

“Paradas” and “Arrechas”

Disrupted Femininities and Gender Arrangements within Bucaramanga’s Gangs (Colombia)

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article describes and analyzes the disrupted femininity of women within gangs in the city of Bucaramanga (Colombia) through the employment of a gender approach. We argue that such women, albeit exposed to multiple forms of violence in their neighborhoods, are also agents of violence with a singular identity, which is expressed by performative acts and ways of being and caring for others, in which broad gender arrangements are simultaneously disrupted and maintained. This research followed a qualitative methodology based on ethnographic work and 50 in-depth and semi-structured interviews.

■ **KEYWORDS:** disrupted femininities, gangs, gender, gender arrangements

Female involvement in gangs is still an under-researched topic in academic literature. The overlooked role of women in gangs has to do with the fact that these groups are almost always presented and perceived as a “male thing.” Nevertheless, women participate in this social universe, sometimes more frequently than it is assumed. This article examines femininities in gangs or *parches* in Bucaramanga, a medium-sized city of half a million inhabitants located in the north-eastern part of Colombia, where active female participation in this type of association has been observed. *Parche* is the term used by gang members in several cities in Colombia to refer generically to the youth group that they belong to. *Parche* or gang are perfectly comparable terms, although young people do not tend to use the second term, which is more commonly used by outside observers. In both cases, we are talking about groups of young people who may commit minor offenses, who have a strong street vocation, and who satisfy certain needs, mainly in terms of entertainment and security. In general, the term *parche* or gang is used to designate groups of delinquents from poor neighborhoods (Bonilla Ovalles and Jaimes Vargas 2017).

The gang phenomenon in Bucaramanga has not been covered in depth by Colombian academics, with only a few academic studies (Bonilla Ovalles 2014; Bonilla Ovalles and Jaimes Vargas 2017). The lack of research specifically focused on femininities within Bucaramanga’s gangs is even greater, since this is a topic that is generally not well researched in Colombia.¹ Internationally, there are more studies on female gang members than those carried out in Colombia, but they are also relatively few, that is, in comparison with those that focus on men. As such, women have not been sufficiently considered as representative actors within these youth groups or their participation in them has simply been trivialized or disqualified.



Although the dominant gender stereotype is that gangs are essentially formed and led by men, and that women play an auxiliary role within them or can only be “pale imitations” of male gang members (OAS 2007: 28–29), in the last two decades, some authors have begun to pay more attention to female gang participation and to how they have constructed an identity different from that of their male counterparts (Miller and Brunson 2000; Panfil and Peterson 2015). Given the scarcity of this academic work, there is not yet much consensus on the extent and nature of female gang activity (Miller 2001), nor are there enough studies conducted outside of the United States to allow for comparisons (Deuchar et al. 2020).

It should not be overlooked that the debates on female gang affiliation have been enriched by the contributions of the study on feminist criminology and the need to include gender within the study of violence, as this makes it possible to overcome some traditional views that are laden with stereotypes. Some of the most important debates in this field, echoed by James Messerschmidt (2002), have focused on the fact that female gang members cannot be studied in the light of masculine theories, nor can they be viewed as if they were the same since this leads to inaccurate generalizations about their motivations and behaviors in these groups.

Similarly, it has been argued that while they may defy gender expectations, they also reproduce social norms that privilege and promote masculinity (Miller 2001 and 2002a). Jody Miller noted precisely the “circumstances in which different types of identity construction are likely to emerge, especially at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender; but she will focus primarily on the contingent, fragmented, and contradictory nature of girls’ adoption of an identity as ‘one of the guys’ in order to gain respect and reputation” (Miller 2002b: 478). This perspective would be criticized, especially by Messerschmidt (2002: 462), who defended the argument that in the case of female gang members, “a unique gender fluidity occurs in which different gender practices are emphasized or avoided depending on the social environment.” Messerschmidt (2002) would also draw attention to the clear compatibility between “acting bad” and “femininity” for which he defended a particular form of femininity that he called “the bad girl.” In short, the debates are longstanding and closely linked to this construction of identity, though the discussion does not ignore the sexual victimization and the differentiated use of violence by women, as well as women’s reasons for entry and continuity within gangs (Fleisher 1998; Miller 2001). This also applies to male hierarchies, their ways of maintaining power and control (Kelly 2015), and the risk factors associated with the gender condition (Esbensen and Deschenes 1998; Maxson and Whitlock 2002; Smith et al. 2019; Thornberry et al. 2003).

As a result, this study aims to slightly offset the lack of studies about gender and gangs in Colombia, and in doing so, to contribute to the expansion and diversification of academic work at an international level, questioning the constructions of feminine identities within gangs. Our research examines the phenomenon from a gender approach—distancing itself from simplistic, stereotypical, and dichotomous visions of female gang members—and it adopts a qualitative perspective that draws on empirical evidence from ethnographic research, which means accounting for the involvement of women in these youth groups in a situated way and delving deeper into what makes sense for the group. In this sense, we are encouraged to answer the following question: How are disrupted femininities within gangs influenced by the interaction between “broad gender arrangements” and “situated gender arrangements”? Gender arrangements are understood here as the result of a contingent and power process in which gang rules are negotiated, established, and expressed within different genres (CNRR and CNMH 2011). These rules may be formal, such as laws and constitutions, or informal, such as cultural conventions. Moreover, these arrangements have been constructed around the heterosexual-masculine ideal, for which what is feminine retains a lesser status (Kergoat 2003). Although these gender

arrangements have a historical and contingent character, subjects generally perceive them as natural and permanent (CNRR and CNMH 2011).

Additionally, the concept of gender arrangements has not been explicitly covered in gang literature. Nevertheless, this concept of constant negotiation has been used by authors such as Jody Miller and Ron Brunson (2006) to explore the emergence of femininities in gangs. Authors like Karen Laider and Geoffrey Hunt (2001) and Abigail Kolb and Ted Palys (2016) explain the advent of femininities as a product of a situated negotiation between particular contexts and broader social structures. Therefore, we integrate gender arrangements as a broader concept that incorporates negotiation to explain the emergence of specific femininities that are guided by particular arrangements, which we refer to as situated gender arrangements.

The central argument of this article is that, in joining gangs in Bucaramanga, women have established situated gender arrangements that partially resist broad arrangements based on heteronormative conventions in at least three ways: by engaging in performances that reconstitute their identities, by becoming agents of violence, and by re-signifying care practices associated with the feminine being. The defiance of broad arrangements is not complete, as female gang members also adopt behaviors that perpetuate these arrangements.

This study is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2022 in *comunas* 1, 2, 9, and 14 in Bucaramanga. *Comunas* are Bucaramanga’s administrative units and are formed by the aggregation of neighborhoods. The selected *comunas* show strong dynamics of financial poverty according to the National Administration of Statistics (DANE, in Spanish). The local government and the Santo Tomás University calculated that *comunas* 1 and 2 have a Human Development Index below the local average and comparable to countries such as Haiti and Afghanistan (Alcaldía de Bucaramanga and Universidad Santo Tomás 2017). Moreover, the four *comunas* are among the most violent in terms of homicides and interpersonal violence (Alcaldía de Bucaramanga 2020).

Throughout the fieldwork process, we observed that the neighborhoods visited are dense areas, located on hillsides filled with cramped houses. All of this is in Colombia, a middle-income South American country with multiple manifestations of organized crime and violence, most of them financed by drug trafficking. In the aforementioned context, we conducted 50 ethnographic interviews, 25 of which were carried out with female gang members and ex-gang members. The female gang members and former members interviewed ranged in age between 13 and 41, with an average age of 23 and at least one year of experience as gang members. There were two social leaders over the age of 30 and the rest were male gang members and former gang members, most in their early twenties. The participant selection was done through snowball sampling, starting with former gang members and social leaders of the 14th *comuna*, who were contacted after the intermediation of a local political and religious leader, who has been working with gangs for 15 years. Given the difficulty to access this social universe and the fact that the intention was never to obtain a statistically representative sample, this approach was deemed appropriate. Also, it is not uncommon or forbidden to belong to more than one gang in this context. It was therefore not possible to identify a specific number of gangs. However, two groups were clearly identified: *Las Carramanas* and *La Parada*,² both rival gangs in the 14th *comuna*.

The life experiences captured in the interviews cover a window of time stretching roughly from 2010 to 2022. Some people were interviewed more than once, with yearly intervals between interviews, allowing us to follow the experiences and lives of several young gang members longitudinally. Even though we have used some available quantitative data to illustrate specific points, this study has essentially relied on a qualitative methodology to explore in depth the social framework of *parches* and the way in which women situate themselves within it. The

empirical material was collected not only by semi-structured and ethnographic interviews but also by a field diary based on direct observation.

In order to carry out the empirical fieldwork, we adopted a reflexive stance, which implies “differentiating contexts, detecting the presence of frameworks from both interpretive research and informants, and how each one understands the relationship and its spoken words within the framework of field research and the exercise of interviewing” (Guber 2001: 4).³ It is appropriate to emphasize that access to female interviewees was always much more complex than the possibilities of talking to men, despite the fact that the person conducting the interviews in the field was a woman.⁴ Since the first incursions were carried out in different neighborhoods of the city in 2017, men seemed to feel more comfortable and did not find it threatening to talk to a female researcher, reinforcing the stereotypical idea that violence and aggression come from men. Instead, it was always necessary to look for women in their homes or in their safe places, usually through a trusted intermediary, and even then, they were less open than men, slightly more wary and sometimes distant. The process of building trust with women took a little longer and initially required a great deal of subtlety and caution on the part of the interviewer, especially as there are entrenched gender stereotypes in the neighborhood, even among women themselves, which state that women tend to be pretentious and treacherous and therefore cannot be trusted.

Over time, it was possible to establish bonds of cooperation, communication, and trust with some of the female former gang members, especially those who found the interviews to be a kind of catharsis, which allowed them to begin a healing and reflexive process about their own lives and what they wanted to leave behind. It was always about creating a safe space for the interviewees in which they did not feel judged.

In addition to the previous clarifications, this study considered several ethical issues. Voluntary participation was ensured, no actions were taken that could cause harm, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Informed oral consent was also obtained, and agreements were made to avoid providing highly sensitive information that could put the safety of participants and the research team at risk. No value judgments or accusations of any kind were made, and questions were never intrusive or overly invasive.

The article is divided into three parts, illustrating a dual dynamic of disruption and maintenance of gender arrangements. The first part explores the ways in which female gang members in Bucaramanga reconstruct feminine identity by turning to transgressive performances and using their gender strategically. The second part shows how the same women disrupt broad gender arrangements, moving from being passive subjects of violence to equal agents of violence. The last part illustrates how care practices, commonly associated with the feminine, are both maintained and transformed within a gang.

Disrupted Femininities, Performances, and Strategic Use of Gender by Female Gang Members

Feminisms, gender studies, and sexual diversity studies have questioned binary and pseudo-biological visions of gender, asking about how societies have endowed physical characteristics of bodies with certain meanings and signifiers. This perspective, which is interested in the social and historical structure of gender, emphasizes the fact that it is not something determined by nature but by a social and somewhat constructed experience through a vital trajectory embedded in different gender arrangements.

Here, we seek to understand and clarify the significance of the “feminine” for women who are involved in gangs (what we call “disrupted femininities”), by examining the ways in which they

reconstruct gender arrangements. For the purposes of this article, we will use Marcela Lagarde’s (2008) definition of femininity as a culturally and historically determined distinction that characterizes and defines women in contrast to the masculinity of men. Lagarde (2008) also writes that these characteristics are patriarchally assigned as natural attributes, even though in reality no woman can fulfill the duty to be feminine and there are contradictions between this duty and what it actually is. In order to emphasize these contradictions in the specific context of gangs, we have coined the term “disrupted femininity” because it operates in a highly androcentric context and is expressed in ways that both claim and deny femininity as a “must be.”

Initially, we are guided by Judith Butler’s thoughts, who understands gender as an experience culturally created, produced, and historically situated. We begin from their point of view about how gender is constructed, as “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 2006: 43–44). The prior statement operates “in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and . . . to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (Butler 1993: 2). It is about a performance that is not a unique act but a repetition and a ritual that achieves its effect through naturalization, within the context of a body (Butler 1993: 2).

According to Butler, this constant performance, which begins to take place from the moment that we are born, imposes on us gender norms that we naturalize and from which it is very difficult to escape. Even though Butler recognizes the possibility of a certain resistance to those norms through the cracks that exist in the form of gender restructuring, for them this resistance is merely a small weakness found within power relations. For that reason, in order to think about and characterize the forms of resistance of female gang members to gender norms, the notion of the body that desires can be more enriching, based on a critique of Butler’s perspective, which states that “even if the body is immersed in power relationships, it is also a territory of creation and agency from which subjects can resist the power that is displayed through gender” (Sáenz et al. 2017: 98). For the authors, the body that desires references: “Desires that are made real in and through the body [and] that allow seeing the existence of a disconnect between the way in which one wants to unfold one’s life and the way in which life is presumed must be lived. [In sum, it is about bodies] that, in a tense and persistent relationship with power, motivate the construction of identities and non-normative bodies” (Sáenz et al. 2017: 84).

The idea is to account for the way female gang members in Bucaramanga possess bodies that desire and perform in ways that involve negotiating the rules they transgress, thereby defying broad gender arrangements and, by extension, the femininities established in heteronormative references.

Above all, it is important to highlight that there are three manners in which female gang members in Bucaramanga are linked to gangs: (1) women who, despite maintaining an esthetic and a wardrobe associated to the feminine, try to gain respect and earn status within the gang by adopting postures of bravery similar to those of the “tough men”; (2) women who feel and perceive themselves as equals within the group, even if they do not necessarily embody styles that make them resemble men; (3) women who take on esthetics and a verbal and non-verbal language conventionally connected to the masculine in order to be recognized as such within the group.

Regardless of how they are linked to gangs in Bucaramanga, women alter broad gender arrangements as they rethink their identities, leaning on an imaginary that exists in Colombia about the *santandereanas* (women from the region Santander, of which Bucaramanga is the capital) as tough and fierce women, whose essential trait is the fact that they “don’t take shit from

anyone.” There are hypotheses about the origin of this imaginary, divulged by local newspapers such as *Vanguardia* (Giraldo Mesa and García Ardila 2012), but none as a result of rigorous historical work on social imaginaries; they are only speculative explanations. Nonetheless, the fact that they were divulged through a local newspaper reveals both the existence and the power of the imaginary. Beyond its origin, what is relevant is the manner in which the women of the *comunas* refer to this imaginary to establish a way to be a woman, not only in a gang’s core but also in everyday life. This is evident in the way that they define, in their own words, the *bumanguesa* (woman from Bucaramanga):

As Camila and Sandra, female former gang members, said to us: “Us women, being the saying here in Bucaramanga about *santandereanas*, it’s true: *arrechás* (tough) for everything, for work, combative as well . . . They are known here for that . . . Santandereana is . . . we don’t let anyone mess with us! That is our saying and being gutsy, it’s being a chick that stands up for herself, a chick that doesn’t let anyone mess with her” (2019).

Product of these internalized speeches, diverse performances of that way of being a woman emerge, such as: always carrying a knife; *pararse duro* (to stand up for oneself without fear), regardless of whether the person confronting them is a man or a police officer; training in the use of weapons; or starting fierce fights with other women, pulling each other’s hair. In this sense, the speeches, the behaviors, and the practices of female gang members defy gender arrangements traditionally established within heteronormative culture, which associates women with being sweet, weak, and fragile. Rather, female gang members seek to be characterized by their “bravery” within and outside gangs.

It is important to emphasize that the entire female gang members’ experience takes place within the street context. Indeed, gender arrangements have a particular spatiality, as they not only operate in the space of neighborhoods as a whole but are established, negotiated, transgressed, or reaffirmed in a street space. This is important because clearly the street does not connect with what tends to be associated with the feminine gender. Feminine bodies on the streets are bodies that are questioned for not abiding by the commonly socially assigned roles within the binary separation of man/woman. It is generally assumed that the street is a place of danger, aggression, and exposure to risk. For this reason, the presence of female gang members on the streets blurs broad gender arrangements that establish an equivalence between a woman and the home, assuming that the street is not a place for them (Rodríguez Lizarralde 2020). Contrary to broad gender arrangements, female gang members occupy the corner, the park, and the court, all the spaces where gangs tend to *parchar* (hang out) and which are often perceived as dangerous, more masculine, and therefore off-limits to women.

However, it is important to note that women occupy different positions within gangs, mixing traditionally masculine traits with those associated with femininity. Certainly, the simplistic premise that reduces their experience as a male imitation attempt, denies how they can equally keep elements that are socially related to femininity. For example, some female gang members do not set aside completely the exploitation of their physical attributes, but instead highlight them through captivating attire, to grab the attention of others and be persuasive within the gang, or even to carry out activities outside of it, such as selling drugs. At other times, however, depending on the situation, they can adopt a very rough, risky, and extremely violent attitude, which is necessary in order to “defend their territory.”

They “act in function of the expectations that are profoundly rooted or segmented in the existence of gender” (Butler and Lourties 1998: 303) but can also resist and distance themselves from these expectations by using language, esthetics, and actions that lead them to position themselves as just another member of the gang, without being treated differently by male mates. This means participating in all the activities associated with *parches*, such as spending time

together, using psychoactive substances, getting involved in fights and/or disputes, and committing crimes, among others. Such ambivalence in experimenting with and adopting gender is related to a “gendered code switch” (Deuchar et al. 2020), which they define as a social ability of strategic character used to survive, referring to women’s ability to adapt their gender image to the needs of the moment and place.

Additionally, there are variations in the way women inscribe themselves within gangs, depending on the type of group they enter. In this study, three types of gangs were identified: all-female gangs, mixed gangs (where both men and women are members) and “mirror” gangs. We refer to “mirror” gangs as those groups that are the female reflection of their male counterparts. In essence, these are gangs that start out as mixed groups, formed around strong affection, sentimentality, or even blood ties, but then separate, although they do not break all ties with the original group. The relationship between two gangs of this type is based on a deep closeness and mutual protection, making them allied gangs.

The variation in female performance in gangs is ample. First, there are women who radically break with the broad gender arrangement associated with male dependency and confinement to predominantly domestic work, becoming leaders of their own *parche* and adopting very autonomous and dominant attitudes (this tends to happen in all-female gangs and in some mixed gangs). There are other women who, without assuming masculine postures and maintaining conventional feminine characteristics, seek to gain the respect of their male counterparts (to be treated as equals) and to achieve recognition within the *parche* by *parándose duro* (standing their ground) and showing strength when necessary (this is obviously the case in mixed gangs). In other cases, there are women who sometimes take on “secondary” tasks within the gang, such as, “cleaning the men,” meaning taking on the responsibility of carrying weapons when the police carry out raids (this happens in both mixed and “mirror” gangs). Finally, there are women who distance themselves from conventional feminine gender patterns, seeking to hang out, and using drugs alongside men.

It is then clear that broad gender arrangements are maintained within the core of gangs, despite women’s attempts to rebuild them. This is evidenced by the fact that men’s respect for women varies according to the way they present themselves to the *parche* and according to the limits they set, given that men can end up using them and not valuing them in terms of affection, and furthermore seeing them as sexual objects. As Sandra explains, “if we don’t make them respect us, excuse my language, they fuck us over” (2019).

Stereotypes associated with dichotomous attitudes toward femininity and masculinity are also maintained within the social universe of gangs, which do not undermine heteronormative social conventions. This is evident in recurrent expressions used by people living in those neighborhoods. Catalina, a female community leader of the *comuna*, states that “the girl stands up and steps up as if she were a man and she gets respect” (2019). This expression suggests that the way to gain respect is to adopt postures associated with hegemonic masculinity, where rudeness and strength are protagonists, in order to acquire respect in the neighborhood (Baird 2018). Something similar can be found in male speeches that place women in a secondary position, as Juan, a male former gang member, expressed: “If one stood up to fight, women also stood up to fight; if one went, they went; what one did, they did. But at the same time, one would always rule; men always ruled in the *parche*” (2022).

In this sense, conditions of subordination over women, which also existed in Santander’s society, and which were frequently described as highly chauvinistic, are revealed. It is paradoxical, then, that in this context parallel speeches associated with tough women operate but also that these chauvinistic and patriarchal logics take precedence. In that respect, we see systematic tensions between the maintenance and subversion of gender arrangements.

Violence as an Expression of Gender Arrangements Subversion and Maintenance

The fact that gang female members are connected to violence and delinquency defies gender arrangements that depict women as fragile beings that require protection, while the man is strong and protective, which generates dependency and a subordinate link from the woman toward the man. Furthermore, it is presumed that women “are beings incapable of carrying out violent acts” (Interpeace 2013), for which a good part of academic literature has placed the study of women as aggressive agents on a secondary level (Ness 2010).

In the few academic studies that exist on gangs in Bucaramanga, the analysis of confrontations and forms of violence perpetrated by women is very limited. Here, this phenomenon is addressed, starting from the concept of violent experiences, constructed, and developed by Myriam Jimeno (2017). According to her, violence has concrete signifiers and goes through speeches and bodily practices as well as through emotions and reasoning that allow the configuration of identities. These identities emerge, among other things, as a product of the interplay of gender arrangements.

Violence perpetrated by female gang members in Bucaramanga arises within the pretension to project an image of being *parada*, meaning that they will not let anyone hurt them and that they are willing to protect their honor and dignity (what they call *criterio*) to the last consequences, just as it appears in the following stories. Valentina, a female former gang member, said to us that in her context: “One had to stand strong or if not, one was beaten. Here I fought with more than one: here I was respected, because I wasn’t afraid of anyone. Even if I was beaten, I would stand up for myself” (2019). Then, Flor, a female gang member, told us about a particular situation when she was intimidating a male rival: “He [thought] that I was going to kill his brother. But I wasn’t going to kill him; I was going to shoot him in the leg, in order for him to respect me” (2019). This was reinforced by Lucía, a community leader: “This girl was one of the strongest. Everyone was afraid of her. If she had to knife someone, she would knife anyone, man or woman; if she had to kill, she would kill” (2021).

This particular attitude toward life becomes an important characteristic within disrupted femininities assumed by women, who originated from neighborhoods with multiple social vulnerabilities, segmenting the fact that attitude and aggression have an instrumental and symbolic value (Ness 2010). In the specific case of the four *comunas* in which the present investigation was developed, physical aggression is a resource that is used, not only to protect themselves against possible aggressions by men or other women—whether they are from rival *parches* or their own—but also to acquire a certain status within the neighborhood and to gain respect.

Violence carried out by these women is produced equally within non-defying dynamics of the “invisible barriers” or borders between the respective territories occupied by each *parche*. Trespassing these barriers, for both men and women, can derive in brutal confrontations caused by territorial defense. Regarding this topic, María, a female former gang member, told us: “But then it was more complicated because we also had to carry a knife, at which point we couldn’t go anywhere because they were waiting there for us. There were even female friends that got hurt because they got into knife fights. When there weren’t any knives, it was fists, kicks, whatever was at hand. We had to defend the territory and they had to defend their territory . . . I mean, they didn’t come up here, nor we went down there, and if one came up, it was because she was daring us” (2021).

Finally, we found that a significant part of the violence carried out by these women is done so under the intention of protecting the affections and collective of the *parche*, which we delve into in the third part of this article.

The violent acts perpetuated by female gang members defy the traditional vision by which these are givers of life and not death (Tickner et al. 2020). This means that the violence of female gang members disrupts the essentialist approach to gender, by establishing a femininity that includes the use of physical force and power as tools to demonstrate individual worth and to protect the neighborhood (Messerschmidt 2002). This ability to inflict violence, to be *paradas*, occurs in a context in which demonstrating who is more capable of humiliating, injuring, and even killing is highly valued. In this context, situated gender arrangements imply that women are both constantly underestimated by their sex/gender assignment and particularly feared after they show what they can do. Men are in effect ambivalent toward female violence, as can be appreciated in different moments of the same interview with Paulo, a male gang member. First, Paulo said the following when discussing confrontations with women: “I don’t like that, I mean, you’re a woman, so how are you going to compete with me if I’m a man?” Then, he stated that women “are tougher, and I’m afraid to get into a knife fight with a woman because it’s known that you have to kill her at any cost, or if you don’t, she’ll kill you without thinking twice” (2019). In this regard, the undermining of women when men think they can defeat them is set as a precedent, as is the fear for their masculinity when they are unable to do so.

However, given that we are talking about gender arrangements, the fact that women are agents of violence does not exclude the high levels of violence they are exposed to in the *comunidades*. In Bucaramanga, sexual and gender violence against women, especially at a family level, is considered a public health problem with very alarming rates (Esquiaqui 2018). The data on gender violence reported by the Local Health and Environment Department between 2015 and 2019 shows that there were 8,215 reports of this type of violence against women, of which 41 percent were carried out against adolescents and young people between the ages of 12 and 28, the age range of most of the interviewees.

Furthermore, fieldwork for this study revealed that gender-based violence against women is prevalent in the neighborhoods where gangs operate, as evidenced by the following testimony of Camila: “He told me: ‘you are mine and no one else’s’ [referring to her romantic partner]. He started saying crude things to me and insulting me. When I saw the stream of blood, it all went to my head, and I wanted to punch him. He was choking me. I felt suffocated.” In the same sense, Sandra also told us, referring to her romantic partner, that “he was telling me: ‘if you’re not for me, you’re not for anyone, because I’ll kill you. If I see you with another guy, I’ll kill you’” (2019).

However, this study allowed us to show that such violence can also be reciprocated by the women who suffer it, so that the violence becomes bilateral, although, in general terms, it is a reactive type of violence in response to previous aggressions. In a context in which violence plays a central role, situated gender agreements consider violence as a legitimate form of defense for women in partner relationships. Catalina, as a community leader, expressed: “fights between partners [of the *parches*] are strong. You see a lot of violence where, for example, the girl was beaten by the boy. You never hear a girl from a *parche* . . . tell the authorities that ‘my husband hit me,’ that ‘my boyfriend hit me.’ No, they don’t even let them get hit, they go hand in hand, in other words, if they have to react, they react” (2021). In this sense, Carolina, a female former gang member, said the following: “I formed a home with him, I got pregnant, he hit me, I hit him back, he stabbed me . . . he tried to stab me, and I stabbed him” (2022). Something similar was described by Juana, a former female member: “He started hitting me in the face, punching me because ‘I made out with other guys’ because ‘I looked at other guys.’ One day he went to do the same thing to me and I grabbed him with a *patecabra* [knife] and I almost ‘ate him’ [killed him]” (2019).

Even sexual violence is something that women in the *parches* can experience. Although it was not a specific topic asked about in the interviews, some women, like Lina—a female former

gang member—expressed this spontaneously when talking about their partner relationships (although, none of them mentioned having been victims of sexual violence within the gangs): “Because he, in the middle of being high, would try to rape me. . . . I would arrive tired to take a bath, and he, as soon as I entered the bathroom, would grab me and put his hand on my neck and try to put his fingers in my vagina to see if I had had relations with someone” (2022).

Finally, we can talk about the symbolic violence to which these women are exposed. This form of violence is manifested in the schemes of language and perception that are carried out by those who dominate and that fall on those who are dominated (Bourdieu 2002). This is evident in the interviews, especially in the way in which men and women from the *parches* express themselves in regard to femininity and what it implies to be a woman. Among them, symbolically violent discourse is normalized, linking what is traditionally associated with femininity with inferiority, weakness, and the undesirable. This can be traced in the speech of Diana, a female gang member: “There were four of us and my brother arrives and hits [another boy]; and I said [to him]: ‘what a pussy, put on a skirt’” (2019). It is also presented by Jesús, a male former gang member, in an interview: “Now there are only men in skirts and that’s it. You say something and they behave like gossip chicks” (2020).

In both interview fragments, the way in which the word “skirt” is used helps to identify how elements commonly associated with femininity are portrayed as inferior within the social universe of the gang. The first story is about a female gang member who used the word “skirt” to mock a young male member of a rival gang who was being beaten by members of her group and was unable to defend himself from physical aggression. The second story is about a young former gang member who denigrates the current state of the *parches* by pejoratively comparing the new male members to women. In his opinion, they are composed of men who behave like women, which leads him to use gender stereotypes by comparing new gang members to gossip women in skirts.

All of the foregoing reveals that female gang members are exposed to a *continuum* of violence, to various types of violence of different intensities that manifest themselves in various spheres (Bejarano 2014). In this sense, they are vulnerable to several kinds of violence, which to some extent are normalized or justified within gender arrangements that equate femininity with inferiority. But, at the same time, the aforementioned arrangements create and justify a situated femininity capable of exercising violence in different situations within the gang experience, thus altering those heteronormative rules.

Caring for Life and Affection on the Street

Thinking about care implies asking, as stated by Joan Tronto, about “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (1993: 103). This conceptualization entails tackling care from a relational perspective in which symbolic order and social institutions are the center of the reflection. Therefore, in relation to broad and situated gender arrangements and care in gangs, we want to explore how femininity as a social institution is strained, rethought, and disrupted.

In terms of the reproductive sphere, and specifically that which is related to care tasks of Colombia’s popular sectors, it is also initially assumed that women are caregivers facing the most vulnerable. For that reason, among other things, it is expected for women to assume maternity, attending to the care of their children. Nevertheless, this does not always happen within gangs, because as Camila indicates: “here, chicks do not give a shit about anything, have children and don’t care about the kids, they even come and get high and continue with their normal lives” (2019).

Consequently, sometimes femininity and maternity are built in a matter in which disinterest, abandonment, and violence are possible, even if they are blamable by the neighbors, guided through broad gender arrangements. In this sense, there is a kind of questioning of the social duties that women should assume because of their reproductive capacity. Therefore, care given by some female gang members is inscribed in the interplay between their female gang member identity and their identity as women, which also allows for oscillation between violence and care. This tension is even stronger when female gang members go beyond omission practices and transition into damning actions. Returning to Camila’s story: “When my daughters were 14 years old, I was into vices, like alcohol, since I was partying a lot. And the girls [referring to her daughters] liked parties. I would take them to the 21st [street in which there are bars] to be alone and they liked being with me. My daughter began to become familiar with drugs. I gave them to her myself” (2019).

The previous story does not necessarily mean that care does not exist at all in the relationship between these female ex-gang members and their daughters, but instead, from the perspective of a mother that takes part in a gang, it can be easier to incorporate the daughters in the logics of the *parche*, even though it is known that it is not the right thing in terms of what mothers are *supposed* to provide for their children. For that reason, women’s experience within the core of gangs can lead them to fracture and transgress the duty of a “good mother,” which essentially consists in following through with the educational norm of children and caring for the husband, leaving aside their own wishes and needs (Federici 2013; Rosemberg 2003). This also allows for tension between broad gender arrangement (what they should do as women) and situated gender arrangement (what they should do as female gang members).

However, these types of transgressions are not absolute, nor do they occur in all cases, as stated by a social leader from the 14th *comuna*, who explains that some women with children or with domestic responsibilities end up going out only at night, meaning that they limit their participation in the gang in order to fulfill the social expectations of motherhood, which can, in any case, correspond with their desire as women, even if it limits their experience as female gang members. These matters about the desires and needs of these women, who construct their identities as both women and female gang members, lead us to ask ourselves, paraphrasing Adam Baird (2018), what it is that they negotiate in hopes of earning their credentials within gangs and how this affects their identity, and, in this case, their particular expression of femininity.

For instance, *Las Carramanas* indicates to us in the following fragment that they built a female gang that is closely linked to the initial male gang, which we have called mirror gangs. There, both men and women end up caring for each other in a reciprocal manner, but with the aim of creating autonomous and partially separated spaces. Thus, men emerge in this relationship as protective figures and women seek a certain autonomy, although they are unable to emancipate themselves completely. They negotiate the limits on female autonomy and male authority, framing the tension as a situation of care, in which they legitimate masculine gang experience and, on the other hand, undermine female reach. On this subject, María stated the following:

They seemed like our protective brothers. They let us advance but keep in mind that only up to a certain point: “look, don’t do this because this is wrong; look at us” things like these . . . But then our *parche* was different, it was family; we cared for them, and they cared for us. They never disrespected us, they don’t let us take any type of drugs, no. The day that they found out that we were taking drugs, that was terrible, because they were all up in our business, they didn’t talk to us, and that hurt us. When they took care of us and all that, that hurt us. (2021)

As María explained, the caring relationships established with the male gang depended heavily on male figures of authority and prestige, allowing men to decide what women could not do in their own gang, framing these prohibitions, inequalities, and punishments within a caring speech. In this case, they forbade them from using drugs, stealing, and forming affectionate bonds with members of another masculine gang because this would lead to wars between the *parches*. However, men were allowed to engage in these activities. This began to change, according to female former gang members, as more female *parches* were formed in other neighborhoods of the *comuna*. As we can see, the gender arrangements within the gang were also negotiated in relation to broad arrangements, although non-static arrangements, and always thinking about keeping their “world” as good as possible.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that, although it seems paradoxical, violence and care are not set in diametrically opposed places in the experience of women who participate in female or mixed gangs in Bucaramanga, which may be an expression of their femininity. In gangs’ social universe, survival is a daily issue that keeps male and female gang members in a constant state of alert, and any threat to life (to their own life or to their loved ones) generates a defensive reaction. Protecting life itself, stopping it from turning off beyond repair, is something very significant not only for men but also for women, as Sara Murillo writes (2021). The logic of protecting life, of interposing the body and risking life itself, is also particularly relevant when the network of affection is present, like in Flor’s narrative about protecting his brother: “My brother is touched by anyone, and I get myself killed for him, nobody touches him because you know why? He is my brother. I’m told: ‘no, thankfully, we do not tell your brother anything because of you, because you are insane’” (2019).

Despite this logic of care that uses the body and that operates on both men and women because of the violent context they experience, there are certain care practices that are only possible as long as a strategic use is made of the feminized body that desires and the gender markers that operate within it. In this sense, the importance of the body is fundamental, since violent experience leaves a physical mark (scars, wounds), but also certain knowledge of the use of the body, not only to exercise violence but in terms of what a feminized body⁵ *can* do. In other words, returning to the notion of the body that desires, these bodily knowledges and practices emerge as possible resistance to broad gender arrangements because they transgress the androcentric ideal in which the feminine has a lesser status associated with fragility. Thus, the strategic use of the feminized gangster body *can* resist these imperatives through care.

Some of the stories told by female gang members bring us closer to these care practices in which they try to avert violence carried out by people from other *parches* or by state security forces, directed toward their male gang members. In this regard, Sandra recalls: “I already had a *parche* in the 9th *comuna*, some friends of my cousin, they took care of me very well. I didn’t disappoint them and let them die; the *tombos* (policemen) came and took them in their truck and I hung on to the truck to free them all” (2019).

In addition, Camila said that they—*Las Carramanas*—“cleaned up” the male gang members (taking responsibility for carrying the weapons during police raids) since male police officers (of whom there are more and who are seen more frequently) could not search them because they were women. These care practices draw attention to two things: first, female ex-gang members use their bodies, which are seen as feminine, to avoid undesirable situations for their male gang mates; in other words, they use their bodies, knowing that because they are women, security forces would not act with the same suspicion and rigor with which they would normally profile male gang members. This then constitutes an advantage in police-controlled spaces due to the gender markers attributed to their bodies, which are dictated by broad gender arrangements.

Secondly, these stories allow us to reflect on the sexual division of labor and the care rules that are socially assigned to women. In this case, it is clear that, although the roles of protection

and security in public spaces are supposedly assumed by men, in reality, women move between domestic care, such as guaranteeing food for the group on certain occasions, and care in the streets, where their affections are present and gang activities take place. In the social universe of gangs in Bucaramanga, even though roles are supposedly rigidly assigned and assumed by social subjects from the perspective of norms and broad gender arrangements, the interplay between female identities and female gang member identities lead them to disrupted femininities; to question and/or to take advantage of both the undermining with which women can be seen, even by police, and the notion that the last natural care space for women is the home.

Conclusions

The research showed that women alter broad gender arrangements to a certain degree, even when they also uphold them in certain circumstances. As products of their context and of peer interaction, these women negotiate situated gender arrangements that enact what they can and cannot do. These new arrangements are in constant interaction with broad arrangements entrenched in larger social structures. As a result, new femininities emerge. Several of the women immersed in this social universe develop particular and situated femininities, which segmented within the symbolic context of the *parches*, revindicate them as women, who are *paradas* and *arrechas*. They also adopt behaviors that can include the discretionary and brutal use of violence, as well as different care practices that can distance themselves from broad gender arrangements.

Likewise, women who take part in gangs participate in crude conflicts for several reasons, such as the defense of their territory, the *parche*, their own *critério*, care for affections, and even self-defense against multiple violence and its avatars to which they are exposed. They are not only susceptible subjects to a *continuum* of violence within different spheres, which are led by different actors, but they are also protagonists and agents of violence within their own neighborhoods. This last situation raises questions surrounding the possible similarities, but also differences, that can exist between the experiences of female gang members and those of other women that belong to armed groups immersed in other violent contexts (like the guerrillas) in which women are also not usually conceived as protagonists of conflict (Castrillón 2015). Women can also be perpetrators in armed conflict scenarios, as pointed out by Adriana Serrano López and Pamela Pinto (2014), and in that way distance themselves from the traditional imaginary lines that show them as defenseless, vulnerable, and removed beings within the context of violence.

This article looked to contribute a better understanding of femininities within the core of gangs, analyzing the praxis of women within these collectives, beyond the simplistic observation that perceives these groups as a “male thing.” It is clear, however, that the article leaves some open questions for future research, such as the processes by which situated gender arrangements emerge; the characterization of singular traits (if any) of the involvement of women in gangs exclusively made up by them; the differences in women’s experiences per different age ranges; the changes in their daily lives according to the *parche*’s time of existence and the involvement of these last ones with illegal activities; or other possible manifestations of resistance to broad gender arrangements conducted by these bodies that desire.

The article also highlights that care provided by female gang members is constructed through context, for which it could be referred to as “street care.” Meaning that it is about a materialization of care that is connected with the group’s daily lives, the spaces they inhabit, the activities that their members carry out, and the dangers that they must face, as well as the affections that are built within those collectives, for which the street is a very important place in their daily experience. In the case of female gang members, a back-and-forth is observed between the care that inscribes itself in broad gender arrangement logic and other types of care that tend to dis-

rupt this logic, especially those related to being on the streets, a situation in which violence is sometimes imposed as a care task.

Caretaking work within the gang—that can mean violence in order to sustain life—also goes through the process of growth of affections that are not necessarily “blood tied” but are instead families of male and female friends that are generally built hanging out. These networks of affection and care are constructed, on occasion, due to the lack of affection, abuse, and mistreatment within birth families, which is usually used as justification for the link to the gang.

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■ NOTES

1. There is only one study that covers the case of female gang members in Bucaramanga (IOM and Fundación Ideas para la Paz 2019). The rest of the academic works that exist on female participation in gangs focus on other cities (Barrera 2020; Domínguez 2003).
2. We used pseudonyms to guarantee interviewees’ safety and anonymity. Besides, Las Carramanas does not exist anymore as a group and we did not include testimonies from gang members of La Parada.
3. All quotations from references in Spanish were translated by us.
4. This study departed from fieldwork led almost completely by one of the female researchers of this study.
5. Here, we briefly pick up the question: what can a body do? (which is inferred from Spinoza’s philosophy about the body), in order to call attention upon some of the possibilities that feminine bodies within gangs have.

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