

CREATING SAFER SPACE

STRENGTHENING CIVILIAN PROTECTION
AMIDST VIOLENT CONFLICT

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Intersectionality, Rights Violations, and Self-Protection in the Context of the Urban Armed Conflict in Medellín, 2022-2024

Perspectives from *Art That Protects* – Community-Based
Artistic and Cultural Organizations

Dossier

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La Fiesta, Arlequín y los Juglares





Creating Safer Space

Creating Safer Space is an international research and impact collaboration, which aims to understand and support unarmed civilian protection (UCP) and self-protection in the midst of violent conflict. It supports research that explores how violence against civilians can be deterred or prevented by civilians without the use or threat of force.

The Network brings together conflict-affected communities, protection practitioners, academics, policymakers, and artists to jointly work on the vision of enhancing unarmed protection practices, which create safer space for communities and individuals amidst violent conflict, raise their levels of resilience and help prevent displacement.

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For further information on the work of the Network, please visit our website:

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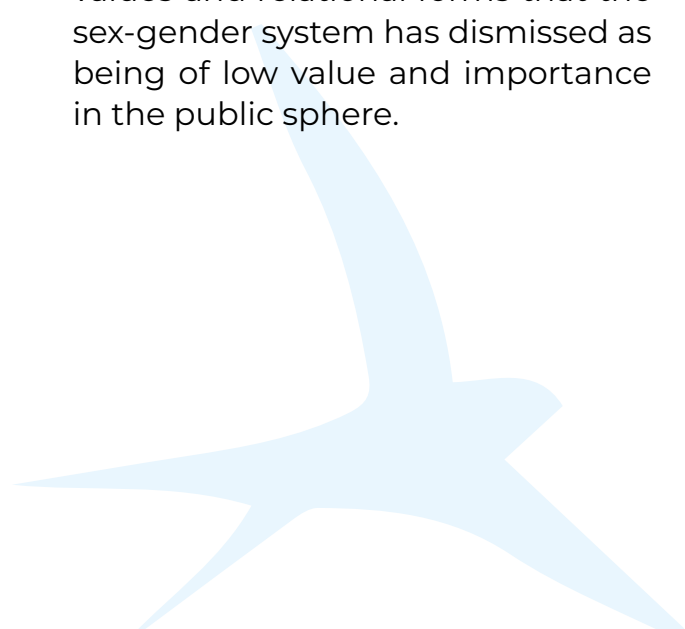
Executive Summary

The dossier presented below is a compilation of analyses regarding art as a powerful form of self-protection in the context of social and armed conflict in Medellín during the last two decades of the 20th century and the early 21st century. It brings together analyses related to artistic and cultural initiatives from around fifteen community-based artistic and cultural organizations that have been working in the city's peripheral neighbourhoods for the past fifty years. They have emerged and endured even during the most intense moments of armed conflict.

The conflicts and violence in Medellín are inscribed within important milestones in the dynamics of the country and the region. There are several explanations for the escalation of urban violence since the 1980s. They include structural perspectives, the peculiarities of the modernization process with its consequent maladjustments and deficient citizenship, State weakness, and the *subculture of violence* fostered by drug trafficking, leading to an exclusionary city where wealth and poverty are associated with certain zones. These dynamics are reflected in homicide rates with sustained peaks in the last decades of the 20th century and a paradoxical decline in recent years. The latter, rather than indicating an improvement in the city's conflict, reflects a change in strategy and a focus on other indicators such as human trafficking or sexual crimes and gender-based violence.

Amid this panorama, we have engaged in dialogue and observed the artistic practices of the participating organizations to understand their self-protective nature and the contexts of rights violations faced by their members and/or audiences. We turn to intersectionality to identify how the convergence of social structures generates power struggles and tensions, discrimination, and exclusion, while also fostering a self-protective capacity situated in the concrete conditions of these territories. The dossier presents an analysis of five social components: sex-gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, and cosmopolitanism. These categories allow for an understanding of the social complexity and actions of the organizations, identifying cultural and social patterns that lead to self-protective and/or rights-violating actions. The results are:

- 1) The marginalized subjects, especially women, are the ones who carry many of the actions and logics that make art a safe space for protection. This is based, as a matter of fact, on the values and relational forms that the sex-gender system has dismissed as being of low value and importance in the public sphere.



- 2) The social status of artists legitimizes their place in the communities, although this does not correlate with economic, personal, or organizational status. This means that the rights violation of the context is compounded by the rights violation of the organisations. In terms of self-protection, this implies a possible condition of precariousness and uncertainty that destabilizes the sustained presence of organizations and their members. It also demands a constant attitude of resistance and survival of the collective/creative project.
- 3) We witness the persistence of structural racism among different communities, at the institutional level and within organizations. It is publicly and politically fed by a media narrative that is based on instrumentalizing exoticism, which commodifies the knowledge and legacies of those communities. In terms of self-protection, artistic initiatives can open up spaces for reflection and self-recognition that question hidden, naturalized forms of violence, not with the purpose of achieving assimilation, but of promoting justice and dignity.
- 4) Militarized hegemonies particularly target the construction of identities of young men, the appropriation of female/feminized bodies, the stigmatization and criminalization of youths, and the establishment of adult-centric social logics. In response to these rights violations, organizations prioritize a counteroffer of youth initiatives to resist the context of illegal co-optation.
- 5) Organisations establish foundational principles, from the standpoint of their political and ethical declarations and their creative potential, which mark the narratives and ways of doing things in their future and are a powerful form of self-protection. However, this moral founding myth generates strong tensions that can lead to ghettoization and closure, adding to existing rights violations.





1. Introduction

The *Art That Protects* project has documented the self-protective effect of artistic and cultural initiatives developed by community-based organizations in Medellín, whose activities have taken place during key moments of armed conflict in the city. Issues such as legitimacy, permanence in the territory, and commitment to socially engaged art stand out as key elements for understanding their self-protective character. These inquiries have resulted in identifying, firstly, that rights violations do not arise from isolated characteristics such as gender and age, but from the combination and overlap of different social factors. Secondly, it has also been found that the network of relationships and alliances between organizations is a strategy that enables them to generate sustainability and *shielding* against rights violations.

Through this process we have come to understand how women, especially from impoverished areas, have been subject to multiple rights violations resulting from urban conflict,¹ but also how they have adopted measures of active resistance (Solano, 2004; Corporación Humanas, 2013). Likewise, we have identified the place held by young people, highlighting how the country's social and political conflict offers a perspective of militarized masculinity and submissive femininity that affects the socialization of children and the forms of cultural consumption

that lead to subjectivities that are instrumental to many of the conflicts in the city's neighbourhoods (Lederach, 2019). However, we found that characteristics such as gender and age are insufficient to understand both the vulnerabilities and the scope of artistic-cultural strategies for self-protection, making it necessary to reorient the analytical gaze, incorporating a broader intersectional view to achieve a better understanding of the different forms of violence in everyday life (Bedoya, 2019; Corporación Sisma Mujer and Red Nacional de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos, 2019) and their correlation with the forms of self-protection that community-based organizations "invent" through artistic cultural work on a daily basis.

In this text, we understand **self-protection** as it is defined in international literature, that is, as the agency that communities exert when protecting themselves from physical harm. However, we will also consider two other dimensions: the care for life and the protection of emotional well-being. As already discussed by Corporación Sisma Mujer and Red Nacional de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (2019), it is important to broaden the focus of self-protection beyond physical security to consider the right to life associated with conditions of dignity and autonomy. These measures help in facing discrimination and ensuring a safe environment for

¹ For Patrice Melé, urban conflicts are related to struggles "for land and urban services, environmental or heritage mobilizations, opposition to public projects or to the authorization of certain urban uses, antagonisms between groups over land use, or political movements focused on the effects of global trends". Vilma Liliana Franco also agrees that urban conflicts are marked by disputes and divergences in the construction of urban space, which is traversed by power relations involving social organization, production processes, work processes and political management processes (Melé, 2016; Franco, 2003, p. 60).

the participation of different actors in social life. This involves considering the subjective-emotional, physical-corporeal, familial, and organizational-community spheres as areas where rights violations as well as self-protection occur.

'Rights violations' is understood as the actual harm done to a person or group. This harm may relate to threats, aggression, denial of fundamental rights (included in the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991, such as life, health, social security, etc.), intimidation, and even murder. Therefore, such violations are directly linked to violence, which can be not only physical but also symbolic. We have explicitly excluded the term **vulnerability** because, as noted by Madrid Pérez (2018), although this concept was initially used to speak of groups more exposed to harm, over time it has led to a sort of social asepsis that names those who are victimized without identifying the agents that cause the harm. Therefore, it may seem that vulnerable groups and individuals are responsible for the violation of their own rights, failing to recognize that the mechanisms causing their social suffering are related to unjust and unequal systems.

Finally, we incorporate the notion of **intersectionality**, a powerful concept for analysing the complexities of rights violations but also of self-protection. Therefore, we analyse how the intersection of social structures and different systems of oppression (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, cosmivision, etc.) generates situations of discrimination and exclusion that are maintained and reproduced at

structural, political, social, and cultural levels (La Barbera, 2017). Nonetheless, we also analyse how those social structures and systems of oppression operate in protecting individuals and communities at certain moments and within the specificities of urban armed conflict. Thus, we incorporate intersectionality as a methodological tool to understand how artistic-cultural initiatives become mechanisms of self-protection against the vulnerabilities arising from different conditions. These, in turn, intersect within individuals and/or groups, thus resulting in multiple degrees of exposure to harm that can arise in contexts of urban violence (Udasmoro and Kunz, 2021). We consider that intersectionality implies a profound ethical commitment, forcing individuals out of their comfort zone, as they must analyse their own life story while seeking ways to distance themselves from violent behaviours and practices.





Intersectionality is a political position in which each individual must examine their own position in relation to others by understanding privilege, recognizing subjugation, and building empathy. Occupying a certain place in society, belonging to a certain social class, or being part of a specific group not only allows individuals to have certain privileges but also to grow in contexts that lead them to ignore the deprivations faced by others. Therefore, each individual's responsibility, regardless of their position, is to question the things to which they have access due to their status (Grupo de Trabajo de Decolonización de la Comunidad de Práctica de Protección Civil No Armada, 2023).

However, it should be noted that the intersectional perspective presented here is limited, despite the efforts made by the *Art That Protects* project team to capture a variety of perspectives and explore their

complex dynamics. Specifically, we found limitations in engaging organizations working on disability issues, as we could not find a way to explore their relationship with urban armed conflict. The same happened with organizations focused on Afro-descendant or indigenous perspectives, and even with LGBTQI+ collectives, which we managed to approach only late in the process to explore their dynamics from the self-protection perspective. We also did not manage to identify specific experiences based on religious/spiritual practices or linguistic or national differences. In this sense, this dossier is a preliminary analysis that must continue to be enriched with contributions from other organizations and perspectives. [Table 1](#) summarizes the five categories of intersectional analysis, their context of production, and the central argument we want to present in each chapter of the dossier. These arguments derive from the research results.



Table 1. Synthesis of Categories for Intersectional Analysis of Rights Violations and Self-Protection in the Context of Armed Conflict in Medellín

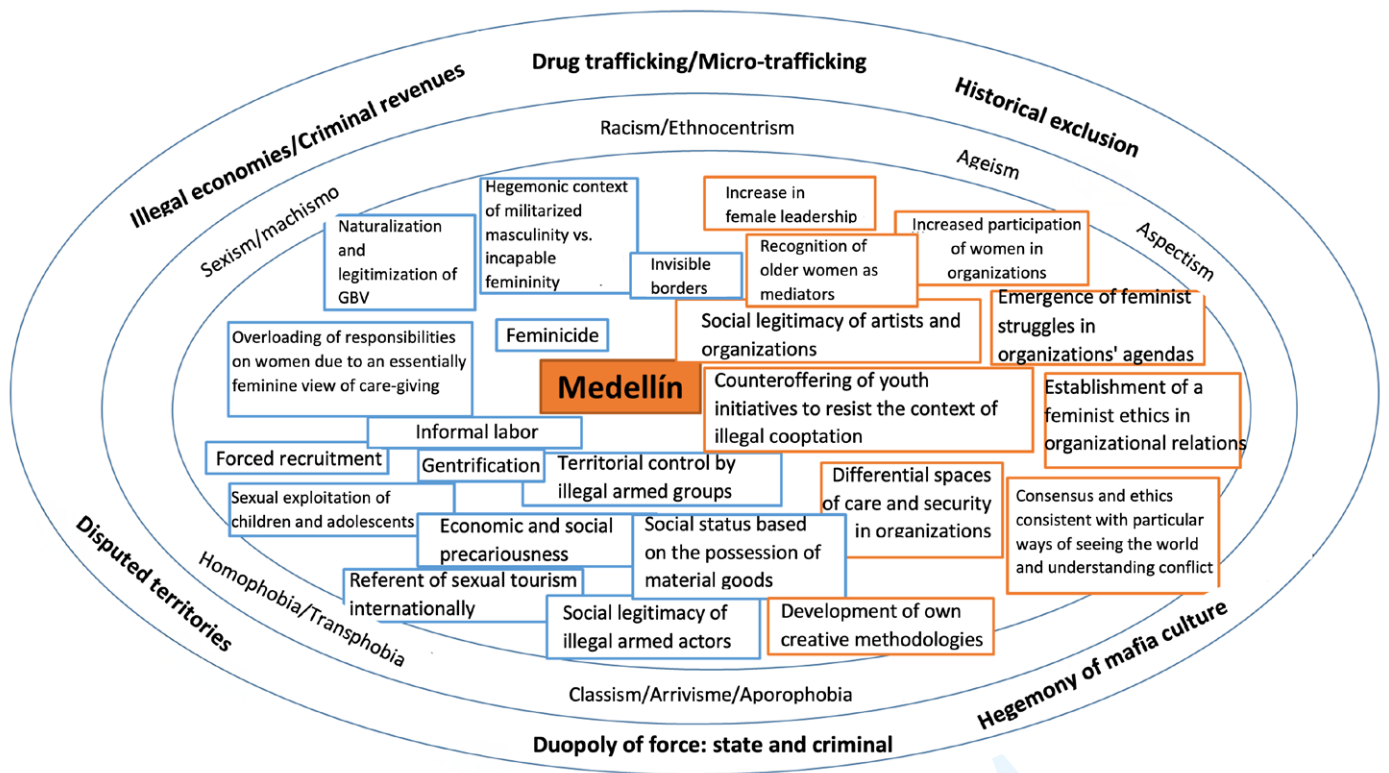
Analysis Category	Research Context	Argument
1. Sex-gender	<p>Hegemony of militarized masculinity vs. an incapable femininity, expressed in bodies, practices, and subjectivities.</p> <p>Naturalization of gender-based violence (GBV) and legitimization of its use as a means of intimidation.</p> <p>Burdening women with responsibilities due to an essentially feminine view of care.</p>	<p>In the armed conflict in Medellín, women, children, and youth are differentially drawn into an increasing and uncontrolled expansion of para-statal and illegal structures seeking to dominate urban life. These structures exert their influence over increasingly wider segments of the population, especially those in vulnerable situations living in marginalized and excluded spaces. Paradoxically, it is these marginalized subjects, particularly women, who often drive many actions and logics that make art a safe space for protection, drawing from values and forms of relationships relegated by the sex-gender system, in terms of disempowerment and public insignificance.</p>
2. Socio-economic status	<p>Economic precariousness, social violations, informal labour, presence of illegal armed actors.</p> <p>Context of organizational violations.</p>	<p>The status of artists socially legitimizes their place in communities, although this does not correlate with economic, personal, or organizational status. This adds organization-based rights violations to context-based ones. For self-protection, this implies a possible condition of precariousness and uncertainty that destabilizes the sustained presence of organizations and their members. It also demands a constant attitude of resistance and survival of the collective/creative project.</p>
3. Ethnicity	<p>Displacement and precariousness of Afro-descendant and Indigenous people occupying the peripheral neighbourhoods of Medellín.</p>	<p>In terms of vulnerability, there is a persistence of structural racism among different communities, at the institutional level and within organizations. It is publicly and politically fed by a media narrative that is based on instrumentalizing exoticism, commodifying the knowledge and legacies of those communities. In terms of self-protection, artistic initiatives can open up spaces for reflection and self-recognition that question the hidden, naturalized forms of violence, not necessarily promoting assimilation through self-affirmation, but seeking justice and dignity.</p>
4. Age	<p>Rights violations against children and adolescents in contexts of urban conflict and organized crime.</p>	<p>In terms of vulnerability, there are militarized hegemonies in the construction of identities of young men, appropriations of feminine/feminized bodies, stigmatization and criminalization of youth, and the establishment of adult-centric social logics. From a self-protection standpoint, organizations prioritize a counteroffer of youth initiatives to resist the context of illegal co-optation.</p>
5. Cosmivision	<p>The assumption that art acts as a form of rescue and self-protecting element in violent contexts.</p>	<p>Organizations establish foundational principles that guide their narratives and ways of doing as a powerful form of self-protection, from the perspective of their political and ethical declarations and their creative potential. However, this moral myth generates strong tensions that can lead to ghettoization and closure, adding to existing rights violations.</p>

Source: *Art That Protects project*

The elements mentioned are detailed in **Figure 1**, which uses the interrelation of concentric circles. The innermost circles represent the intersection between violations and self-protection practices in the context of armed conflict in the city of Medellín, from the perspective of the type of art that is meant to protect. The second inner circle represents elements of contextual identities. The

third circle outlines responses in terms of discrimination or attitudes that affect these identities and create a cultural framework for violence. The outermost circle represents larger forces and structures that work together to reinforce exclusion and violations in the city of Medellín. These elements are adopted and adapted from *A Toolkit for Applying Intersectionality* by Joanna Simpson (2009).

Figure 1. *Art That Protects'* intersectionality in the context of urban conflict in Medellín, 2022-2024.



Source: Own elaboration within the *Art That Protects* project, adapted from Simpson (2009, p. 5).

This dossier consists of seven sections. First, we provide a general contextualisation of the research and describe the problem. We discuss the territorial characteristics of the armed, political, and social conflict in Medellín and how organised crime has operated in the city. The next five sections correspond to the different categories of intersectional analysis, four of which are classical (sex-gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age) and one emergent (cosmovision).

Within each chapter, we analyse how each category is configured as a condition that, in turn, results in the violation of rights as well as in self-protection strategies for children, youth, and women. We also offer some reflections on the findings and potential future approaches for each category. Finally, we present a concluding section that summarizes the general findings and offers some final considerations for the future that we gained from this project.

2. *Art That Protects*: Research Context

Background and Approach

The *Art That Protects* project was developed in the city of Medellín, Colombia in two consecutive stages from April 2022 to October 2024. During the first stage, we documented the self-protective role of the cultural and artistic initiatives developed by community-based organizations in the city. In the second stage, we deepened our analysis of intersectionality and the networking efforts of those organizations. We were particularly interested in recognizing these organizations' contributions to the self-protection of children, youth, and women amid the armed conflict in the city. Women, especially those from impoverished areas, have been subject to multiple rights violations, but they have also implemented active resistance measures (Solano, 2004; Corporación Humanas, 2013). The same applies to young people, who are usually offered a perspective of militarized masculinity and submissive femininity, which impacts the socialization of children and their cultural consumption patterns that contribute to many conflicts in the city's neighbourhoods (Lederach, 2019). Illegal armed groups—and even legal ones—impose certain codes of morality in daily life that dictate how to be, behave, and act in territories controlled by those groups. These moral codes establish and *naturalize* cultural formats and narratives in neighbourhoods, defining who or what is excluded, rejected, or marginalized, while also defining that which armed groups have influence over to validate, modify, or silence.

These insights emerged from engaging with fifteen organizations that conduct artistic activities in various neighbourhoods of the city. Our methodology included document review, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, as well as walking tours of the neighbourhoods and network mapping workshops. We found that social legitimacy, permanence in a given area, and commitment to socially engaged art, among others, are key elements for understanding those organizations' self-protective nature. The network of relationships and alliances, exchanges, and collaborative strategies between organizations are crucial paths that enable them to generate sustainability and *shielding* against the multiple violations that occur in that context, and against the lack of institutional and state support to develop their plans and programmes. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the emergence of participating initiatives since the 1970s.





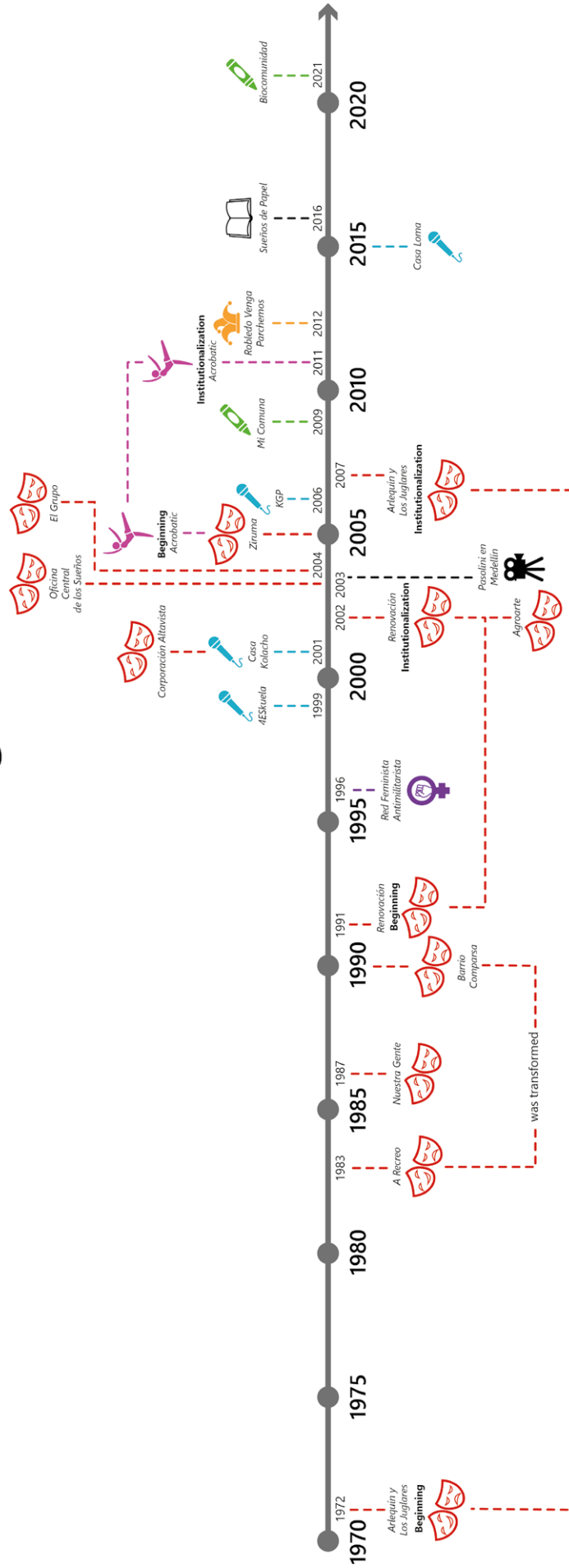
Over time, these organizations have gained legitimacy within communities, even among local armed actors, allowing them to influence and contest some sections of the territory and even part of the populations, where various interests, primarily focused on recruitment and consumption—not only of substances but also of ways of life—are at play. In struggles for power, legal support alone is insufficient, as it becomes secondary to dynamics of social support and recognition. For an artistic organization to be seen as a legitimate social actor within a community, continued presence over time in the area is necessary.

Resistance processes supported by cultural and artistic collectives, social movements, and human rights defenders have been fundamental in the city's history. This was confirmed by the Colombian Truth Commission, which notes that the armed conflict in Colombia has caused cultural damage but also recognizes the existence of “various and rich community and social projects that have allowed a transition from armed conflict to coexistence, and from pain to reconciliation” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 574). The Commission's report emphasizes that art and culture are powerful and useful tools for reconstructing the social fabric, torn apart by violence caused by the conflict, allowing us to “name the unnameable and make the invisible visible” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 575).



Figure 2. Community-based artistic and cultural organizations and initiatives participating in the Art That Protects project.

Art that Protects Timeline of organizations



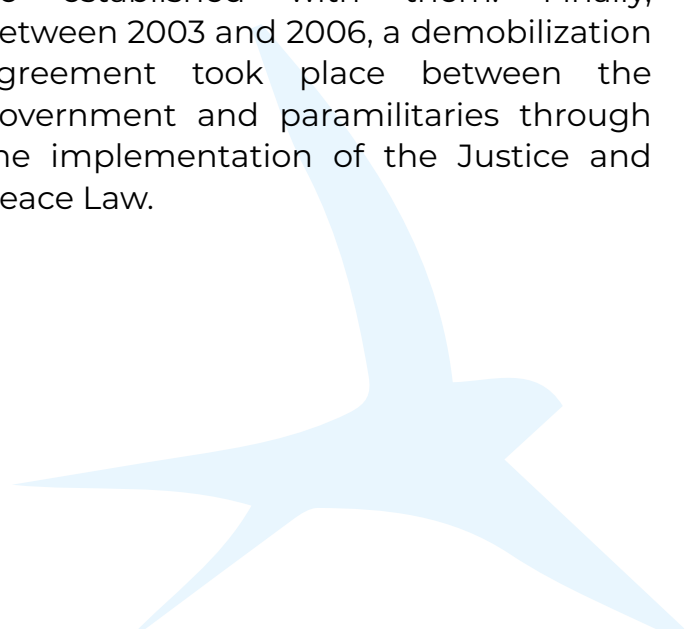
Source: Art That Protects project



Territorial Context

The history of the urban armed conflict in Medellín has been explained in great detail in the reports by Martín (2014), the National Centre for Historical Memory [*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica—CNMH*] (CNMH, 2017), and the Truth Commission (2022). The CNMH identifies four periods within the urban armed conflict in Medellín. In the first period from 1965 to 1981, the elements that would later result in the escalation of the conflict began to take shape. Vigilante-justice practices emerged, smuggling grew, and the illegal drug trade began to co-opt social, political, economic, and private life, with different social actors making their demands known. The second period from 1982 to 1994, was marked by the growth of drug trafficking through the Medellín Cartel, its declaration of war against the Government, and the deployment of terrorism. The “*dirty war*” began. It was a strategy of political violence used by paramilitary armies in collusion with various state sectors to annihilate political opponents, student and union leaders, neighbourhood leaders, and other actors who expressed dissent against state and/or paramilitary actions.

The third period spans from 1995 to 2005. Although during these years paramilitaries and guerrillas expanded their control in rural areas, there was also an *urbanization of war*, meaning the city ceased to be merely a space for recovery and supply and became a strategic space for struggles. The confrontations were not only between guerrilla militias and paramilitaries but also among factions of the latter, who formed armed self-defence units that clashed over control of organized crime. Ultimately, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia—AUC*) emerged victorious, achieving a criminal territorial hegemony in almost the entire metropolitan area of Medellín. During this same period, peace negotiations took place with some urban guerrilla militias, and military operations Mariscal and Orión were carried out. In these operations, paramilitaries and public forces collaborated to drive guerrilla militias out of Medellín’s Comuna 13 [13th District] and hand over that territory to the AUC. This exposed a state policy that was unconcerned with the welfare of the inhabitants, focusing instead on which actors controlled the neighbourhoods and the covert agreements that could be established with them. Finally, between 2003 and 2006, a demobilization agreement took place between the government and paramilitaries through the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law.



The fourth period extends from 2006 to 2014. Two years after the demobilization of the paramilitaries, President Álvaro Uribe decided to extradite twelve of their former leaders to the United States. While his main argument was that these former AUC leaders were failing to comply with the Justice and Peace Law, some human rights organizations viewed this as a strategy to obstruct investigations into parapolitics, which sought to expose the co-optation of various branches of state institutions by these criminal structures. The extradition of these individuals sparked a war, between 2008 and 2009, among drug traffickers and illegal armed groups seeking to take control

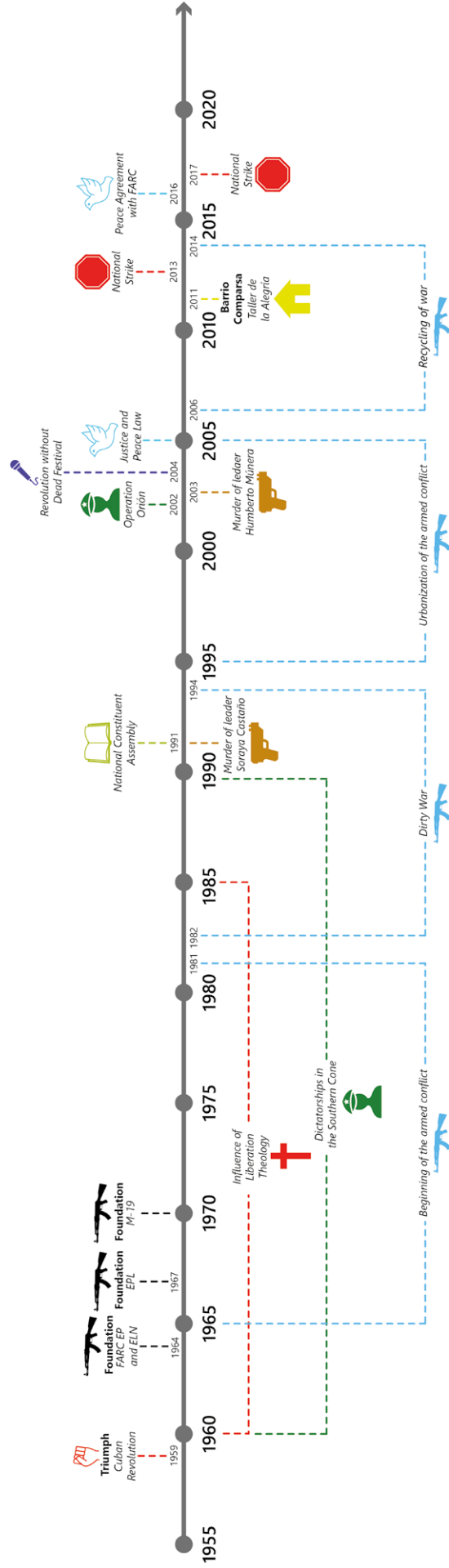
and territorial leadership of the city. This control was primarily over trafficking routes, drug markets, extortion rackets, and various criminal revenues. This period was marked by a decrease in violence, attributed by some analysts to an increase in the operational capacity of the state, but by others to agreements reached between criminal organizations and the state to reduce the number of homicides and their media coverage (Sepúlveda, 2019; Semana, 2013). Consequently, it was expected that as long as armed actors remained faithful to the established agreements and there were no wars among them, some calm might exist in the city.





Figure 3. Milestones in the dynamics of conflict and violence in Colombia (with some emphasis on Medellín) over the last seventy years.

Art that Protects Timeline of milestones



Source: Art That Protects project

According to information from the Medellín Mayor's Office, the Aburrá Valley currently has ten organized criminal groups (GDOs)², eighty organized common crime groups (GDCOs), and 196 subgroups, most of which are subordinate to the GDCOs (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2024, p. 428)³. These figures contrast with data from a study conducted by Innovations for Poverty Action and Universidad EAFIT, whose authors indicate that the city has approximately 380 gangs that are subordinate to fifteen or twenty larger criminal groups. All of them are located in 14 of Medellín's 16 districts. The only districts that do not report territorial control by gangs or groups, but do have specific criminal activities, are Laureles-Estadio and El Poblado, where the wealthiest residents of the city live. Therefore, criminal groups are present in all middle and lower-class neighbourhoods (Blattman et al., 2020; IPA and EAFIT, 2021; Blattman et al., 2023).

It is important to note that organized crime in the city has formed a highly hierarchical vertical structure. At the base of the pyramid are the gangs (*combos*), which are groups that can consist of fifteen to forty salaried members, most of whom are young. Their territories can range from a small section of the city to entire neighbourhoods. Additionally, their criminal activities often include controlling drug markets [*plazas de vicio*]⁴, "*gota a gota* [drop by drop]" loans⁵,

extortion of businesses, and collecting protection payments (also known as *vacunas* [vaccines]) from neighbours. Above the gangs are the larger criminal groups (*bandas*), typically led by middle-aged men with long criminal records. They provide overall direction to the gangs and supply them with weapons and drugs (Blattman et al., 2020; IPA and EAFIT, 2021; Blattman et al., 2023).

The organized crime groups in Medellín do not only operate through their criminal activities but also exercise a form of *criminal governance*, meaning they fulfil certain functions similar to those of the state: conflict mediation and resolution, debt collection, administration of justice, tax collection, and imposing behavioural rules, among others. However, this does not imply that the state neglects its functions; rather, there exists a duopoly of force, where criminal governance and state governance coexist. Both, rather than excluding each other, can become complementary. Therefore, an individual might turn to gang leaders for certain issues and to state authorities for others. For example, for debt collection or resolving a dispute between two drunk individuals, they would call the gang. In contrast, for constructing a house or matters related to public services, they would turn to state officials (Blattman et al., 2020; IPA and EAFIT, 2021; Blattman et al., 2023).

2 According to the Sistema Nacional de Lucha contra el Crimen Organizado [National System for the Fight against Organized Crime], a GDO is: "a structured group of three or more persons who, in a concerted and coordinated manner, define roles or functions for the purpose of committing crimes of various kinds". These types of groups usually have transnational, national, regional and local scope. On the other hand, GDCOs are: "a grouping of three or more persons that exists for a certain period of time or acts in concert with the purpose of committing one or more crimes that affect citizen security and coexistence, with which they intend to obtain economic or material benefits" (Policía Nacional de Colombia, 2018). Its scope is especially local. Thus, the main difference between GDOs and GDCOs lies in their scale of incidence: while the former are articulated to broader networks, the latter usually move at the neighborhood level. Consequently, many GDCOs may depend on GDOs

3 To these structures should be added the Clan del Golfo, classified by the State as an Organized Armed Group (GAO), which is considered an actor in the armed conflict, rather than a group that operates solely under the logic of organized crime (PARES, 2023).

4 "Plazas de vicio" are the places in the neighborhoods where drugs are sold and sometimes allowed to be consumed.

5 These are informal money loans characterized by high interest rates and daily debt collection.



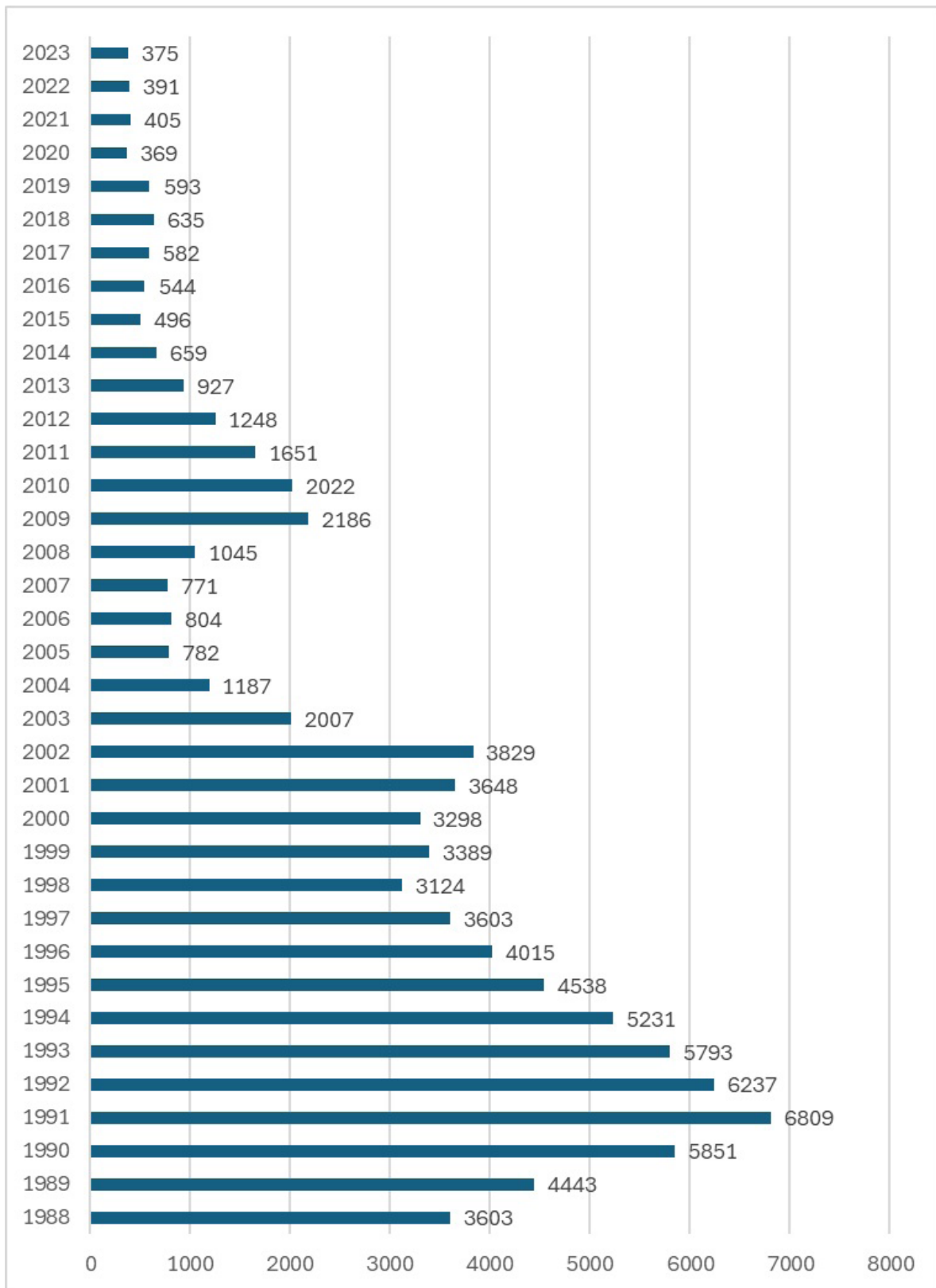
Gangs fulfil these criminal governance functions for multiple reasons: first, the protection and surveillance services they provide allow them to collect extortion payments (*vacunas*) that represent a significant economic income. Second, these functions grant power, authority, and loyalty to the gang leaders, which gives them a certain moral legitimacy. Third, this type of governance helps protect criminal revenues from other competitors and safeguards the integrity of gang members, as local residents develop some kind of loyalty towards them, preventing them from being reported to the authorities (Blattman et al., 2023).

Criminal governance is crucial to the operation of organized crime in Medellín because it has served as a way to maintain its presence throughout almost the entire city over the past two decades. It was at the beginning of the 21st century that a market for internal drug consumption began to consolidate. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the activities of criminal gangs and groups focused on waging war against the state and against each other (Blattman et al., 2023). The establishment of certain agreements with state entities and among criminal groups has allowed for the maintenance of low homicide rates and the continued functioning of illegal revenues without major difficulties.

This is the current landscape of the urban armed conflict and organized crime in Medellín. In conclusion, it should be noted that the history summarized here can be traced through the number of homicides in the city from 1988 to 2023, as shown in [Figure 4](#). The peak moment of tension in the war between the Medellín Cartel and the state was reflected in the peak of 1991, which recorded 6,809 homicides, being the highest rate in the city's history. The second peak occurred in 2002, with 3,829 homicides, during the war against guerrilla militias and among paramilitary units. The last peak was in 2009, during the conflict following the extradition of AUC leaders. The last few years have seen a marked decline in homicide rates, driven by existing agreements between gangs, the larger criminal groups, and state entities.



Figure 4. Homicide rates in Medellín, 1988-2023.



Source: *Art That Protects* with data from SISC (2024).



3. Art as a Form of Care Amidst Militarization

In the intersectional perspective we have been developing regarding both violations and self-protection through community-based artistic cultural initiatives, we are interested in showing in this section how the sex-gender system integrates into this analysis. This system originally emerged in the 1970s as a differentiator of identities based on the relationship between culturally constructed gender and sex, and vice-versa, establishing a set of agreements and social representations through which biological sexuality translates into expressions, practices, and cultural behaviours that are hegemonically imposed rather than consensual. Today, this perspective is informed by other debates that interrogate the nature/culture dichotomy and propose alternative forms that do not directly respond to the dictates of biological sexuality, establishing the prominence of human experience, identity constructions, and modes of relationships beyond traditionally recognized orders.

It is important to note that within these debates, our project is based on the consideration that in the armed conflict in Medellín, women, children, and young people are dragged in a differential way into an increasingly uncontrolled expansion of paramilitary and illegal structures seeking to dominate urban life. These structures exert their influence over wider segments of the population, especially those in vulnerable situations living in marginalized and excluded spaces (Segato, 2016). However, what we paradoxically find in the study is that it is precisely these historically forgotten

subjects, particularly women, who drive many of the actions and logics that make art a safe and protective space, reinforcing values and forms of relationships that the sex-gender system has associated with a lack of value and public insignificance.

Rights Violations

Initiatives that use art as a *passport* for self-protection are developed in a context of militarized and hegemonic masculinity, in contrast to an imaginary of femininity as incapable, expressed in specific subjectivities, practices, and bodies. These representations continue to associate masculinity with men, while femininity is linked to women, but they also feminize those assigned a lower social value (boys, girls, gender diversities, ethnicity, class, etc.). Such associations lead to the naturalization of phenomena such as gender-based violence and to its legitimization as an effective means of intimidation. It also results in an overload of responsibilities with which women are charged in the private sphere, as a result of an essentially feminine view of care. Meanwhile, the social demand for militarized masculinity among young men reinforces the artificial view of the masculine/feminine gender dichotomy, creating an irreconcilable boundary. The masculine/feminine dynamic fails to be understood as a set of cultural elements present in people's lives, independent of sex, thereby emphasizing strongly divided roles.

As members of *Arlequín y los Juglares* pointed out, the social offer for and pressure on men have been reinforced by

drug trafficking and the armed conflict, therefore: “the kids in the neighbourhood are constantly exposed to being called to those activities” (Personal communication, member of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, August 2023), making minors especially vulnerable. A common term in the colloquial language of Medellín is “*carritos* [little cars]”, a euphemism that conceals the forced recruitment to which children and young people are particularly exposed. The Defensoría del Pueblo [Ombudsman’s Office] (2020) warned about the increase in forced recruitment by criminal gangs in urban centres. Those gangs exploit children and adolescents as a means of social and territorial control, in addition to sustaining the local market for psychoactive substances. This exploitation is accompanied by:

(...) gifts as gestures of trust, money, presents (cell phones and communication radios), which are means that allow the recruitment of children and adolescents to develop illicit activities of intelligence, transportation, and marketing of psychoactive substances, serving as lookouts, guards, collecting extortion payments, and engaging in activities related to contract killings, as well as other actions for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2020, p. 44).

In light of the absence or weak presence of state protection networks, the violation of rights to education and economic well-being, the existence of violent contexts, and the presence of adverse sociocultural environments for children and adolescents (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2020), the various artistic and cultural organizations involved in this study continuously respond in the territories through offers of self-protection,

care, and solidarity in common life, as well as relational strengthening and reciprocity. Precariousness in the neighbourhoods of Medellín is understood not only from an economic perspective but also, complementarily and more specifically, in terms of the quality of interpersonal relationships. It refers to the fragility of the ties that establish, root, and consolidate affections in everyday life (Segato, 2016; Furtos, 2011) and the impoverishment of women’s relationships with their own strength, rationality, leadership, and ability to manage resources and processes. This intensifies women’s stigmatization as incapable and lacking autonomy:

At one event, a kid from one of the gangs saw a man and thought he was the one in charge [of the event], when in reality we [three women] had organized it. So, they [asked] the man who was in charge of that event. He told them: ‘It’s them...’ And [the kid] replied: ‘Oh, no, tell them they have to ask for permission’ (Personal communication, member of *Biblioteca Sueños de Papel*, September 2023).

For young people in neighbourhoods where artistic organizations are present, their possibilities of masculinity are reduced to practices of violence, illicit exchanges, and drug use. This predominates in social imaginaries alongside ideas of romantic love that imply women must endure and men must possess, leading to the naturalization of violence as an artificial expression of love, even by those representing institutions in these territories, such as the police and other legal agents. Additionally, this situation sustains other subtler behaviours like the daily harassment of women and girls in the neighbourhoods:



(...) the father of my child physically and verbally assaulted me, (...) I called the police, and when they arrived, they saw me beaten, saw me on the floor. The first question the police officer asked me was: 'And what did you do to him to do this to you?' And I [answered]: 'I did nothing, I simply did not want to do what he asked because being my partner does not grant him the right to access my body when I say no.' [The police officer said]: 'But you're the woman, and the woman must do what he says.' That was his response; nothing happened to the aggressor. [I was told] just go and see what you can do, file a report, we honestly cannot do anything because you live with him, and you depend on him; he is your husband. The second time I was bleeding profusely. I called them again because it was the only support network I had nearby, and nothing happened again. So, I went to the prosecutor's office, filed a restraining order, and went through the whole process. A year later, he assaulted me again, stabbed me, was trying to choke me. I called with the order I had. I never received help. No one came. Only my female neighbours came to help me; no one else did (Personal communication, member of Biblioteca Sueños de Papel, September 2023).

These events disrupt the work of artistic organizations and permeate their daily lives, posing enormous challenges at the community level because, on the one hand, they constitute scenarios for self-protection and, on the other, they embody ethical responsibilities among which they navigate to create, denounce, and publicly impact these situations:

(...) that question about love, romantic love, why can't men express their feelings... and look, theatre is a very valuable tool to address emotions and feelings. Why can't you as a boy cry? We began to ask ourselves all those questions. Or why can't you as a girl express your strength, your anger? That's where it started. It wasn't named feminist, but it began as an anti-patriarchal school (Personal communication, member of the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista*, April 2023).





Stop war against women. *Red Feminista Antimilitarista*

According to the PARES report (2023), femicides continue consistently throughout Colombia; in 2023, there was more than one case of femicide per day. From 1 January to 31 July 2023, at least 301 femicide cases were reported nationwide, ten of which occurred in Medellín, making it one of the municipalities with the highest number of cases, with equally high data on domestic and partner violence. Medellín ranks second in the top 5 municipalities with the most cases of sexual offenses between 2022 and 2023. This report highlights Medellín as a reference for international *sex tourism*, which can be associated with illegal dynamics of pimping and the use of minors for prostitution and sexual exploitation, linked to illegal drug and arms trafficking dynamics. In March 2024, there was extensive media coverage of the sentencing of an 18-year-old Afro-descendant girl, who was sentenced to twenty years in prison for the murder of

a 55-year-old American man in the city of Medellín. The media narratives did not analyse the intersectional dynamics of the violations and structural violence experienced by women in this city, focusing instead on ensuring the perception of Medellín as a safe destination and not affecting the flow of international tourists to the city.

These situations open an important dialogue with the assertions of Segato (2014) who states that contemporary wars assume new forms and unknown disguises, as violence is primarily inscribed in the bodies of women and other fragile and feminized bodies, no longer warriors, through which social collectives are threatened as a whole and territories are captured in a sustained manner, more as an end than as a means. These feminized bodies, which are the focus of violence, are understood as minoritized bodies,



pushed to the margins of the intimate and the private, and consequently becoming invisible (Segato, 2016). It is precisely against this construction of the residual value of the feminized that some of the initiatives in this study respond through their pedagogical and self-protection exercises, but also through new dynamics within the organizations. The goal is to dismantle the binary framework that results not only in harm to the lives of women and other minoritized subjects but also to local dynamics as a whole. As already noted, those local dynamics are characterized by an irreconcilable schism that hierarchizes and subordinates the feminized below what represents the militarized hegemony of the masculine. This has direct effects on bodies, territories, and subjectivities, where sexual violence has taken a privileged place, not as collateral damage but as central strategies of military actions.

Self-Protection

When analysing rights violations through the framework of the sex-gender system, it is necessary to also consider the alternatives for self-protection that this perspective offers. This study generally found an increase in female leadership within artistic and cultural organizations, a growing trend of women's participation in these and other community spaces, a more prominent focus on feminist struggles in organizational agendas, and the adoption of feminist ethics in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Priorities such as fostering sisterhood, encouraging intergenerational dialogue, and promoting alternative masculinities are gaining more attention in organizational actions and narratives.

These alternatives are rooted in and give voice to femininity-related imaginaries. Such perspectives emphasize reliability, preserving a sense of rootedness, fostering community, and nurturing relational bonds essential to communal life—values historically underappreciated within the private realm but now being re-politicized within organizational dynamics. These dynamics, as noted by Segato (2016, p. 106), work to “break down the walls that enclose domestic spaces [so as to] revive the political essence of the domestic, intrinsic to communal life”.

Interestingly, in response to marginalization, some processes emerge that reaffirm and re-signify the domestic sphere as a key site for generating new forms of relationships and sociability, which contribute to self-protection. The feminization and devaluation of the domestic space are deeply ingrained in the culture, limiting its democratization and recognition as a valuable space for personal development. As a result, neither men nor women view it as a place for growth and achievement (Sarmiento, 2019). Women's visibility in the organizations studied comes from their shift from the private, anonymous space—not to idealize the public sphere, but to politicize public issues using lessons and values drawn from the private realm.

We are part of a complex society. The norm is patriarchal, but collective action is shaped by the maternal. So, we see two approaches: the patriarchal side represents colonialism, authority, and norms, while the maternal side emphasizes building family, home, and society. Ultimately, the maternal approach defines moments of care and self-care. When we created Nuestra Gente, it was the women who played

the most important roles: out of the 36 young people who founded the organization, the women—like Gisela, Nidia, Diana, María Eugenia, the Ángeles, the Saras, the Mildreds, and Piedads—had the greatest impact. They shaped the work through motherhood, a matriarchal perspective, and femininity. And how did they do it? In practice, the organization’s care practices have always been led by women, who have served as the protectors of care and the economy (Personal communication, member of Nuestra Gente, September 2023).

As Valdivieso (2014) explains, feminism has worked to make private lives visible, bringing them out of anonymity, as well as politicizing traditionally private matters. This has significantly influenced how power relations are understood and how political and economic matters are approached within societies. Educational initiatives by organizations are crucial in this context, as they challenge perceptions of those living in the private sphere and examine how personal relationships intersect with public and collective spaces.

For me, my opportunities were very limited. When Renovación came and told me I could achieve more as a woman—that I could travel and accomplish things independently—it opened up a powerful path. It’s about seeing yourself as a capable woman, realizing that you don’t need to depend on others, that you can handle your own life. Understanding I could live life on my terms has been key in helping me resist certain hardships. When we’re together, we discuss our concerns as women. It’s like we make a vow to protect each other, to be aware when we’re being exploited or when we’re not acting with reciprocity and support (Personal communication, member of the Corporación Renovación, October 2022).





These processes empower women by enabling them to reclaim resources, goods, and rights that have long been denied to them, reshaping their political presence through collective recognition (Lagarde, 2023). For organizations, this is an opportunity to bolster self-protection by creating safe spaces for women to listen, share, and reflect: “Women come to talk, vent, and contribute to critical thinking” (Personal communication, member of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, August 2023). It is also about acknowledging their collective role in the community and their leadership in protecting others:

For us, the safe place is with the ‘doñas’, with the group of ‘doñas’ — the older women who have always protected and cared for us. No matter where we go, these women, who symbolize our neighbourhoods, remain our foundation. They are present in many of the areas we live, mostly women who have survived violence but are respected as the original leaders of the community. They offer us a secure way to navigate public spaces, always with their support and presence” (Personal communication, member of *Agroarte*, September 2023).

Conclusions

Most of the organizations involved in this research were mixed-gender, with only one explicitly feminist group, and none specifically formed around gender identity diversity. This reflects the positions of the narratives and the research team, which mirror similar organizational structures, with inherent limitations and tensions. Established organizations have historically been led and recognized by male figures’ voices, aligning with the historical period in which they emerged. In contrast, the more recent organizations have stronger female leadership, with openly feminist viewpoints more prominently featured in their public narratives: “reclaiming power for women has been very difficult, [very difficult] not feeling guilty for asserting your power, your place, and pursuing what you want to do” (*Red Feminista Antimilitarista*).

In a patriarchal, militarized society like Medellín, art is a powerful tool that challenges gender norms and dismantles oppressive power structures. Art has traditionally been feminized due to its associations with emotions, intuition, and subjectivity—qualities traditionally attributed to femininity, as opposed to masculinity’s association with rationality and strength. This view of art paradoxically undermines its societal value, while allowing it to quietly question and transform dominant power systems. Art’s mimetic nature turns it into a form of care that transcends aesthetics, becoming a medium for resistance, healing, and community-building. Art and care intersect to challenge gender hierarchies and promote more inclusive social visions. By offering spaces for expression and

reflection, art encourages us to rethink societal norms and envision new ways of interacting with each other and the world. These elements add complexity to discussions on protective art and its relationship with the sex-gender system.

One key debate involves the feminization of care, a romanticized idea that positions care as a purely feminine trait while masking the power dynamics inherent in the traditional sex-gender system. This system's masculine hegemony dominates words and decisions, condescendingly views tenderness, and upholds the figure of the "warrior", supporting and guaranteeing a warlike culture. Art, with its feminized identity and representation of marginalized groups, assumes a saviour role that paradoxically reinforces gender binaries and heteronormative structures. These are deep-rooted systems of thought that often correlate care ethics (typically associated with femininity) with justice ethics (linked to masculinity). This binary and hierarchical framework reflects gender roles and stereotypes that have

shaped the narratives and practices of the participating organizations.

Historically, the ethics of care have been associated with women due to gendered expectations that position them as primary caregivers in both domestic and community spaces. This ethic emphasizes empathy, compassion, and attentiveness to others' needs, whereas justice ethics, more commonly linked to men, highlight fairness, rationality, and equality. However, these binary and stereotyped associations are problematic and limiting. They fail to reflect the diversity of experiences and the potential for convergence between masculine and feminine values, regardless of gender identity. Moreover, they ignore the essential nature of care as a universal aspect of human life that should permeate all social processes, regardless of gender (Cárdenas, 2017). This includes the initiatives led by artistic and cultural organizations, which contribute to civilian self-protection and promote the preservation of life, freedom, autonomy, and nonviolence.



4. Artists and Organizations: Balancing Social Recognition and Economic Instability

An intersectional analysis of interviews with organizations highlighted the importance of *social and economic factors* when addressing situations, actions, or evidence related to the social recognition of artists and their collectives. This recognition distinguishes them from other community members, both legal and illegal, and may increase rights violations or generate protective processes. These dynamics are tied to economic conditions such as income and resources. Given their intertwined nature, we use the concept of *socioeconomic position*, which includes class-related components such as a hierarchical differentiation based on interdependent economic relationships, as well as status rooted in prestige, honour, reputation, and some material standards. Using this framework, socioeconomic position can be measured at different levels (individual, household, community, or societal) and be used to assess the political implications of material redistribution and social recognition (Cabieses et al., 2011).

In Medellín, the context for artistic and cultural initiatives is characterized by low resources—not only for the management of organizations themselves (headquarters, administration, maintenance, etc.) but also at the personal and family level for those involved. Most interviewees, including young people, come from the city's lowest socioeconomic strata (0 to 3 on a scale of 0 to 6) with limited access to cultural events (theatre, exhibitions, concerts, training, etc.). Their daily lives are marked by illegal armed groups, economic insecurity, informal labour, forced displacement, weak state presence, and limited access to basic services. As noted:

In everyday life and in perceptions of the city, this is simply called violence, but it is actually the result of overlapping forms of violence—ranging from armed conflict actors (guerrillas, paramilitaries, sectors of the public forces) to organized crime groups (drug traffickers, gangs, combos) and everyday violence, including domestic, street, and neighbourhood violence (CNMH, 2017, p. 18).



Nuestra Gente troupe

In this challenging setting, artists and organizations have a certain social legitimacy that provides them with a unique status among both legal and illegal armed actors. This, however, does not translate into economic or personal status, either individually or collectively, which increases their vulnerability. Art, while offering self-protection, also brings fragility and uncertainty, threatening the stability of these organizations and requiring constant resistance and survival strategies for their collective and creative projects.

Rights Violations

The contextual challenges discussed form a basis for understanding the rights violations experienced by women, children, youth, and members of collectives. Notably, individuals face stigmatization rooted in poverty and certain youth identities, with young people particularly discouraged from pursuing careers in art; those who do are often judged for not choosing financially lucrative or immediately profitable paths. This situation underscores a moral tension within societies where quick wealth, often through illegal means, has become a social benchmark. Additionally, community leaders in many of the neighbourhoods and organizations studied face ongoing threats, making leadership a risky endeavour due to the dangers these individuals confront.



Ironically, despite these dynamics, the media often sensationalizes poverty and suffering, turning them into marketable products that reinforce stigmas and influence how residents in the city's poorest areas are perceived.

One recurring theme in the interviews was the existence of territorial boundaries enforced by illegal armed groups, which leads to violence, displacement, and shifts in daily life. In response, organizations advocate for an art that protects, presenting it as a way to navigate these conflict zones:

If they happen to ask you about your way of life/ Tell them you see in art a reason to go on/ It's a fire that invades us/ here in the neighbourhood something's happening/ Everybody get ready/ That this takes us out of the house

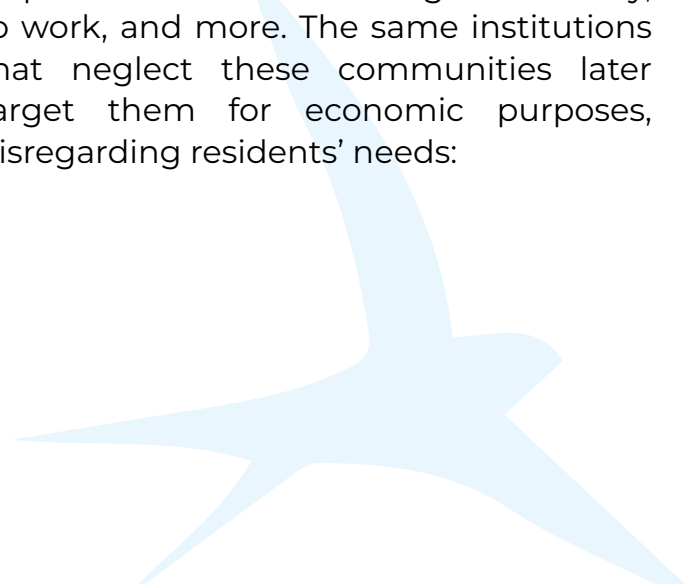
Art, art that protects/ Art, art that entertains Art, art that builds/ Art that does not flee That renews and maintains itself

We have exchanged the violence/ For life and love/ We have sown awareness/ that hanging out is better like this/ And it's that the landscape looks better/ other sounds take over the street/ other reasons to carry the message/ another language with the neighbour a smile is drawn in every corner

I have a passport in my own way/ It's called art, I take it wherever I go/ I'm evading borders/ If you know me, you know how I am/ Art has been my way (Gio Monteadentro, 2023)⁶.

For young people, choosing a nonviolent path makes them vulnerable within the broader dynamics of armed conflict. Neighbourhoods mirror the national situation, where decisions made far from the community affect daily life. In Medellín, these circumstances often occur alongside gentrification processes, contrasting with state abandonment. Gentrification arises when, in the name of progress or the common good, populations are displaced from their territories. Authorities and the media demonize areas before clearing them for high-end housing or commercial projects, raising land prices and forcing out the original inhabitants. This legal displacement violates their rights to the city, to work, and more. The same institutions that neglect these communities later target them for economic purposes, disregarding residents' needs:

⁶ Videoclip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgYv70cnZIQ>



All our rights are violated in this territory—every single one. They charge for electricity, they charge for gas but when there’s an emergency, they say no because it’s an informal settlement or invasion⁷, but for collecting payments, it’s not an invasion. The community is in total abandonment, displaced by the violence of life (Anonymous source for safety reasons, September 2023).

Organizations also engage with illegal armed groups in their daily work. While they generally try to avoid close relationships, they sometimes find that these groups ensure security in the territory, given the strategic absence of the state but also due to the legitimacy granted to these social actors:

You know, the relationship with the illegal armed actors, well... it’s positive because they provide the support we need in terms of taking care of the space when we are not there, and also the safety of the people who carry out our activities for the benefit of the community” (Anonymous source for safety reasons, September 2023).

These relationships often stem from familial or emotional ties, with gang members being relatives or neighbours of organization members. As a result, their security offers are accepted, and their actions within the community ecosystem are valued:

We are part of the same neighbourhood that becomes an ecosystem, meaning we are all here. There have to be relationships, not intimate, not close, but we are always going to coexist. We’re not here to cause problems. [We don’t say] that we are

fighting to eliminate the illegal groups, or to keep kids out of violence, or to disarm them; because those things also upset us, and we are living in the same territory. It’s about doing things with purpose, but without demeaning or belittling anyone, because many of them, the illegal actors, are there for much more difficult reasons, not just because they want to be violent. Many of them are also victims of violence; they are also migrants; they are also low-income people who often find a way to generate income there. It’s not about segregating them; we’re part of the same community, trying to make changes for the future (Anonymous source for safety reasons, September 2023).

From an economic standpoint, the organizations interviewed noted that material goods are viewed as symbols of personal value, putting both direct and indirect pressure on young people to earn money to gain community recognition. Opportunities beyond those offered by illegal armed groups are scarce, and making a sustainable income from art—enough to ensure financial stability—is highly challenging. Most organizations emphasized that artistic work is not seen as legitimate employment and brings limited economic benefits. Community art projects lack financial backing, with government grants reaching only a few, and private sector support for new artists is rare. Consequently, income for cultural and artistic groups is constrained, and artists struggle to practice their craft with dignity. Many are compelled to take on informal work or “hustling” due to exclusion from both global and local market systems, where precarious, self-managed work is often the norm.

⁷ The term “invasion” refers to the illegal occupation of land and constructions without formal planning.



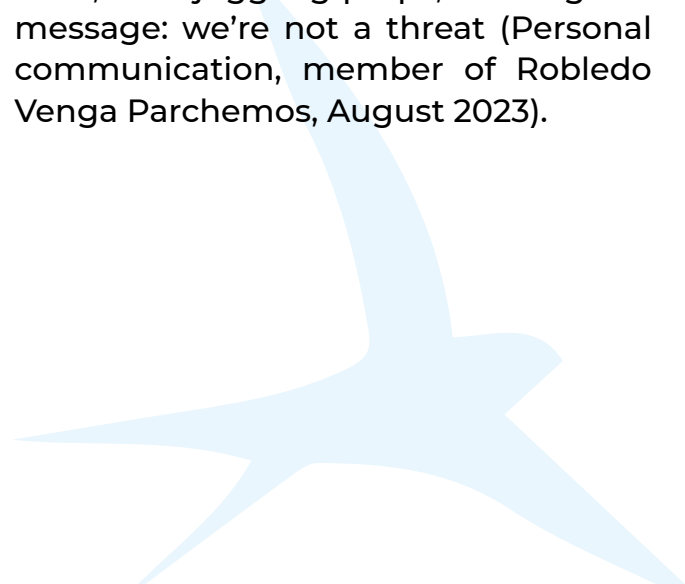
Self-Protection

All the organizations we spoke with believe that art promotes an awareness of a shared humanity, teaching people to acknowledge and value diversity, different perspectives, and the potential for solidarity and connection among individuals, groups, and collectives.

They argue that free access to cultural events, workshops, and courses is essential, as it brings personal and social transformations, elevating their status in society. This recognition of humanity through art builds heritage, public engagement, local actors' stories, and memories, processes that sustain the continuity of the organizations and, therefore, cultural transformation. By offering alternative, nonviolent identities in conflict zones, art provides young people with a different path, showing them possibilities beyond violence and drug trafficking in their neighbourhoods. As one woman explained, "Art protects young people... because it validates their thinking in a territory where they have no alternative but to join a gang" (Personal communication, member of *Corporación Renovación*, October 2022).

As noted earlier, what we call a "passport" stems from the legitimacy gained by being an artist or part of these organizations, which prompts armed groups to permit certain freedoms in movement and access to shared neighbourhood spaces. This backing comes not only from armed actors but also from the community, who see the members of these organizations differently, considering them good people doing good things for the neighbourhood and their families, who often frequent the spaces they provide:

That's how the group was born, the *parche* (informal gathering of friends) was also born as a proposal to hang out in the neighbourhood, right? We did art outdoors, even hosting the first event in a small park, and at that time, everything around the bridge, that ravine, was a boundary. So, I couldn't go where José lived, and José couldn't come here, but we wanted to hang out. So, before the gathering, we started doing brief workshops to find people who were interested in both neighbourhoods, to see who would join. And what we did was to come in small groups, cross the boundary in small groups, but on a unicycle, with a clown nose, with juggling props, sending the message: we're not a threat (Personal communication, member of *Robledo Venga Parchemos*, August 2023).



Conclusions

The role of grassroots arts organizations in self-protection can be understood on multiple levels. One key aspect is cultural consumption—these organizations provide free access to cultural goods and services, which are scarce in the neighbourhoods, helping to foster a sense of belonging and loyalty, which gradually fosters cultural transformations in the medium and long term.

The most noteworthy aspect is that its mission extends beyond merely consuming culture, promoting cultural creation from within the communities, territories, and their people. In areas with heavy stigmas and limited opportunities, especially for children and youth, this type of art that is meant to protect offers more than just a way to generate income; it opens the path to dreams and utopias, essential for envisioning new ways of life. It promotes new social values by acknowledging alternative identities to those the environment imposes as inevitable, emphasizing local agency and potential. This allows individuals to adopt a non-violent approach in the context of constant armed conflict. As a result, art becomes both a protective

shield and a passport for navigating conflict, gaining legitimacy and support from the communities, and even from illegal armed groups.

However, this is a complex situation, and it may result in increased rights violations because social legitimacy also extends to illegal armed actors. In some cases, their protective role is accepted by both the community and some artistic collectives. This creates a vicious cycle where art serves as a form of protection against violence but also becomes entangled in it, perpetuating the social and cultural patterns that normalize violence. As a result, the community's support for artistic projects becomes uncertain and vulnerable, depending on the actions of armed groups. The legitimacy that artists gain can quickly become a reason for persecution due to the political, restorative, and critical nature of their work.

Additionally, the lack of state investment and economic support for artists and grassroots cultural organizations, combined with the overall precarious conditions in which they operate, limits their ability to protect themselves, undermining their potential for medium and long-term impacts.

5. From Armed Youths to Young People Protected by Art

In this section, which addresses age within the intersectional analysis in this dossier, the argument being that rights violations are shaped by militarized hegemonies that influence the construction of young men's identities, the exploitation of female and feminized bodies, the stigmatization and criminalization of youth, and the dominance of adult-centric social norms. From a self-protection perspective, two key points are emphasized: first, organizations focus on alternative youth initiatives to resist illegal recruitment; and second, the recognition and respect that older women receive in their communities enables them to form alliances with organizations, making their efforts justifiable.

Rights Violations

As noted earlier, the influence of organized crime groups committing various violations against young men⁸ in different neighbourhoods of Medellín has resulted in the development of a militarized form of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by carrying weapons, using violence, eliminating rivals, and rationalizing murder. This element is included among the idea of rights violations because it becomes an ideal prototype that many young men end up adhering to, limiting their ability to seek other life perspectives.

Literature has captured the realities of these young people in works such as *La Virgen de los Sicarios* ('Our Lady of the Assassins', Vallejo, 2016), *La Cuadra* ('The Block', Mesa, 2016), and *Aranjuez* (Mesa, 2023), embodying the tragedy of a youth perpetually condemned to serve as fuel for the voracious violence of a city that devours its own children. Adolescent boys act as hitmen, guards, bodyguards, and protectors of the neighbourhood. Carrying weapons guarantees their safety and power over neighbours. Motorcycles become the emblem of their intense, short, and fast lives. Studies like those of Salazar (2018), Riaño Alcalá (2006), and Baird (2018) have explored these phenomena in the city.

Lederach (2019) has also examined the concept of militarized masculinity and its influence on the identities of young people. In the framework of masculinity promoted by organized crime, men assume a dual role: they are both aggressors, pursuing sexual control over women for personal satisfaction, and protectors, shielding women and other vulnerable individuals from external threats. In this model of male domination, the outside world is perceived as threatening, filled with men who could harm the weak. A key element of this protective masculinity is the dependency and subordination it creates. In exchange for protection, women are expected to be submissive and to accept any decisions made by the head of the household. He is the one who knows what needs to be

⁸ In its public policies, the Medellín Mayor's Office defines young people as those between the ages of 14 and 28 (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2024, p. 434)

done to keep his property safe, and those who live under his roof are to follow his command to preserve their peace (Young, 2003; Stiehm, 1982).

Within the dynamic between protective masculinity and submissive femininity lies a second aspect of rights violation: the appropriation of female and/or feminized bodies. A representative from *Corporación Altavista* explained:

(...) with girls, I feel like there's a really heavy issue that you start to perceive, yes, that they see girls as potential sexual objects. So, I feel like it's a game, like that inappropriate, suggestive gaze that shouldn't be there, yet you see it frequently among teenagers (...) (Personal communication, March 2023).

The third type of violation, also related to militarized masculinity, is the stigmatization and criminalization of young people, based on the assumption that they are the ones who are violent, sell drugs, use them, or carry out orders from gang leaders. In the end, all young men in the neighbourhood end up being stereotyped, leading to arbitrary persecution by the police, public scrutiny from neighbours, or feeling judged for how they dress or simply for existing in other parts of the city.

Studies like those of Callejas Fonseca and Piña Mendoza (2005), Napoli (2016), and Pacheco Paz and Idárraga Restrepo (2022) have shown that young people from low-income backgrounds are highly stigmatized in cities like Montevideo, Asunción, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Medellín. They are often blamed for much of the violence in these cities; this stigma is more prominently enforced in public spaces by the police and in private spaces by families. Some people link certain styles of dress, mannerisms, and self-expression with delinquency, drug use, and violence, while others view young people as rebellious when they develop an identity outside of traditional family values. In Medellín, this stigma particularly targets the “*parche*”—groups of young people who gather on streets or in parks to hang out. This way of occupying public spaces is often seen not only as unproductive but also potentially associated with illegal activities, like drug use.



The final violation particularly affects children and adolescents, who are often victims of adult-centric social logics. This not only prevents them from fully living their childhoods but also forces them to mature prematurely. Regarding this issue, a member of *Nuestra Gente* shared the following in an interview:

What we need to be protected from... it's from delusional grown-ups (...). Adults are delusional beings, and there are ugly delusions and beautiful delusions, and that ugly delusion is what constitutes perversity, just as the beautiful delusion can create imagination and wonder (...). So, we just finished the artistic showcases that started in the processes of March, May, June; the kids started, and those who have been in the process longer are the ones I work with—teenagers. They created a play called *Estamos perdidos* ('We Are Lost'). And we are lost because today, they have the deepest discussions at home with their moms and dads. And look at the depth of these discussions: 'use contraceptives, if you come here pregnant, you're screwed. You're not a whore.' And they are being forced to use birth control methods, having this brutal imaginary built for them. Then the father comes and starts messing with them, and all this talk begins about how we have to protect girls and boys... from delusional adults, from adult-centrism, from the worries of adults who believe that everything must be shaped in their own image (Personal communication, member of *Nuestra Gente*, September 2023).

According to Vásquez (2013), childhood and youth are often seen as transitional stages that primarily serve to prepare individuals for adulthood—a stage considered the point of maturity and entrance into the productive workforce. This perspective devalues the younger stages of life, treating them as preparatory phases leading to adulthood, which is viewed as the ultimate stage of human development. Consequently, adult-centrism emerges as a form of adult-centred knowledge that shapes various societal norms around behaviour, productivity, reproduction, political involvement, and more. This perspective prioritizes adult experiences over those of children and youth, imposing restrictions on how they understand and interact with the world. As a result, adult-centrism becomes a damaging force that limits young people's ability to fully engage with their current life stages, based on assumptions that they lack understanding or face no serious issues. Ultimately, it seeks to mould children and youth to fit roles that do not align with their realities.





Sueños de Papel

Self-protection

In the context of different age groups, grassroots artistic-cultural organizations highlighted several key self-protection strategies. These include prioritizing youth groups, fostering peer collaboration, recognizing older women for their historical contributions and leadership, and adopting differential approaches. Regarding the prioritization of youth groups, collectives like *Agroarte*, *Nuestra Gente*, and *Renovación* emphasized the importance of involving children, adolescents, and young people in their

activities and leadership initiatives. Their work primarily focuses on the San Javier, Doce de Octubre, Castilla, and Santa Cruz neighbourhoods, where state presence is limited, and organized crime groups exert control through territorial dominance, criminal economies, human trafficking, and recruitment. Additionally, these communities face severe challenges such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, and lack of access to basic resources.

As a result, young people often experience various forms of rights violation, and youth art collectives work to nurture

emerging talent and provide cultural alternatives. Amid urban conflicts, as previously mentioned, an idealized and militarized version of masculinity has shaped how young men construct their identities. Collectives like *Nuestra Gente*, the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista*, *Barrio Comparsa*, *Robledo Venga Parchemos*, and *Ziruma* have sought to promote alternative masculinities that challenge the image of young men bearing weapons and being prepared to serve the violent mechanisms that operate within their communities.

The promotion of cultural alternatives aligns with the second self-protection strategy: peer collaboration. In an interview with three leaders from *Robledo Venga Parchemos*, they emphasized that reviving the *parche* (informal gathering of friends) is crucial for fostering a sense of identity and community among local youth in Robledo. They aim to show that young people do not just gather to smoke marijuana or engage in illegal activities but come together to organize events for children, practice acrobatics, hold community bazaars, and participate in artistic initiatives. A leader from *Nuestra Gente* also stressed the importance of offering young people a legal path, distinct from the illegal activities prevalent in their neighbourhoods. By doing this, youth not only engage with artistic organizations but also work towards influencing public policies in a city that often forgets the fact that young men, who are frequently exploited in territorial conflicts, are among the most impacted by urban violence.

The third self-protection strategy involves recognizing the leadership and historical role of older women in many Medellín neighbourhoods. *Agroarte*, which operates in San Javier (Comuna 13), refers to these women as “The Doñas”. These women, often the founders of the self-built communities, have dedicated their lives to the well-being of the neighbourhood by securing resources, organizing communal spaces, and coordinating activities. *Agroarte* collaborates with them to gain legitimacy and protection from armed groups, who often view these women as maternal figures—mothers, grandmothers, or relatives who cared for them during childhood. Solano Suárez (2004) highlighted that, in the context of Colombia’s armed conflict, women have stepped up to provide for their families and lead the community in the absence of men, who often leave for war. This leadership has earned them respect and authority, making them key spokespersons and intermediaries in their neighbourhoods.

The final self-protection strategy focuses on using differential approaches when working with youth. Collectives like *Renovación* and *Ziruma* emphasize the importance of creating artistic workshops, theatre productions, and spaces for dialogue specifically tailored to young people. They note that young people have a unique way of expressing themselves and connecting with their peers, which is different from how they interact with older generations. It is crucial to provide calm environments where they can freely share their thoughts, experiences, and emotions:

For example, sometimes I finish a three-hour workshop, and I have to take a break for the whole afternoon because I get so emotionally involved in what's happening. I get so emotional when one of the kids, for example, is expressing themselves, feeling something, living something, and is passionate about what's happening. That's it: that awakening in others, the protective art awakens the senses, evokes memories, stirs feelings of

hope, ignites the desire to fight. Our nourishment is seeing the audience enjoy a piece that comes from what we have lived or watching a kid working in a workshop where they're killing their demons, processing those enemies they have, those frustrations, but from the stage. The kids here burn a lot of demons, ghosts, just as I did and continue to burn (Personal communication, member of *Ziruma*, October 2023).



Circo al puente [The Circus comes to the Bridge], Robledo Venga Parchemos



Conclusions

In response to the promotion of militarized masculinity that reduces men to tools in others' conflicts, grassroots community-based organizations using art as a form of advocacy have created alternative paths for young men. This has encouraged the development of masculinities that contrast with dominant norms, emphasizing community care and self-protection. However, this does not mean that young male artists are completely free from patriarchal expectations or involvement in sexist behaviour. It does, however, represent a step toward a vision of equality where women can feel on par with men while fully embracing their unique experiences and growth.

While this research focused on age-related vulnerabilities and self-protection, questions remain about the elderly. How can grassroots cultural organizations create spaces for intergenerational dialogue to bridge gaps between elders, adults, youth, and children? The focus on youth has left older generations somewhat overlooked, with only one collective offering theatre workshops for older adults. It is essential to provide older adults with meaningful ways to enjoy this stage of life and challenge the modern view of them as unproductive. Creating safe spaces for intergenerational discussions on topics like substance use, youth gatherings, decision-making, and differing cosmovisions could foster stronger bonds within the community and lead to better strategies for mutual care and support. Understanding others is key to appreciating their role in our own lives.



6. Re-affirming Ethnic and Racial Identity through Art in a Context of Structural Racism

The classic analytic components of an intersectional approach are race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1993). We have already looked into the latter two categories through the concepts of sex-gender and socioeconomic status. In this section, we will focus on the ethnicity-race construct. On the one hand, it should be noticed that the concept of race was perceived, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a biological fact that combined certain phenotypical, social, and moral features of human groups. This category was mobilized in the context of scientific racism to create hierarchies among individuals, ranging from the most primitive to the most evolved, in order to justify an idea of guardianship and dominion of some societies over others. Consequently, it was the burden of more technologically advanced countries—which were located mainly in North America and Europe—to spread progress throughout the globe. These ideas served as the foundation for over three centuries of structural racism, which discriminates populations based on the colour of their skin (Lévi-Strauss, [1983]; Wade, 2010).

On the other hand, as a result of advances in science after the second half of the 20th century, geneticists have provided evidence that race does not exist as a biological fact. Nevertheless, the concept continued to have a noticeable social, political, and economic impact, especially in the aftermath of Apartheid in South

Africa and the civil rights movement in the U.S. As a result, race has been understood from the perspective of social studies as a symbolic category based on phenotypical features of human beings. Particularly with the advent of European colonialism, this category has resulted in the exclusion of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples. While certainly symbolic, this category has had more than tangible effects on reality, resulting in racist ideologies, which attribute certain moral and social features to different human groups due to the colour of their skin. As a consequence, highly hierarchized societies have emerged, where non-whites are usually at the bottom of the pyramid (Lévi-Strauss, [1983]; Wade, 2010).

Importantly, even though race and ethnicity are sometimes used as synonymous, for the purposes of this study we will not follow such an approach. The concept of ethnicity gained traction during the second half of the 20th century to refer to minority groups in European countries, such as Jews and Gypsies. Anthropologists adopted it to refer to the *Others* of the West, communities with different traditions, identities, and cultures. That may explain why ethnicity is sometimes confused with race, since this diversity of cultures is usually reflected in phenotypical differences. Nevertheless, Wade understands ethnicity not only as a matter of differences between cultures, languages, and traditions; it is also a matter of one's *place of origin*:



Arlequín y los Juglares

Cultural difference is spread over geographical space by virtue of the fact that social relations become concrete in spatialised form. This creates a cultural geography [...]. People thus use location, or rather people's putative origin in certain places, to talk about difference and sameness (Wade, 2010, 16-17).

With that in mind, we will understand race, on the one hand, as a symbolic construct based on the phenotype of a given human group, with an impact on their real lives, which results in a society that excludes Afro-descendant and indigenous communities. Ethnicity, on the other hand, will be associated with cultural differences among certain minority groups originating in the regions outside Medellín; these Afro-descendant and indigenous communities are all bearers of diverse forms of knowledge, practices and cosmovisions, different from those usually found in the city.

Thus, in our intersectional approach to the ethnicity-race construct, we adopt the premise that at the root of rights violations, we find pervasive structural racism directed at the communities at the institutional level as well as within organizations. Such racism is encouraged publicly and politically by narratives found in the media in the form of an exoticism that instrumentalizes and commodifies their knowledge and legacies. As part of their efforts to foster self-protection, artistic initiatives promote self-reflection and self-recognition, questioning hidden, naturalized forms of violence. They also encourage the self-affirmation of identities, not with the purpose of achieving assimilation, but to promote justice and dignity.

Rights Violations

The rise of the capitalist economic system was spearheaded between the 16th and the 19th centuries by the trafficking of enslaved

people from Africa to the Americas. Upon their arrival, they were forced to work in sugar and cotton plantations, in underground and alluvial mines, moving goods, and in domestic labour. The only way for capitalism to grow without restrictions was by exploiting the almost free labour of Afro-descendant men and women. Towards the mid-19th century, movements to abolish slavery began to gain strength, as it became clear that slave labour was no longer profitable for industrial capitalism, which has favoured wage labour ever since. Consequently, the idea of race was created, with scientific racism serving as a means to control Afro-descendant populations. These communities were not granted political or civil rights, being treated as second-class citizens. As a result, a system of oppression emerged, by virtue of which not only Afro-descendants, but also indigenous peoples, were pushed to the margins, deprived of access to positions of power and self-determination (Sánchez Artega, 2007; Pineda, 2017).

After World War II, decolonization and civil rights movements gained strength throughout the world. By the 1990s, the struggles of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples in Colombia resulted in the recognition of a pluri-ethnic, multi-cultural State. Even though authors such as Eduardo Restrepo (2013) have been critical of such a model of the State, it should not be ignored that thanks to its implementation, the ethnic diversity of the nation has been made visible, with these communities gaining access to opportunities which until then had been denied to them. Nevertheless, structural racism continues to exist, pervading every single aspect of the lives of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples: the way in which they affirm their identities and their own aesthetics; the way in which they

express themselves and how they feel; their access to basic commodities; their ability to exercise fundamental rights; and the way in which they inhabit and use the city. The last census conducted by the National Department for Statistics (DANE) in 2018 indicated that 2.5 million people lived in the city. 2,934—i.e., 0.09%—of them identified as indigenous; 1 person identified as Gypsy or Romani; 248—0.01%—identified as Raizal (an Afro-Colombian ethnic group); finally, 137,715—6.5%—identified as Afro-descendants. Even though some of these individuals have lived in the city for generations, others have arrived due to different circumstances: looking for a better future, in search of work or study opportunities, as a result of forced displacement, due to the Colombian armed political and social conflict, or as a consequence of extractivist projects in their place of origin. Once in Medellín, they face a discriminatory society, in which most white/mixed populations may be hostile to their traditions or provenance. As a result, many Afro-descendant and indigenous individuals experience feelings of discrimination and shame due to these processes of cultural violence. It goes without saying that being part of a minority in this city is not easy at all. This has been amply documented in the literature by works such as those by Montoya Arango and García Sánchez (2010; 2011), Restrepo Rodríguez (2019), and Bohórquez Durango et al. (2017), for the case of Afro-descendants. For the case of indigenous communities, studies by Siniguí Ramírez (2007) and Cañas Cano and Mejía Agudelo (2017) could be mentioned.

Consequently, the first element we have found that results in rights violations in the context of the ethnicity-race construct is prevalent structural racism. One participant reported an instance in which



Afro-descendant youths working in a theatre troupe suffered from discrimination and were forcefully displaced from their neighbourhood. This occurred after they found the body of a person who had been murdered and dismembered. Most of these young people hailed from the city of Buenaventura, where in the 2010s a fear tactic to control the population, known as *casas de pique* [lit. chop houses], was implemented; these were places where paramilitary groups dismembered and tortured people (Cavanzo García, 2023). When the dismembered person was found, one of the young men from the theatre troupe was accused of being an accomplice, as the *modus operandi* coincided with what was happening in Buenaventura. As a result, not only that particular young man was threatened, but also those close to him.

The second element resulting in rights violations and contributing to structural racism is the exoticization of indigenous practices and their commodification on the part of tourists and white/mixed individuals. An increase in consumption of *yagé* (*ayahuasca*) has been notorious in the last few decades throughout the city, especially in the township of Santa Elena. *Yagé* is a powerful hallucinogenic used by certain indigenous communities in the Amazon region to conduct several spiritual and religious rituals (Quiceno Toro et al., 2001). Although its use has been reported in the urban area of Medellín since the 1990s, these past years have seen an increase in its consumption, exacerbated by the massive arrival of foreign tourists. What is problematic about the situation is not so much that these rituals are being performed, but the fact that they are separated from their cultural context to be incorporated into the logic of the market, resulting in the exoticization of

the way of life of indigenous communities. Co-opting these practices dismisses and downplays their spiritual, political, and social significance for the communities (Acevedo González, 2021).

Self-Protection

In the face of structural racism, we have identified two strategies to promote self-protection: anti-racism as a guiding principle in the cosmovision of organizations, and ethnic self-affirmation through art. On the one hand, organizations working with Afro-descendant and indigenous communities, such as the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista* and *Arlequín y los Juglares*, acknowledge that racism is a fact of life with direct consequences on the body, as it pertains to the individual, the community, the ethnic group, and one's ancestors. It is a system of oppression that pervades everyday intimate life and conditions the way in which one feels, thinks, behaves, acts, and builds one's life (Ballesteros Trujillo, 2016). As a result, these groups have incorporated a principle of anti-racism as part of their cosmovision, which transforms their entire organizational processes. In keeping with this idea, the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista* has declared the following in its website:



First of all, following anti-racism as a principle means that we understand racism as a historic system of oppression, which has been built on power relations that produced an idea of “race” to advance the supremacy or hegemony of whiteness over blackness or indigenous communities (in this country). Both publicly and in the internal structure of the Red Feminista Antimilitarista, this principle implies constant discussions and condemnation regarding the multiple manifestations of racism. In this way, we hope to construct political and collective actions to acknowledge its existence through critical and deep reflection and to fight for its elimination in all spheres of life (*Red Feminista Antimilitarista*, n.d.)

Anti-racism, just as intersectionality itself, implies a profound ethical commitment to understand that race is not the only system of oppression there is; it is part of a network of relations of subjection where one can also find gender and class, among other categories. As a result, undoing the system of oppression that is structural racism implies dismantling and reshaping the various power relations that structure modern societies (Curiel, 2007).

The second strategy to promote self-protection strives for ethnic self-affirmation through art. In an interview with representatives of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, they explained that through theatre, Afro-descendant and indigenous individuals can explore their own identities, where they come from, and their ancestral heritage. They can also reflect on how these elements shape the way they inhabit the world, how they live in the city, how they structure their thought, and how they imagine their lives. They can

project themselves through art, and find a way to express, narrate, and recognize themselves. Additionally, art contributes to strengthening organizations: “Theatre, and art in general, is a tool for political empowerment, as it positions people in the arena of the public” (Jaramillo & Salazar, 2019, p. 29, translation ours).

Through art, communities that never received any attention from the media and from those in power can now make their capacities and talents visible. Art legitimizes their voices, it builds networks of affect and solidarity among those who partake in it. Through it, they can also re-affirm and recognize their own cultural richness and diversity, and build a sense of citizenship in difference. Art brings a message of hope in the face of the difficult conditions we encounter every day and contributes to rebuilding the social fabric in the context of the aftermath of the Colombian 2016 peace agreement. Art strengthens ancestral forms of knowledge, cultural heritage practices, and the transmission of traditional forms of knowledge, bringing together different sectors of the population.

It should be noted that in the context of art for self-protection, ethnic self-affirmation does not take place in the form of assimilation. In other words, the purpose is not for indigenous or Afro-descendant communities to integrate their cultural differences into the hegemonic white/mixed population by turning them into a spectacle, or by turning their culture into an object for consumption. Art, as promoted by organizations such as *Arlequín y los Juglares*, promotes ethnic self-affirmation through a perspective of justice and dignity. As a result, the practices of these communities can be positioned



in the public discourse as legitimate narratives and experiences, which can

contribute to the organization, planning, and democratization of society.

Conclusions

Ethnic groups or peoples have seen their rights violated as a result of their displacement from their original territories; these violations can be measured and confirmed by looking at the precarious conditions in which these communities live. Afro-descendant and indigenous individuals live mostly on the outskirts of Medellín. Confronted with the violation of their rights, art acts as a self-protective mechanism, through which these communities can narrate and reexamine themselves, affirming their own ethnic identity. Even if their new context tries to force them to assimilate, they can regain their creative and critical potential, so that they can defend their own rights and constantly find places where they can recover their strength and dignity.

Nevertheless, we do not see art as a form of redemption or salvation; it cannot transform or redress the damage caused by structural racism. Even if it can be a strategy for self-protection, we also believe that cultural and artistic organizations should constantly examine their own practices and biases. It is important for them to open up more scenarios for intercultural dialogue with Afro-descendant and indigenous organizations, in order to find alternative aesthetic perspectives and different ways in which artistic organizations from different backgrounds and ethnic origins can work together.



7. Cosmovisions, Poetics and Challenges of an Art That Protects

Art as an element of self-protection has enabled conditions of empowerment, interpellation, care and security, in the territories of the city as well as in the life of artistic organisations. They are reflected in the search for the best possible scenarios for shaping social life and achieving more humanised forms of existence, exchange and the construction of collective meaning. In this context, worldviews held by an organization and its members greatly determine the stories, discourses, aesthetic narratives, loci of enunciation, and ethical positions regarding different matters, above and beyond the life of the organization itself. In Spanish, such a worldview is referred to as *cosmovisión*, literally a vision of the cosmos.

This section focuses cosmovisions as an image of the world, not in order to fixate their contents by describing them, but to carefully consider the components and strategies of self-protection and possible violations of rights associated with their meaning. It should be highlighted that cosmovisions are not merely representations of the world that are constructed and perfected by artistic organizations; they also incorporate the values and varying denominations that these representations confer to individual and collective practices.

Values and images resulting from artistic processes deeply resound with life (hi) stories and memories that individuals have created about themselves and the place they inhabit, be it their neighbourhood or their city. It should also be considered

that the creative act not only appears as a response to questions resulting from personal tensions; it also works as a form to directly interpellate the surrounding conditions, which in turn can only be articulated through art and by interacting with other human beings. This idea could be applied to the phenomenon of urban violence:

Theatre as such changed my life. So much so that when I was younger and suffering from depression, I began to feel a bunch of things every time I lost one of the kids. For me, the greatest therapy I had, the greatest way to feel whole again, was to cling to the theatre; in this case, I felt I had to cling to theatre writing, but a different kind of writing, which materialized in the methodology we now promote. It's not, then, just a matter of talking about violence for the sake of it, but about how we touch on that violence, how we shine a light on it, and how we transform it as a result of our creative and training projects (Personal communication, member of *Ziruma*, October 2023).

Cosmovisions are defined as a structured set of multiple ideological systems associated with one's surroundings, which serves as the basis for social groups to build their beliefs, values, and traditions, in order to understand such fundamental questions as: *Where do I come from? Who am I? Where is my life going?* These questions represent a person's before/origin, their now/identity, and their after/destiny, or their past, present, and future,



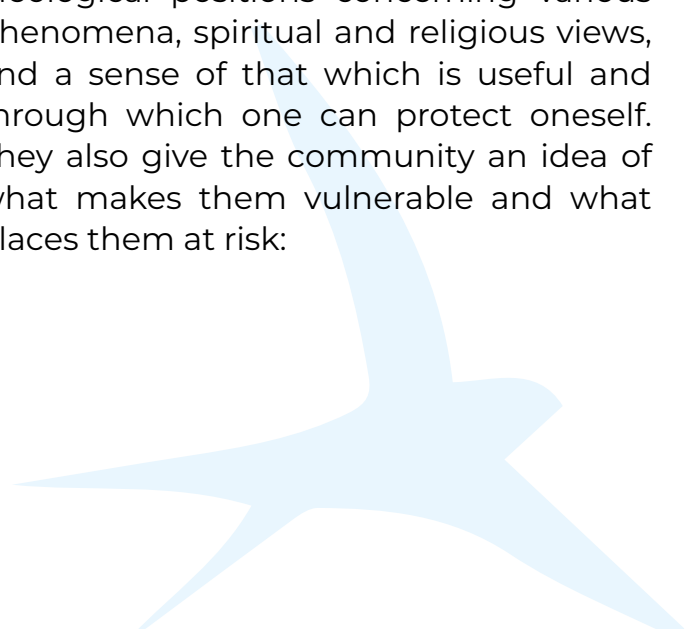
to put it in terms of linear time (Restrepo Arcila, 1998). Such definition implies the existence of a complex *space-time* relationship and of a shared history as the foundational myth of organizations. Based on these, agreements, strategic routes, and narrative landmarks are established:

When *Barrio Comparsa* first came to be, we had the idea that young people didn't have many options because they were killing each other; the only alternative to drugs, to make them hallucinate and send them in a different direction, was music. Musical instruments, masquerades, give them an incredible high, as the kids say. Art makes it possible to transform your spirit through creativity and trust. If we find each other in dancing, in the theatre, and we let go of that which brings us down, everything we're missing, it is in that finding each other that new alternatives emerge (Personal communication, member of *Barrio Comparsa*, July 2022).

A cosmovision can be defined as “a human construct that brings together different forms of seeing, feeling and perceiving the whole of reality, which means—in the case of human beings—the conjunction of nature and the cosmos” (Cerruto Alarcón, 2005, p. 14). Furthermore, “A cosmovision explores the depths of the universe as an integrated system, the understanding of the great fabric that makes us one with the cosmos, with the world, as human beings who partake in the creative act. It means even the possibility of naming and understanding—to the extent that it is possible—other forms of the divine itself” (Restrepo, 1998, p. 32). These definitions call attention to the ability to feel and to be excited against the overall background of the world. In the case of artistic and cultural

organizations, as well as their members, they bring to the fore the linkages among local actions and imaginaries, subjectivities, and broader understandings of the cosmos, which go above and beyond the structure of the organization itself. As Catalina Álvarez (2006) has pointed out, *cosmos* in Greek means order, harmony, decorum, decency, world-building. As a result, these cosmovisions materialize an approach to the cosmic order of life and a way to find order in the universe on the part of a culture, a people, or a nation. It is a way of understanding nature, the self, and the other.

In other words, cosmovisions are sets of beliefs shared by a person or a group concerning reality, and their own presuppositions and assumptions about how the world works (Herrero, 2002). In this sense, artistic organizations express some shades and hues of their cosmovision in their creative projects, thus creating an authentic path to their work and reaching an eventual narrative with the community. These paths and narratives usually take the form of theatre scenes, carnival troupes, *fiestas*, or mystical objects created to perform rituals. These expressions embody ideological positions concerning various phenomena, spiritual and religious views, and a sense of that which is useful and through which one can protect oneself. They also give the community an idea of what makes them vulnerable and what places them at risk:



We conduct a sensory inquiry, a poetic inquiry so to speak, a dramatic inquiry; we need the content to hold up. But we also promote social inquiry... social and human. We ask ourselves about the content we present in our plays. That is also a big part of the inquiry we propose (Personal communication, member of *Ziruma*, October 2023).

There is a two-way interaction between cosmovision and social practice: cosmovisions are conditioned by socioeconomic structures, but they also act upon these structures (Zuckerhut, 2007). As a practice, the cosmovision opens up the possibility for dialogue and creation that lead to the reassessment and validation of the economic and collective structures that serve as the basis for the artistic project. Cosmovision brings to the forefront that which needs to be protected and points to what is harmful, thus articulating and reflecting—by means of a complex medium—the complexity of the social world and the complexity of one’s individuality.

These three complexities—of the medium, of the social world, and of one’s individuality—question public and private realms that intersect both the anxieties and intimate experiences of the members of the organisations, as well as the neighbourhood narratives and the history of a city like Medellín, which is marked by milestones and critical events that have left their imprints on the social life (drug trafficking, armed control of the territories, and economic inequality). All these elements constitute the materialities that serve as both inspiration and outlet for creative projects:

I feel that we had to use art to defend ourselves from the very visible, very real monster that is war; it was breathing down our necks, it whispered in our ears; it made us shiver from uncertainty, from life itself (Personal communication, member of *Ziruma*, October 2023).

In this sense, cosmovisions represent collective categories which link the way in which organizations create their art and the complex nature of their members. By somehow sticking with their organizations, they come to agreements in the way they see the world and also conduct their practices in a way that reflects for the most part the sense of ethics of those involved. These practices inadvertently become strategies both to protect themselves in the face of adverse situations and to identify the consequences of not honouring collective agreements. When they come together, these organizations tacitly reach agreements on how to protect themselves and take care of each other, on how to face harm, and on how to understand harm when it happens. Thus, they come up with a kind of hermeneutics of their own making, which solidifies their community practices and identities. For *Barrio Comparsa*, for instance, the streets are the most important stage to find one another, they are part of their own nature. Over this metaphorical terrain, they build a scaffolding where they take care of and defend one another, and acknowledge their own risks. It is not the same to engage in a creative act following the dynamics of an enclosed space, a playhouse, for instance, and to do so out in the open, in the streets. Once they are out there, their own rhythms, the way they perform, even the possible violations they subject themselves to, may play a key role. But the main difference is the liberating power of the message, its possible visual, narrative, and sound effects:



We prefer festive performances with the community, the kind that takes place out in the open and in the streets; the only place for a troupe is the street; it's the place to be. It's the big house of culture, where people get together. Streets, street corners: that's our cosmovision. The street with its everyday rhythms, even beyond every day. When cultural expressions come to and intervene in a place, there is some sort of architecture of that setting going on, through culture. They used to say: it won't work because it doesn't last, it goes away, there'll be nothing left. No! There will be something left, when it happens, it changes these barrios, where there was no room for culture sometimes, no space for it, but people can come together. The way our barrios have been built is very relevant, that's where we were born, where we grew up; it is precisely there where we find one another (Personal communication, member of *Barrio Comparsa*, July 2022).

An organization's cosmovision symbolizes the coherence between the organization's ideals and their actions. An organization's strategies recreate symbols and meanings that are acknowledged by its members, and in turn motivate them to go into action. Among these strategies, one could mention the process of making pain a collective event (finding that which causes pain to all), methods connected to one's own philosophy, specific ways to teach artistic practices, to create records of real events, and the preferential option for festiveness, hope, or equality. Consequently, symbols serve as protection because they expose outwardly that which has a powerful strength within; they enact mandates and statements that can even

go against the established external order. It is in this tension between the outside and the inside where the most creative act of all takes place, going hand in hand with one's cosmovision: being disruptive, revealing the tensions between the organization's ideals and principles, the weight and violence of reality, and one's ability to act and create in response to it.

Rights Violations

While artistic organizations certainly mobilize foundational narratives, practices, discourses, and ethical attitudes which actively protect individuals and their collective creations, it should also be said that the force that propels this mobilization may create harmful conditions. In spite of the fact that artists promote aesthetic practices that expand and refresh the cosmovision of those who partake in them, many of their most intimate needs cannot find an outlet or a form of catharsis through the medium of art. The relevant question here would be: Is there anyone to support and encourage artists so that their own vulnerabilities may be kept in check in order to preserve the artistic process? "I feel that the type of art that protects responds to a problem, but it also helps people deal with other situations. As human beings, as artists, we have many different concerns and needs" (Personal communication, member of *Ziruma*, October 2023).

Most members of artistic organizations are mainly responding to their own sense of duty, a sense of empathy and a calling to serve others through art. Not every artist thinks about making it big in the art world, or about receiving awards. Most of them believe instead in creating opportunities so that communities may create and express themselves autonomously. While

certainly valuable, this attitude opens up possibilities for harmful effects, especially as the arrival of new members and the subsequent interaction with other cosmovisions create tensions in the way individuals understand their voluntary service and the way the organization works. Many times, people also find it difficult to understand that there are other ways to understand the world beyond the market logic. These tensions often result in either processes being subjected to constant rearrangements, or in individuals gaining a sense of self-entitlement, precluding the arrival of new members and consequently closing themselves off to alternative cosmovision.

Change is hard. It's just that we begin to feel comfortable with the way things work internally. We already know who we work with, who is in charge of what. And sometimes new people come in with new dynamics, new hang-ups; sometimes they don't understand why we do things a certain way, and you're like, hey, easy! (laughter), you'll get the hang of it. When new people come in, it's also hard, because you come to understand that people here at the foundation are doing voluntary work, it's not like a company, or any other type of organization (Personal communication, member of *Robledo Venga Parchemos*, August 2023).

Cosmovisions as images of the world directly refer to shared ethical attitudes, to the agreements and ways of dealing with disagreements within each organization. Sometimes they are simply an ideal, but they can also take the form of concrete actions that can even jeopardize artistic processes. Given the disruption of an internal agreement or confronted with

harmful practices within the organization, the kind of situation that can arise here is very different from those situations resulting from external armed violence. As a result, situations that represent violations of internal regulations trigger defence mechanisms within the organization, which operate according to their own internal logics and paradigms. Nevertheless, these situations also cause serious harm when they do not receive appropriate follow-up measures. They may result in a sense of stagnation and lack of coherence, especially where values are concerned.

Cosmovisions serve as symbolic anchors which stabilize the artistic process during a given period, they endorse certain actions, meanings, experiences, and principles. Because they are built on the basis of the organization's identity and seek to preserve its values, they can also become a stable foundation which, on the one hand, protects many individuals from risks associated with external factors such as violence and social indifference. On the other hand, it also may contribute to the petrification of certain discourses, making it impossible to embrace difference, i.e., other cosmovisions and ways of doing, which in itself constitutes a risk to the existence of the organization.

The links of meanings within the organization's cosmovision points to a tension between the external logics that impinge on it and more authentic processes which extol the values of community life. One should be aware of the potential harmful effects of such tensions. Because organizations are focused on building a sense of their own identity, some radical (from the Latin word *radix*, meaning root) perspectives and statements may emerge, which promote political activisms. These



positions may well open up scenarios where organizations can dialogue with their counterparts, but they can also lead to their isolation as they galvanize a sense of difference in the organization's aesthetic or political convictions. In the long run, this situation results in missed opportunities and weak management at the local level:

Some organizations that do community work have created a sense of legitimacy for themselves in the areas where they operate [...] I feel safe in the strength of the collective; that's such an important issue. You don't just get together with anyone; you look for people who think like you. Sometimes other people come along; I've been in public settings with other grassroots or social movements where I don't feel safe, because they have some positions that make you scared (Personal communication, member of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, August 2023).

Self-Protection

Cosmovisions in the organizations follow cooperative principles; they represent efforts to redress past wrongdoings beyond expulsion or more radical forms of punishment. In other words, there is some room for collective construction and self-reflection:

We have found a way to keep our discourse from becoming propaganda, so that it vindicates life, in order to advance our proposals; it means saying the same in a different way; finding alternatives to keep ourselves from being threatened. We do not want to be a black dot on white paper: we know we're being watched. But we also know that often those who are watching just do it to enjoy

themselves, I mean, they just hang out and watch us do our thing, that's cool, right? So I also think art means to find what brings us closer more than what keeps us apart (Personal communication, member of *Robledo Venga Parchemos*, August 2023).

Polyphony, then, becomes a kind of protection: it offers organizations a solid ground to build their beliefs; it forces them to question their coherence and constantly revise their own principles. That is why it is not so easy for violent and armed groups to interfere with artistic organizations:

Art has a language that brings people together and encourages intergenerational dialogue about complex issues. You need to consider that kids have a great capacity to understand things. Through art, you can really understand others, the way they think. You protect yourself because you reflect about your own life. Art is a place where you can listen, that's why I think it's a place of protection (Personal communication, member of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, August 2023).

Training oneself to listen to others is a common practice in organizations that believe in this kind of symbolic mechanism in contexts of violence and silence. Hugging someone or partying in the streets, getting up on a stage and telling a story that speaks of a "we": in that way meaningful collective meanings are built together, thus intangibly saving people from the most harmful emotional effects of war:

It has saved us from sadness, sadness first of all; loneliness, the lack of hugs. You'll still be hungry, but you feel full.

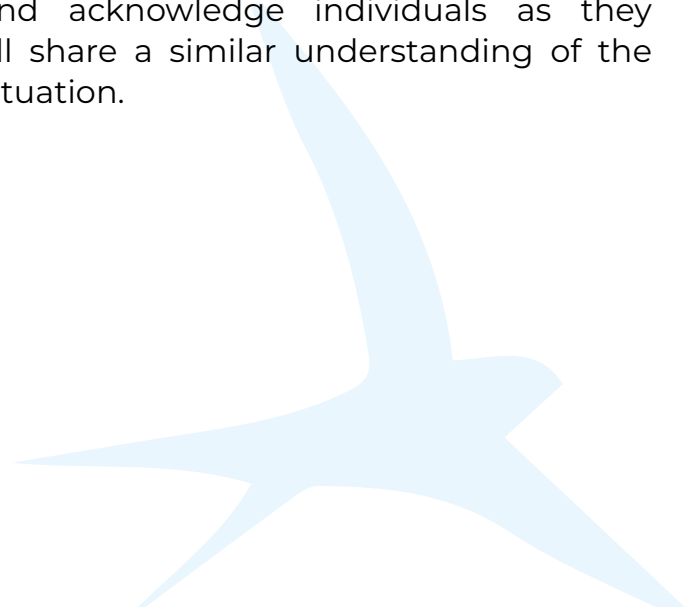
It has saved us from other behaviours in the community, such as violence, firearms, war. It has given them a different way to express themselves: now young people and kids always want to change things up. You can't keep them locked up just because they cannot leave their houses (Personal communication, member of *Barrio Comparsa*, July 2022).

Symbolically, the stage is a safe place. You don't get the feeling that during rehearsals, when you're in a play, something will happen. You never even think about it, you really feel safe. The stage is not merely the physical setting, the stage is when you're performing (Personal communication, member of *Arlequín y los Juglares*, August 2023).

In addition to these practices, cosmovisions create a sense of place that goes beyond a physical setting. The emotional meaning with which a community endows and legitimates a place goes beyond its tangible walls: it creates a set of images and words that explain why they go there, what they feel, what they do. It is more a matter of human feelings responding to a sense of caring, the freedom to be, and peace of the mind. Being part of an artistic organization constitutes an emotional compass and a defence mechanism for many lives in these communities. This is the result of the organization's attempt to be coherent with the way it conceives of and sees the world, i.e. its cosmovision; it also reflects its ethical positions in the way its members live their everyday lives:

The *parche*, the place where you hang out, is where you feel good; where you can do stuff with others. When you talk about hanging out, it means you're having a good time. And that's what we do in *Barrio Comparsa*. You can be there for a while and do things that make you happy: music, stilts, art, painting, whatever; you can talk about literature, poetry, mental health, what you find attractive, drugs... So, *Barrio Comparsa* is a hangout spot for kids; I call it a sensitive place where you can get together; I don't think about it as a hangout spot; I call it sensitive place (Personal communication, member of *Barrio Comparsa*, July 2022).

In addition to this way of inhabiting places as a strategy for self-protection, cosmovisions also make it possible to follow very specific ground rules within organizations. As a result, communities can come together to see the value in remaining anonymous, approaching other ways of thinking, and acknowledging other value hierarchies through which they can find new meanings for festiveness, for what they have gained and lost. They can find new values which will certainly result in situations where they can provide safety and acknowledge individuals as they all share a similar understanding of the situation.





Barrio Comparsa

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, art as a strategy for protection brings together dissimilar cosmovisions. It makes them resonate with one another, it promotes dialogue beyond the domains of reason and capital, it creates room for the abnormal, the disruptive, the bizarre, and the contaminated. Ultimately, it asks questions of individuals and about individuals which have an impact on those who may benefit from the community's care, affection, and safety, as opposed to what they traditionally see in their environments.

The type of art that protects assumes that other methods, principles, and foundations can be established in the world. To do so, it is necessary to contribute to the expansion of symbolic spaces and the making of diverse cultural worlds. This enables the emergence of new epistemologies and onto, or at least of creative combinations that counter the linear empires of reason and the abhorrent banner of warmongering and wastefulness.

8. Some Thoughts in Order to Move Forward

Intersectionality is understood as a set of different power domains which act upon people's lives according to their social conditions, economic status, and cultural imaginaries and representations. With that in mind, different approaches to the same phenomenon can be offered. Even though this *dossier* does not intend to fully account for all the possible intersections and domains, it did try to offer specific approaches to several relevant categories. Based on those categories, we propose the following motivations, recommendations, and conclusions for future projects:

- More than an individual power domain, cosmovisions in artistic organizations may be understood as a collective form of power, which is constructed and put in place in order to liberate and preserve artistic processes. In this way, identity, a sense of belonging, agreements, and ethical attitudes can be maintained, so that they can support political and aesthetic initiatives on the part of the community as well as its sense of self-government.
- Concerning its methodology, our work here offers a circular analysis model of intersectional categories. As a result, several intersecting and conflicting variables may be graphically and conceptually identified by organizations working with the purpose of developing self-protection strategies. Consequently, our circular model is open to questions and challenges, which may be taken up in future works, depending on the type of intersection that is being problematized.
- Even though categories such as gender diversity and disability have not been covered in this work, it is a task for organizations to address these questions in the context of the armed conflict and self-protection strategies.
- Concerning the ethnicity category, internal differentiations should be given more careful consideration. There are fundamental differences in the domains of power impinging on Afro-descendant individuals compared to those conditioning the lives of indigenous peoples. Consequently, we suggest going deeper into this matter adopting a differential approach. Attempts should be made also to rethink gender approaches from the perspective of black and indigenous feminisms.



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- Intersectionality as understood by Art That Protects may also be a relevant tool to explore contexts where identity-related or religious conflicts exist.
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- Finally, we should bear in mind that art for art's sake is not redemptive. Facing radically violent structures in the regions is a very complex matter, as these are the result of micro-powers and authoritarian agents that fall outside of the sphere of art. From a symbolic perspective, striving for legitimacy and promoting collective action, art manages to achieve powerful results, but it does not manage to solve other problems. Nevertheless, its protective intention across time and space offers some hope; it has powerful poetic and creative consequences: the *fiesta* becomes a collective endeavour and it offers its aesthetic force whenever the rights of an individual and/or community are violated.



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