallway. The shadow that stalks us is not only physical; it is structural. To reduce the experience of fear to a lack of lumens is to ignore that space is constructed through gazes, and that those gazes are deeply gendered. While patriarchal architecture focuses on the functionality of transit, we focus on the possibility of survival.

This abysmal difference is recorded in the scientific evidence of heat maps: while a man walking across campus usually fixes his gaze linearly, merely focused on his path, the gaze of women and dissidents is peripheral, tactical, and constantly on high alert. For them, the environment is scenery; for us, it is a map of potential threats. They scan the destination; we scan the corners, the entrapment points, and the figures lurking on the edges of our vision (Chaney, Baer & Tovar, 2023).

From a feminist and decolonial epistemology, the transition from the neutral "body" to the feminized cuerpa is not a mere grammatical change, but an act of political sovereignty. The cuerpa is understood as the primal territory where memory, desire, and resistance intersect; it is an active subject narrating her own history. Therefore, GBV is not an isolated event, but a disciplinary tool of the patriarchy: a violent attempt to "mark" the territory and restore an order of obedience through physical and symbolic punishment.

Extrapolating this logic to the university micro-city of Medellin, the 'dark street' relocates to the classrooms, cubicles, Faculty Councils, and the campus at large. These are not isolated or hypothetical anecdotes; rather, they constitute empirical observations systematically gathered through my active role as a feminist autoethnographic researcher immersed in this institutional ecosystem. Within this situated fieldwork, the violence materializes in plain sight: on the soccer field, the Dean of Economic and Administrative Sciences physically assaults a female professor. In the gardens, an employee remarks aloud that 'delicious girls' study here. In the hallways of the Law Faculty, the Dean fixes his gaze on students' backsides. In the legal clinic network, a coordinator cynically jokes, claiming victim status due to his marital status. Even in official spaces, such as an institutional birthday greeting, the Rector publicly wishes his subordinates "health, wealth, love, and a concubine".

The architecture of the university is not just concrete; it is a hierarchy where the institutional patrimonial risk—its good name and administrative stability—always supersedes the integrity of our cuerpas.

The institution, sheltered in a "culture of simulation" (Huacuz, 2022), has executed a purplewashing strategy (Madrigal, Béjar & Madrigal, 2025) to formally comply with Ministry of Education requirements (Resolution 014466 of 2022). However, this protocol is not an instrument of justice but one of the "master's tools" (Lorde, 1984), operated by the "elevator holders": those gatekeepers (Viaene, 2023) who, through omission or active complicity, guarantee the institutional indemnity of the "star professor" while the campus walls scream the opposite.

I speak of "elevator holders" to describe the technical and moral complicity that guarantees the perfect scenario for violence. It is the gesture of the one who holds the door so that no one comes up and no one sees, allowing the aggression to occur in a surveillance vacuum; it is the hand that, after the attack, even straightens the abuser's clothes to erase the traces of the struggle, ensuring he steps out immaculately into the public space*.

3. Spatial Resistances and GBV Prevention

In the scarce cracks of this system, we, the "count's daughters," walk. Precarious bodies (students and working-class women) navigate this fiefdom dispossessed of that lineage of impunity. For us, the university is not a temple of knowledge, but a blind alley where retaliation is the ghost haunting every grade, every contract, every space where the white, hetero-cis man (with a dash of power) can use our bodies for his benefit.

In the center of this desert of indifference, something explodes. The flare occurs (Rosales, 2021). The survivor's agency bursts forth. It is an anger that asks no permission; it is a Dignified Rage. Tired of enduring the snail's pace of the Gender Committee and the absolute (complicit) indifference of the patriarchal educational administration, she leans on the crutch of her support network, which validates her pain-anger. The cuerpa performs the visceral revelation of "I feel, therefore I can be free" (Lorde, 1984).

* This concept "elevator holders" reflects the materialization of gender-based violence within confined architectural spaces, which gained massive public attention in Colombia. For details on the event and its institutional repercussions, see Lena Hansen, 'Causa indignación video de periodista Juan Fernando Barona golpeando a su novia en un elevador,' *People en Español*, November 14, 2022. https://peopleenespanol.com/noticias/juan-fernando-barona-periodista-colombiano-golpea-novia-elevador-video-viral/

Faced with this panorama of bodies broken by institutional contempt, the radical necessity emerges to situate care not as a private act of charity, but as a political axis and a fundamental human right. The Advisory Opinion OC-31/25 of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has set a milestone by recognizing the right to care as an autonomous right, essential for dignity and autonomy. The Court provides the tools to understand that the university has the obligation to transcend "case management" and build a paradigm of co-responsibility.

By shifting the analysis to the educational setting, the notion of the university as an aseptic bubble or a space of axiological neutrality is deconstructed. On the contrary, the higher education institution is revealed as a mesosocial level (Incháustegui & Olivares, 2011) that is decisive in legitimizing and normalizing GBV. Here operates what critical pedagogy calls the hidden curriculum (Álamo, 2023): that set of implicit teachings, institutional silences, and peer complicities that dictate which behaviors are tolerable.

This landscape has become more complex with the emergence of the manosphere in the digital ecosystem and its subsequent filtration into university hallways. Communities that promote misogynistic discourses, from incels to "red pill" ideologues, have equipped students with a pseudo-philosophical language to justify domination (García-Mingo, 2023). The ideological divergence between genders has reached a critical point in Generation Z (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). Global data indicates that, while women under 30 are consolidating themselves as progressive change agents, their male peers display a growing trend toward conservatism.

4. The Reinvention of the Encounter: The Virtual Agora as a Success Story in GBV Prevention Pedagogies

Faced with the desolation projected by the "manosphere" and the rigidity of a silencing institutional architecture, the need emerges to build refuges that do not depend on the "King's" permission. In this context, the Virtual Women's Agora constitutes not only a project but a methodology of political and pedagogical resistance that resignifies encounters in the university micro-city.

The success of this approach lies in its capacity to dismantle the "culture of simulation" through fundamental pedagogical axes:

- Purple Lenses: The pedagogy of the Agora does not limit itself to the transmission of technical information; its goal is to transform women's subjectivity. By inviting participants to "put on their purple lenses," they

are given tools to make visible what the hidden curriculum attempts to normalize. (Lienas, 2001).

- Embodied Solidarity (Acuerpamiento): To process the loneliness, PTSD, and anxiety generated by campus harassment, the Agora proposes care among women as a practice of self-awareness. Through face-to-face meetings in classrooms, a "safe space" was generated where the recounting of personal histories acts as a device for healing and public denunciation. (Patiño, 2023).

The Virtual Agora demonstrates that the effective prevention of GBV in HEIs will not come from protocols drafted in the asepsis of administrative offices, but from women's capacity to collectivize dignity. By placing care at the center, this pedagogical model achieves what the institution usually avoids: that the shame finally changes sides, and the university micro-city finally begins to be a refuge and not a minefield (Corporación para la vida Mujeres que crean, 2023).

5. Conclusion: From Shame to Care

Only by transitioning from a system of exploitation and contempt toward one that places care at the center can we deactivate both the arrogance of ancient privilege and the resentment of new misogyny. Recognizing that the university is a space where GBV is legitimized is the first step to subverting that function. The university must cease to be the place where shame is hidden and become the space where dignity is collectivized, dismantling those pacts of silence that, until now, have allowed the campus to be a disputed territory instead of a safe haven (Guerrero, 2022).

The right to this university city is not begged for: it is seized. It is exercised when public shaming (escrache) (Corte Constitucional, 2023) shatters the glass of hypocrisy, and when embodied solidarity (acuerpamiento) (Patiño, 2023) becomes the only solid architecture on a crumbling campus. The slogan that has resonated globally following the Gisele Pelicot case " Shame Has to Change Sides " (Pelicot, 2026) is not just a cry for justice, but a demand for epistemological and social transformation.

Breaking this pact of sexist silence (Daberkow, 2025) means understanding that the responsibility for violence never falls on the one who suffers it, but on the structures and subjects who exert it, and the culture that normalizes it. Because in this micro-city of Medellin, the true lecture is not delivered from the podium, but in the radical act of refusing to be invisible—in the decision to inhabit the campus with our heads

held high, knowing that, even if they try to scrub the walls with the detergent of oblivion, the memory of our cuerpas has already marked the territory forever.

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