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"I FEEL AFRAID." PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY VIOLENCE AMONG WOMEN IN TIJUANA
"I FEEL FEAR: PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE AMONG WOMEN IN TIJUANA"

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Summary
This article aims to analyze the fear of community violence among women in Priority Attention Zones (ZAP) of Tijuana, from their roles as victims, witnesses or having heard stories from third parties and how this determines their decisions. It seeks to identify patterns, understand the emotions, perceptions and decisions behind each experience, as well as motivations and strategies followed to face the situation and avoid threats. 233 in-depth interviews were conducted between women aged 18 to 50. Particular emphasis was placed on the analysis of how women perceive dangerousness on the streets. Notably, younger women between 18 and 25 years of age demonstrate perceptions of fear and distrust. The older ones offer a panoramic view of violence, which extends beyond physical aggression to encompass deeper structural and psychosocial elements.

Abstract
The objective of this article is to analyze the fear of community violence among women in Priority Attention Zones (ZAP) Tijuana, considering their roles as victims, witnesses, or individuals who have heard accounts from others, and how these experiences influence their decisions. It seeks to identify patterns, understand the emotions, perceptions, and choices behind each experience, as well as the motivations and strategies employed to confront the situation and avoid threats. A total of 233 in-depth interviews were conducted with women aged 18 to 50. Emphasis was placed on analyzing how women perceive the danger in the streets. Notably, younger women, aged 18 to 25, exhibit perceptions of fear and distrust. Older women provide a broader perspective on violence, which extends beyond physical aggression to include deeper structural and psychosocial elements.

Key words: Fear, community violence, women, victims, Tijuana.

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Introduction

The city of Tijuana, Baja California, has historically been a point of interest in the study of violence and crime in Mexico. However, it is essential to analyze how this phenomenon affects women in a particular way. The idea that the perception of crime is, in many cases, more powerful than the crime itself (Stafford, et al, 2007), establishes the ground for the analysis of this article, since this causes women's ability to exercise their citizenship in public spaces to decrease due to crime (Bastomski and Smith, 2017, 74). There is an unquestionable fact, women in Mexico have seen their freedom of movement in cities limited due to community violence, which takes place in public space, and the perception of it (Garfias, et al, 2020).

The objective of this article is to analyze the fear of community violence among women in Tijuana[5], from their roles as victims, witnesses or having heard stories from others and how this determines their decisions. This research seeks, through their stories, to identify patterns, understand the emotions, perceptions and decisions behind each experience, as well as motivations and strategies followed by women to face the situation and avoid potential threats. The places and times that they consider most risky are identified. Perceptions are broken down by age ranges, seeking to understand the possible divergences between the opinions and experiences of young and older women.

The focus on women is due to the fact that they are the ones who show more vulnerability and fear than men in public spaces, consequently, it is of great interest to see how they conceive the city, what it provokes in them and what they do about it, in one of the most violent cities in the world. This research, which was developed under a qualitative approach, aims to provide a deep and multifaceted understanding of women's experiences and perceptions and shed light on the stories and experiences of those who reside in the city.

Community violence is linked to public insecurity. At the national level, the perception that violence and crime are pervasive is evident, and even more so when it comes to violence against women. According to the 2022 ENVIPE, in Baja California, 68% of the population aged 18 or over considered insecurity as the most important problem that afflicts them, this perception of insecurity has been increasing, 74% of women felt unsafe when walking alone at night in the vicinity of their home. In comparison, 58% of men felt insecure (ENVIPE, 20
22).

It is imperative to examine the fear of community violence experienced by women, as this fear has harmful consequences at the individual level and has an impact on the social and community fabric. As Bruton-Smith and Jackson (2012) indicate, this fear can compromise women's physical and mental well-being, while eroding social cohesion and trust. For their part, Yates and Ceccato (2020) define this fear as the "persistent feeling of need for constant surveillance". Studies such as that of Stafford et al. (2007) have associated it with a decline in mental health and to greater limitations in physical functioning, noting that it particularly affects younger and older generations.

Theoretical framework.

Mellgran et al. (2017) define violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that can cause physical, sexual, or mental harm, which must be investigated in depth to generate effective combat strategies. It is exercised against women for being women, it is intimately related to stereotypes and practices that maintain the oppression and inequality of women (UN women, 2025). Although many women face it in private spheres, public spaces are not without risks. According to the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, when it occurs at the community level, it encompasses acts that violate women's rights in public spaces.

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Community violence refers to acts of violence that occur in public spaces and involve people who do not generally share an intimate or familial bond, affecting individuals, groups, and entire communities. Examples of this type of violence are: touching, "compliments", sexual innuendos, phrases about women's bodies, aggressive behavior, denial of free movement, restriction in community decision-making, etc. These manifestations are usually tolerated, justified or minimized (PGR. Gender Equality Unit, 2017).

In cities in northern Mexico, community violence has been interpreted as part of "systemic violence," linked to organized crime, corruption, and widespread insecurity. The media and the population develop collective strategies of protection and resistance in the face of the constant risk that this violence represents in the community space (Salazar & Curiel, 2012).

The perception of community violence and the fear it generates can significantly alter human behavior, as Calonge (2022) points out. Decisions about how and when to move around a city are sometimes more influenced by fear than by individual will. Urban design and planning play a crucial role in these perceptions and decisions (Dymén & Ceccato, 2012).

The study on women's fear of community violence in the city of Tijuana is based on "the fear-gender paradox" and the "vulnerability perspective", since these theoretical frameworks explain that women's fear comes from various causes, and because of this, it can be disproportionate and conditions their freedom of action in public spaces.

The fear-gender paradox suggests that women have a disproportionate fear of crime in relation to their actual risk. However, men are more likely to become victims (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Sutton and Farrall, 2005, 212). Rader et al. (2020) relate the paradox to the "vulnerability perspective", which also considers people's ages. The fear of crime affects as much as crime itself (Gidong and Mikyoung, 2023, 1). However, each person's fear depends on a variety of factors, such as physical abilities, age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and previous experiences of victimization (Dymén & Ceccato, 2012, 313-315). However, gender is the most consistent indicator of this type of fear (Garfias, 2023, 2). The concept of gender encompasses biological, bodily, perceptual connotations (e.g., female, body, sex) that is combined with social, cultural, linguistic, and introspective characteristics (e.g., rights, feminism, discrimination) Mazzuca, et al, 2020). From feminist studies, the concept of gender explains the social inequality derived from sexual difference (Palomar Verea, 2016).

Women are disproportionately targeted for harassment by strangers (Bastomski and Smith, 2017, 73), which helps to create the "fear-gender paradox" (Rader, et al, 2020, 7),

Women often associate criminality with harassment, sexual violence and rape, manifestations of community violence. Causing them to feel more vulnerable (Condon, et al, 2007), due to the constant perception of being at risk (Zúñiga, 2014, 90; Yates and Ceccato, 2020; Macmillan, et al, 2000). manifesting higher levels of fear and anxiety compared to men (Dymén & Ceccato, 2012; Mellgren and Ivert, 2019,2), particularly young women (Mellgren and Ivert, 2019,11). It has been found that younger and older people are more fearful of community violence, (Rader, et al, 2020, 6). At the same time, these groups of the female population are frequently at risk (Lebugle, 2017, 3), due to their lower ability to resist victimization or be easier targets (Almanza, 2022, 219). Lewd looks, physical, verbal and sexual aggressions, such as touching and rude interpellations towards women are daily acts in northern Mexico (Zúñiga, 2014, 85).

Sexual threat, as a manifestation of community violence, among women has a significant impact on their fear of crime (Chataway, 2018, 146) and experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces correlate with a number of adverse psychological and behavioral consequences (Mellgren, et al, 2017).

"The fear of empty streets is not only due to poor lighting," but is due to a broader system of gender inequality (Dunckel Graglia, Amy, 2016, 2), which revictimizes them by blaming them for their appearance or for circulating at "improper hours" and "inappropriate places." This is how the streets become territories of "male domination", and men approach women as inferior (Almanza, 2022, 4).

In public spaces where violence against women is present, the burden of responsibility usually falls on them, making them believe that their protection and well-being depend on how alert they are, which ultimately restricts their freedom of movement (Garfias, 2023,1). This conception of violence and responsibility has deep roots and has been the subject of multiple investigations in recent years. Marganski (2019) highlights how patriarchal structures in society perpetuate the idea that women are responsible for their own safety, which accentuates the culture of victimization. This victim-oriented approach is not only damaging to women's self-image, but also diverts attention from the real problem: the perpetrators of violence. It has been observed that by constantly focusing attention on women's self-defense and how they "should behave," a system in which women are increasingly limited in their autonomy and mobility is reinforced.

According to a study by Navarro and Soto (2018), self-imposed or socially conditioned restrictions on women's movement and freedom have significant impacts on their mental health, quality of life, and economic opportunities. The constant fear of victimization prevents women from accessing public spaces and can limit their participation in the labor market, social events, and recreational activities. This marginalization is detrimental to women as individuals and has broader ramifications, restricting the social, economic, and cultural potential of the entire community.

The fear of community violence is a multifaceted response that cannot simply be attributed to a single factor. Pain (2001) argues that this fear is a complex phenomenon, and is not linearly related to the probability of victimization. In her study, she argues that although women, especially in certain contexts, may feel disproportionate fear, it is a logical response to the wider forms of violence and harassment they experience in society. Stanko (1995) has indicated that women often adapt their daily behaviors and routines to avoid situations they perceive as threatening, reflecting a constant and pervasive fear. In addition, Day, et al. (2003) have highlighted that ethnic minorities and marginalized groups may experience higher levels of fear due to structural discrimination and stigma. In short, fear represents an amalgam of personal experiences, sociocultural biases, and perceived real threats, all of which interact in complex and often overlapping ways.

This paradox becomes even more complicated when you consider that, although men are more likely to be victims of random crimes by strangers, women are disproportionately victims of sexual crimes and domestic violence. The visibility and prevalence of gender-based violence in the media and society may be one of the reasons behind this disproportionate fear (May, Rader & Goodrum, 2010). In addition, power structures and patriarchy have instilled a sense of vulnerability among women, exacerbating their fears, even in situations where the objective risk is low (Madriz, 1997). Toro and Ochoa (2027) argue that women's fear is learned and therefore cultural. Family and friends persuade women that public places are where men are most likely to commit violent acts against them (Condon et al, 2007, 102). Consequently, although this paradox may seem contradictory at first glance, when broken down, it is a reflection of the unique realities and challenges that women face in society.

Various factors combine in cities such as Tijuana to exacerbate the fear of public space. The feelings that arise in many women when traveling through Mexican cities – fear, mistrust, caution, among others – are not unfounded. Unfortunately, there is evidence that community violence is on the rise.

The perception and reality of fear has a strong gender connotation. Specifically in Mexico, this concern is supported by solid data, as reflected in the ENDUREH (2016 and 2022), which shows that community violence remains constant, as does sexual violence and aggression.

Table 1. Comparison of percentages of intimate partner and community violence 2016-2021. ENDIREH.

ENDUREH	Intimate Partner Violence		Community violence		Aggressions that occurred in the street	Sexual violence in the street
	Throughout your current or	Last 12 months	Throughout his life	Last 12 months	Last 12 months	Last 12 months

	last relationship					
2016	44%	26%	39%	24%	65.3%	67%
2021	40%	20.7%	46%	22.4%	65%	67.2%

Source: Authors' elaboration with data from ENDIREH 2016 and 2021.

Method.

In the first phase, an "ethnographic glossary" was developed focused on 5 items to be addressed in an in-depth interview. The items developed were: "narratives of their daily lives", "migration", "gaps and inclusion", "violence" and "cross-border life". Each item makes up a section of the glossary, in turn, each section has a description of the specific exploration criteria and the guiding questions to be developed (Flick, 2018). This stage lasted two months (May-June 2022), through collegiate meetings between researchers specialized in each of the items.

Based on the script formed during the first stage, 233 in-depth interviews were conducted in the second stage as the main method of data collection (Patton, 2014). This stage lasted four months (August-November 2022). The target population were women living in the city of Tijuana between 18 and 50 years old. To ensure a conducive environment that fosters sincerity and reflection, the interviews were conducted in their homes, to avoid external distractions that impeded their development (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The intention of the interviews was to understand the perception they have about crime in their environment. This perception is influenced by multiple factors such as the growth of crime, personal experiences and accounts of third parties, and how they perceive the image of their city, considering that the physical and environmental aspect of a city plays a crucial role in the sense of security or danger that a person may experience (Ceccato, 2012, 4).

Particular emphasis was placed on the analysis of how women perceive dangerousness in streets and neighborhoods of the city. Locally, the experiences and sensations of crime and fear are more palpable. Moreover, it is at this micro level of society that voices that have traditionally been marginalized or excluded can be more visible and have a greater impact. Part of this perception is based on the fact that the rapid growth in the crime rate outstrips the capacity of local government to provide basic services, including security to its residents

Unfortunately, there has been a notable lack of initiatives to listen to and directly address the concerns and experiences of those who suffer the direct consequences of insecurity. This research seeks to be a step towards the recognition and understanding of these voices.

The interviews were conducted using the semi-structured approach that provided a thorough exploration of the relevant issues (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The script formed in the ethnographic glossary was flexible to adapt to the answers and follow relevant routes of inquiry (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the software program *verbatim*. The minimum duration of each interview was 30 minutes and the maximum was 120 minutes. The analysis of the qualitative data was carried out using a thematic coding approach. In such a way, emerging patterns, categories and recurring themes could be identified in the women's responses. These interviews allowed us to capture objective information and the subjective perspectives, emotions, and experiences of women in different aspects of their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The main goal of the qualitative approach to collecting information in the field during the research was to obtain an enriched and detailed understanding of the complexities and nuances of women's experiences in the context studied (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) and to give voice to the individual narratives that, taken together, make up the broader picture of women's reality in the specific context (Patton, 2014).

Sample.
The answers obtained were later classified by age groups. The distribution was as follows: up to 25 years (36 EPs), 26 to 30 years (12 EPs), 31-35 years (11 EPs), 36-40 years (33 EPs), 41-45 years (45 EPs), 46-50 years (42 EPs). Once this information was collected, all interviews were transcribed for later analysis.
Using Maxqda software (Analytics Pro 2022, version 22.7.0), an open analysis and coding process of the transcripts was initiated. This analysis focused particularly on the categories described in the item "violence", where a specific search was carried out for the terms "fear" and "violence". After categorizing and analyzing, the five interviews by age group that showed a greater centrality in the aforementioned terms were selected, based on their direct experiences in Tijuana.
By spanning a wide range of ages, the study was able to capture a variety of experiences and perspectives that reflect both shared and unique experiences for each demographic. This variety is essential to understanding how the intersections of age, experience, and context influence the perception of violence in the city. In this way, the sample provides a representative reflection of the female population of Tijuana and offers valuable insights to fulfill the central purpose of the article: to offer a detailed and enriched analysis of how women in Tijuana perceive and experience violence in their daily lives.
The voices of these women, coming from different stages of life, underscore the pervasiveness of fear and violence in their daily lives, and the ways in which resilience, adaptation, and resistance emerge despite adversity. Likewise, this representativeness ensures that the findings and conclusions of the article are not limited to a specific subsection of the population, but are relevant and applicable to the more general experiences of women in Tijuana.

Qualitative analysis
Once the field interviews and transcription were completed, the coding stage began. In this phase, the theoretical approach to data analysis was provided by Corbin & Strauss (2015), who consider coding to be a fundamental component of this approach and is carried out in three stages:

- Open coding: examining data in a detailed and systematic way, seeking to identify recurring concepts, ideas, or patterns. In the material, relevant fragments must be labeled with descriptive codes to capture the key characteristics and dimensions present without imposing predefined categories.

- Axial coding: establishing relationships between identified codes to group into broader categories or main concepts. At the same time, identify the properties and dimensions of each category to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied.

- Selective coding: selection of the most relevant and central categories that emerge from the analysis to identify the connections between the categories and develop a theoretical proposal in the collected data. This stage is characterized by building a coherent theoretical narrative based on the findings.

Results
Age group 18 to 25 years: Everyday fear and constant uncertainty
Younger women describe fear as part of their daily lives, a predominant emotion in their daily commutes. The threat is perceived as constant: "being a woman, I feel afraid and uncomfortable in the face of harassing looks at all hours of the day" (Woman, 19 years old). This group associates violence primarily with robberies, kidnappings, homicides, and harassment, often citing concrete examples of danger on the streets. The distrust of strangers and even authorities is palpable, reflecting the little faith that anyone can help them. Several participants shared recent traumatic episodes. A 24-year-old woman narrated: "I was assaulted in the subdivision where I live, during the day"; another, a university student, recounted an aggression when leaving classes that left her injured, to the point of requiring disability for two days. These events corroborate that insecurity in everyday environments (residential neighborhoods, university commuting) marks their experiences.

Spaces and times of risk: The central areas of the city (such as the Central Zone and its surroundings) are seen as particularly dangerous, especially at night. Young people from peripheral neighborhoods mention fear when using public transportation at night and walking through dark streets. Weekends at night also stand out as critical moments, associated with the activity of people in a state of drunkenness or with a greater criminal presence. Phrases such as "living in a violent city is living without peace of mind" (Woman, 24 years old) encapsulate the continuous anguish they experience. The fear, for these young women, is not only of immediate physical aggression but of the environment of generalized distrust that forces them to be on permanent alert.
Emotional and coping strategies: In their stories, strategies emerge such as avoiding going out alone at certain times, preferring to transport themselves accompanied or armed with self-defense objects (pepper spray, whistles). A 24-year-old interviewee shared: "I always walk with the keys between my fingers; in case I have to defend myself." However, these measures do not eliminate fear, they only give them a minimal sense of control. The internalization of the message "don't expose yourself" is evident: many say "I don't go out after 8 pm" or "if I go out, I notify someone and I'll monitor." This state of hypervigilance affects their emotional well-being, as denoted by the recurrent allusion to stress and anxiety due to insecurity. In short, the 18-25 group experiences fear intensely and on a daily basis. Tijuana, in his perception, is a hostile space where any simple journey — going to school, work or returning home — can become dangerous. The young women of Tijuana are already showing signs of habituation to fear: they have grown up hearing about violence and, when they reach early adulthood, they confirm with their experiences those instilled fears. This finding coincides with studies that indicate that young urban women tend to limit their mobility out of fear, affecting their quality of life (García-Carpintero et al., 2022).

Age group 26 to 30 years: Ubiquitous insecurity and home adaptation
Women aged 26 to 30 have a unified perception of violence as pervasive in their environment. They speak of violence not only in terms of assaults or direct aggressions, but also refer to "subtle manifestations in the environment" (for example, they note vandalistic graffiti, urban deterioration, the presence of homeless people or drug users in the streets) as indicators of insecurity. This alludes to a conception of "urban disorder" that generates alert, in line with theories of broken windows where signs of disorder increase the perception of risk.
Everyday spaces under threat: The house emerges as a central locus in their narratives: paradoxically, although the home is a refuge, it is also a source of concern. Practically all of them mentioned measures to protect themselves at home (place bars, cameras, do not open the door to strangers). Several suffered robberies at home or in their neighborhood. "I always have the doors closed for fear of strangers" (Woman, 27 years old) sums up that tension. Likewise, concern for young children begins to figure in this group: some young mothers fear "that they will take my child away while we walk." This expands the dimension of fear from the individual to the familiar. Places and times of risk: Night and early morning continue to be marked as the most dangerous time slots. Areas such as Sánchez Taboada, Villa Fontana, and Boulevard 2000 are mentioned among the most unsafe, also Downtown (the tourist and commercial area of Tijuana) appears continuously in their stories, showing that even crowded places are feared due to the incidence of robberies. A 28-year-old participant mentions: "In the evening, when the areas are not well lit, is when violent acts occur." Weekends maintain their reputation as a higher risk, probably due to the combination of greater social activity and relaxation of routines.
Representative experiences: Within this age range, some have not suffered direct violence in the last year; however, this does not diminish their fear, as living in a violent environment is enough to modify their behavior. A 29-year-old woman emphasized: "It can happen anywhere, even in neighborhoods considered safe; I saw how a girl's phone was snatched from her on a dark street in the center." That testimony of witnessing an assault by someone else marked her almost as much as her own experience. Another interviewee said: "I remember that they jumped on the roofs of my block and there were

chases with weapons; since then, I sleep alert." Synthesis of group 26-30: These women show a state of continuous adaptation to an environment perceived as threatening. They adapt routines (e.g., avoiding certain routes, coordinating group transfers), reinforce their homes (locks, guard dogs), and live with the idea that "no one is safe anywhere." However, they still hope to control certain factors, for example, they mention that lighting the streets better or having more surveillance could improve their sense of security. That is, their perception of insecurity is high, but they still identify concrete actions that could mitigate their fear. This suggests that panic is not paralyzing but rather stimulating practical strategies. Overall, his narrative reaffirms that the fear of crime in Tijuana transcends classes and neighborhoods: even those who live in middle-class areas consider that "no place is immune."

Age Group 31-35: Trauma and Family Concern

In the 31-35 age range, interviews reveal that the fear of violence is deeply rooted, often due to direct or close traumatic experiences. This group used descriptions of the situation in Tijuana with forceful metaphors: "like in the Middle East" (Woman, 32 years old) to refer to the feeling of daily war, evidencing how normalized the sounds of gunshots or news of shootings are. The definition of violence for them clearly includes shootings, assaults, kidnappings and sexual assault, showing a multifaceted perception of the threat: both organized crime and common crime and gender violence.

Temporality and spatiality of risk: The night remains the most dangerous moment; Practically all of them agree that darkness is an ally of crime. However, there are multiple mentions of violent acts in broad daylight: "shootings and robberies in broad daylight" (Woman, 35 years old, mother). This indicates that trust in daytime safety is broken. Territorially, Sánchez Taboada and Boulevard 2000 continue to appear as epicenters of danger, adding other neighborhoods such as Natura. The idea of "the whole city is dangerous at night" that they repeated is notorious, denoting a wide geographical scope of fear. Even places of recreation such as parks or shopping centers are viewed with suspicion if the sun has set.

Impact on family life: Unlike younger groups, here there is a strong concern for third parties, especially for children. Several women express fear of taking their children to school, fearing kidnappings or school shootings. A 32-year-old interviewee confessed that she thinks every day: "What if something happens while my children are at school?" Another (35 years old) pointed out that "going to the park or work with peace of mind is no longer possible because of robberies," revealing how fear also restricts family and work activities. This transfer of fear to the care environment (children, family) suggests an internalization of a protective role: they not only fear for themselves, but also carry the safety of their own.

Personal experiences: We found testimonies of direct assaults (a woman was assaulted and her bag and phone were stolen a few years ago; another suffered an attempted carjacking near home), which have left deep traces: "that experience taught me to be cautious on the street" (Woman, 35 years old). Even those who have not had recent incidents are hyper-aware of the violence: "I have not been a direct victim, but I hear of murders in the neighborhoods and that is enough to feel afraid" (Woman, 35 years old). The symbolic violence of news and rumors is as effective as that experienced in the flesh to generate fear.

Behavioral adaptations: Many of these women report that they have changed their lifestyle: they avoid going out at night, implement an early personal "curfew," choose to live discreetly (not wearing jewelry, not displaying valuables in public) so as not to attract attention. "He is always alert, as if he were in a war zone," said one interviewee, revealing a state of chronic hypervigilance.

Synthesis of group 31-35: Here fear is presented as deeply internalized and tied to meaningful experiences, with a tinge of mild post-traumatic stress in some cases (e.g., re-experiencing fear when remembering an assault). The emphasis on family safety and the notion that "in Tijuana no one is exempt" are evident. What differentiates this group from the younger ones is perhaps the accumulation of experiences and responsibilities (being mothers, having worked for years in the city) that makes their fear more multifaceted: they fear for themselves, for their children, for the stability of their home.

It is not only physical fear, but also psychological damage and the deterioration of quality of life that they lament, to the point that some speak of "sadness and lack of peace of mind" as consequences of living with violence. This ties in with findings by Rader et al. (2020) on how fear of crime affects mental health.

Age group 36-40 years: Expanding the concept of violence and resilience

In women between 36 and 40 years of age, there is an expansion in the understanding of violence. They do not limit themselves to mentioning conventional crimes; they also include private violence (domestic, couple) and even institutional violence in their definitions. Phrases such as: "Violence is beatings, death, abuse... also abused children, violence in schools, and violence in the streets" (Woman, 39 years old) show a holistic vision of violence that encompasses the public and the intimate. This perspective can be attributed to the fact that, with age, they have accumulated both direct experiences and knowledge of close cases (relatives, friends) of various types of violence. In addition, the general situation in Tijuana in recent decades has exposed many to organized crime violence, which is mentioned here more frequently (references to drug trafficking and its effect on the city appear). Persistence of nighttime fear, with nuances: Night is still indicated as a critical period, but this group introduces nuances: some also mention the afternoon (perhaps at dusk) and dawn as moments of risk, reflecting that even early in the morning, there are incidents (e.g., assaults on people who leave for work at dawn). The recurrent dangerous areas continue, with Sánchez Taboada omnipresent, with the addition of neighborhoods such as Lagunitas, La Gloria, Tecolote, and Santa Fe – a more extensive list, demonstrating a broad territorial awareness. Also, several said "anywhere in the city is dangerous at night", insisting on the idea of the omnipresence of risk, but one specifically pointed to the insecurity even in San Diego (USA) when they take their children to school, which shows how fear crosses geographical borders in their minds, perhaps exacerbated by cross-border violent events. Direct and indirect experiences: Many participants in this group have been both witnesses and victims: "In my work they were assaulted twice; a thief entered with a weapon" (Woman, 40 years old, merchant). Another (39 years old) said: "I witnessed an assault in the early morning; I saw chases in the city." And another (38 years old) narrated: "They broke the window of my car to steal a backpack." Significantly, several spoke of past domestic violence: for example, one reported having suffered aggression during her pregnancy and another mentioned "bad friendships" that led to risky situations for her daughters, alluding to violence in private spheres. This indicates that as they age, women not only carry the fear of public space but also personal stories of domestic violence that add to their emotional baggage. Parental distress and protective role: In this group, concern for children reaches its climax. A 39-year-old woman emphasized that her main fear is "the insecurity of my daughters, that something will happen to them, bad influences, assaults... I go to church to ask for an end to the violence." This quote reflects both despair and the search for relief or protection in the spiritual in the face of the impossibility of control. A parental anguish superimposed on the personal one is identified: they prioritize the safety of their loved ones even above their own. Attitudes towards authorities: It should be noted that in this segment distrust of the police emerged strongly. There were those who said "the police are criminals" (Woman, 38 years old), which indicates a perception of corruption or institutional complicity, aggravating fear. If authority is seen as part of the problem, women feel that they are practically alone in the face of danger, which intensifies the feeling of vulnerability. Adaptations and resilience: Even so, adaptive tactics developed with experience are observed. These women have calibrated their routines with a certain "expertise": for example, accurately identifying "after 6 pm I don't go out anymore" or "when I leave a place, I first look around because you don't know if someone is following you" (Woman, 39 years old). These practices denote resilience and agency's ability to mitigate risks, even if that means restricting their freedom. Work is pointed out as a risky area (robberies in businesses, on the way to work), but none suggests abandoning the work activity; rather, they take extra precautions.

Synthesis of group 36-40: This group exhibits a broad and mature vision of violence, recognizing its structural nature (drug trafficking, social decomposition) and the intersections with private life (domestic violence). Their fear is intense but it comes with a repertoire of coping strategies polished by years of living in a hostile environment. Resilience here coexists with fatigue: tiredness is noticeable in phrases such as "living in Tijuana is traumatic, it generates restrictions on your personal freedom" (Woman, 40 years old), but also determination in "you have to continue, with caution, but continue". This shows that middle-aged Tijuana women have naturalized insecurity to a certain extent, integrating it into their life schemes without completely resigning themselves.

Age Group 41-45 Years: Multifaceted Fear and Critical Appraisal

Women ages 41 to 45 offer diverse perspectives, reflecting individual trajectories spanning decades of change in Tijuana. The definition of violence varies significantly between them: some focus on specific crimes (robberies, assaults, homicides), while others emphasize the emotional and psychological impact ("terror, anguish, depression" says a 42-year-old woman). This duality indicates that not everyone experiences fear in the same way, possibly influenced by differences in personal experiences. Fear as a constant state: A common theme is the pervasiveness of fear. "Constant fear everywhere, all the time" (Woman, 42 years old), "it's already at all hours" (Woman, 44 years old) reveal that for them the old daytime tranquility is also eroded: they perceive the city as unsafe 24/7. This group stresses that traditionally safe places are no longer safe: houses, schools, markets or shopping centers do not provide a guarantee of peace. One interviewee narrated how they tried to open their car at a traffic light with their daughter inside, having to take refuge in a premises – a daytime incident that breaks the illusion of routine security. Likewise, economic violence is mentioned: "impact on the economy, prices rise due to crime" (Woman, 42 years old), which shows awareness of macro social effects (for example, early closure of businesses that reduces supply, increase in prices due to frequent robberies). Critical places and situations: The mention of recurrent dangerous neighborhoods continues (Camino Verde, Sánchez Taboada, México Lindo, October 3), but there is more emphasis on the fact that "all of Tijuana is dangerous." In particular, it is pointed out that "there is no specific place, everywhere there are drug users" (Woman, 42 years old), a comment that makes visible the perception of diffuse insecurity associated with the addiction crisis in the city. Nightlife areas (bars, nightclubs) are noted for concentrating fights, armed people, knives, etc., showing concern for recreational spaces that in theory should be for recreation. This coincides with other studies where women avoid nightlife spaces for fear of violence (García-Carpintero et al., 2022). Personal experiences and repercussions: Traumatic events in this group range from armed robberies (a 42-year-old woman was held at gunpoint while waiting for transportation), home robberies (another 42-year-old woman suffered a car theft in her own home) to assaults while driving (a 43-year-old woman reported that a man assaulted her when she got off a bridge). Shootings in public places that they have witnessed or known up close are also mentioned, reinforcing their sense of vulnerability in any space. A 44-year-old woman summarized a common situation: "Not feeling safe when returning late; From 5 pm the city changes." Several allude to the loss of enjoyment: "lack of enjoyment in recreational places due to fear" (Woman, 43 years old), indicating how leisure is restricted. Psychological dimension: This is the first group where clinical terms such as anxiety or depression linked to fear are verbalized. For example, "this causes anguish, it has given me depression," said one participant, underlining a more pronounced level of psychological affectation. Perhaps decades of accumulated stress manifest havoc on mental health, aligned with findings by Stafford et al. (2007) that connect fear of crime with mental health deterioration. Critical evaluation and exhaustion: Due to their age, many have witnessed the evolution of insecurity in Tijuana and exhibit a critical tone towards the current situation. There are mentions of government inaction and lack of police support in incidents (one reported that after a robbery she did not receive help). This perceived helplessness leads them to somewhat fatalistic conclusions: "The whole of Tijuana is dangerous; there is nowhere to flee from fear." However, not everything is resignation; some remain

proactive, for example, avoiding night Ubers or implementing neighborhood care networks (this is intuited in certain stories).
Synthesis of group 41-45: This group exhibits a multifaceted fear, where violence is both physical and emotional. Their lives are marked by insecurity to the point of altering their patterns of enjoyment and tranquility. They represent the phase in which patience is exhausted and a discourse of demand (although sometimes incredulous) towards the authorities emerges. The universalization of fear stands out: if before we saw some distinction between zones or schedules, they emphasize that "it doesn't matter, it is dangerous at any time and place," reflecting a severe deterioration of public trust. They are the spokespeople for an unspoken claim: fear has become a structural factor of life in Tijuana that requires urgent attention.

Age group 46 to 50 years: Panoramic vision and structural understanding
Women between the ages of 46 and 50 bring the most holistic and thoughtful view of violence. By accumulating decades of experience, their perception integrates social, moral, and community aspects, beyond direct violence. Broad definition of violence: They mention rudeness, bullying, labor abuse, social decomposition, along with conventional crimes. This suggests that for them, violence is a continuum, from everyday acts of incivility to serious crimes. A 48-year-old woman said, "The violence is reflected in rudeness, bullying at school, mistreatment at work, as well as assaults." This more subtle understanding of violence speaks of a developed sensitivity: they recognize microaggressions and social tensions as part of the violent environment. The term social decomposition also appears, indicating a reading that violence in Tijuana is a symptom of deep problems (family, educational, and values). Relationship with the environment: Interestingly, several in this group feel that "the places where I spend my daily time are safe" (Woman, 50 years old), clarifying that they have created a relatively reliable "bubble" for themselves: they frequent familiar spaces, family neighborhoods, etc. However, they simultaneously acknowledge that they do not expose themselves: "I avoid going out after 6:00 pm for fear of assaults" (Woman, 46 years old). In other words, their sense of security in their daily environments is conditioned by self-restriction. If they follow their rules of care, they feel safe; outside of them (for example, going to a tourist area at night), they avoid it. This denotes adaptive control: they learned what to do and what not to do to minimize risks. Areas and times of risk: They maintain the notion that "after sunset, any area of Tijuana can be dangerous." Sánchez Taboada and Camino Verde continue to appear, and they mention fun and tourist areas as areas where you have to be careful. This shows that, in his opinion, not even developed areas escape: places with many people (downtown, commercial areas) can be hotbeds of assaults or kidnappings. A 46-year-old participant narrated that co-workers were assaulted and there was even an attempt to kidnap a colleague, so the fear transcends spheres (she not only fears for her family, but also for her work circle). Notable experiences: At this age, many have gone through several incidents: "Criminals entered my house three months ago" (Woman, 49 years old); "I lived through a virtual kidnapping of my daughter" (Woman, 50 years old, referring to telephone scams that simulate kidnapping). They also speak of "robberies of classmates, violence by parents and teachers in schools", showing knowledge of cases of violence in different areas. This stock of direct and indirect experiences gives them a certain authority in speaking: they have amply corroborated that the dangers are real. Impact and attitude: Emotionally, they express constant fear, but their words resonate more with the tone of chronic worry than acute panic. They have learned to live with uncertainty: "you live with worry, with uncertainty about whether you will return home safely" (Woman, 49 years old). There is a tinge of fought resignation: they know that the government is ineffective ("the inaction of the government and the police" mentions the same participant) but, even so, they do what they can to be safe. They limit outings, take care of their grandchildren/children with extreme vigilance and rely only on places and people very close. Reflection on solutions: Although solutions were not explicitly asked, some spontaneously pointed to the need for greater intervention. Someone mentioned that before the Zona Río (an important commercial area) was safe, but now "in the wee hours you can't

even go there," suggesting that it would be necessary to regain control of those spaces. Without saying it directly, they seem to advocate taking back the city: more lighting, more reliable police presence, social programs for young people (since they point to the lack of values as the root of violence).
Synthesis of the 46-50 group: The most complete perspective is presented: they recognize the structural causes, the daily impacts and the various manifestations of violence. They are aware of the limitations of their study (only women), even an older interviewee may have commented that men should also be listened to; in fact, they notice that men also live in this context (unlike young people who emphasize only their female fear). Overall, their fear has evolved into a serene but determined concern: they've adjusted their life to handle it, but they don't trivialize it. We can say that these women are not surprised by violence, they understand it as an unfortunate part of their reality. And despite this, many show community resilience: they continue to work, take care of their families and hope for a better future, manifested in desires for a safer Tijuana for the next generations.

Discussion

Theoretical-practical contrast:

The empirical findings in Tijuana dialogue with previous literature on gender and urban fear. They confirm the "fear-gender paradox": despite the fact that men may face certain crimes more frequently, it is women who experience and express a more intense fear of public spaces. This study finds, like Mellgren and Ivert (2019) and Zúñiga (2014), that women restrict their use of the city out of fear, affecting their right to the city and their well-being. Also, the "vulnerability perspective" is corroborated, where structural factors (patriarchy, differential gender education, institutional responses) explain why women feel more insecure. The interviewees from Tijuana pointed out several of these causes: impunity towards aggressors, negative attitudes of authorities, culture of fear instilled at home and, above all, panic about sexual violence, consistent with what was documented by Rader (2020), Rodó-de-Zárate et al. (2019) and Zúñiga (2014).
Contributions of the Tijuana case: Although many trends reflect general patterns (e.g., avoiding the night, fear in young people), Tijuana offers particularities. First, the identification of specific areas of fear (Sánchez Taboada, Camino Verde, Centro) shows how in contexts with very high violence, fear is territorialized: women mention entire neighborhoods as synonymous with danger. In European studies (Delgado & Aguerri, 2018; García-Carpintero et al., 2022), young women talk about parks or specific streets; in Tijuana, they speak of neighborhoods and sometimes say "the whole city," which reveals a level of generalization of fear uncommon in less violent places. Second, the link with organized crime: several women integrated into their discourse concerns about drug trafficking, shootings, kidnappings – violence linked to the macro criminal context of the region – something that distinguishes this case from, for example, urban fear in European cities where drug trafficking is not an explicit factor of daily fear. Third, the border condition loomed in commentary (fear of crossing into the U.S., comparisons to San Diego), suggesting that the interaction of two environments (one very violent, the other perceived as safer) generates singular reflections on what is tolerable and what is not in terms of security.
Comparative coping strategies: The strategies reported by Tijuana women (avoiding going out at night, changing routes, walking in groups, taking constant precautions) strongly coincide with global findings. Delgado & Aguerri (2018) found in Zaragoza, Spain, that young women resignify urban space through very similar survival practices: "avoiding darkness, planning safe routes, limiting nighttime social interaction". Latin American studies, such as Toro & Ochoa (2017) in Colombia, also describe women educated to avoid risk and perceive the street generically as dangerous, which our interviewees confirm: many say they feel unsafe "anywhere". This parallelism suggests that female fear in violent urban contexts has universal elements, despite cultural differences. At the same time, the intensity and extent of fear in Tijuana highlight the urgency: few cities register such a high percentage of women who avoid going out at night in their own neighborhood (74% in Baja California according to ENVIPE 2022). Tijuana represents an extreme case that highlights how far the restriction

of freedoms can go out of fear. Generational dimension: A conceptual contribution of this article is to show how age modulates the experience of fear. While all generations share the basis of female vulnerability in public space, their focus and narrative vary: young women 18-25 focus on immediate personal fear (harassment, rape, stealing while walking); those between 26 and 30 expand to an environmental fear (urban disorder, neighborhood insecurity); 31-35 move to strongly include the family; 36-40 integrate private and institutional violence; 41-45 take stock of everything and show emotional exhaustion; 46-50 add up to a structural and values perspective. This progression indicates that accumulated experiences and life stages (singleness, motherhood, job consolidation) influence the perception of fear and coping strategies. Younger cohorts, formed in bloody years, have a very intricate web of feelings of distrust, while older cohorts tend to conceptualize violence in broader frameworks (social, moral). This finding suggests that public policies for the prevention or care of fear may require differentiated approaches by age group. For example, campaigns for young people could focus on empowerment and reporting of bullying; for older adults, perhaps in rebuilding community and social fabric.

Reflection on prejudices and language: Care was taken to avoid any classist interpretation or that stigmatizes popular areas of Tijuana. The data show that some neighborhoods with deficiencies (e.g., settlements with poor lighting) are perceived as dangerous, but this is contextualized in the lack of infrastructure and state presence, not in a supposed "intrinsic evil" of their inhabitants. We avoid concluding that "such a neighborhood is violent because people of a certain socioeconomic level live"; instead, we point to the need to improve conditions (lighting, security) in those areas. Likewise, blaming the victims was avoided: although women take precautions, the responsibility for violence lies with the aggressors and the social structure that allows it. This approach aligns with gender perspectives that criticize the rhetoric of "don't expose yourself" towards women, and instead, demand structural changes (Moreno & Villanueva, 2016).

Limitations and future research: The study focused only on women, and as one of the conclusions reflects, this is insufficient to understand the totality of fear in the city. Also investigating men (who may experience different or similar fears) would offer a complete picture and allow the influence of gender to be contrasted. In addition, a longitudinal design would be valuable: following these same women over time or comparing how the perception of insecurity in Tijuana evolves in the next decade, given that the situation of violence is dynamic. We suggest delving into intersectionalities: are there differences between women of different socioeconomic levels beyond age? How does migrant status (very relevant in Tijuana) impact the perception of fear? These questions were outside the scope of this article, but emerge from the findings. In conclusion, the fear of violence among women in Tijuana is a multi-causal and adaptive phenomenon. Structural in that it reflects the objective conditions of a city hit by crime and inequality, and subjective in that each woman lives and interprets it according to her personal history and her stage of life. Recognizing this duality is crucial: solutions must address the concrete (improving lighting, police presence, crime prevention policies and attention to gender violence) and the subjective (empowering women, working to reduce the self-perception of vulnerability, healing the social fabric to reduce fear). Only in this way can women be given back the confidence to fully exercise their citizenship in Tijuana and other cities with similar violent contexts. As our older participants note, understanding fear in this structural key is to "combat gender inequality" and contribute to a fairer and more livable city for all.

This research observes that feelings of fear of public spaces, as well as strategies to cope with it, are similar among women in Tijuana and those in other cities in the developed world, due to the social structures that surround them and the subjective structures that they develop. It is interesting to find that fear of public space seems to be widespread in Spain (Delgado & Aguerri, 2018; García-Carpintero et al., 2022, Rodó-de-Zárate, et al, 2019), Sweden (Mellgren and Ivert, 2018), Scotland (Pain, 2001), France (Lebugle, 2017) and Australia (Chataway and Hart, 2018). Also in Latin America, in Colombia (Quiñones, 2020) and in northeastern Mexico, as corroborated by Zuñina

(2014), in Mexico City (Dunckel Graglia, 2016) and in the neighboring city of Mexicali (Almanza et al., 2022).

Final considerations

This study, located in the complex socio-cultural fabric of Tijuana, illuminates women's experiences of fear of violence across generations. It shows that fear is a rational response to a hostile environment, but at the same time it is a social construct fueled by shared narratives and experiences. Tijuana women, each from their generational context, have developed resilience tactics and adaptations that allow them to cope with everyday life under threat. However, their individual strength does not exempt the urgent need for collective and institutional action. Ultimately, this research provides a nuanced portrait of the perception of violence among women in Tijuana and serves as a call to action. Violence – both its tangible manifestations in the streets, and its intangible imprints on the minds and hearts of citizens – must be addressed in a comprehensive way. The women of Tijuana show courage and adaptability, but they deserve a city where those qualities are oriented to personal and community progress, not mere daily survival. Heeding their cry means claiming the right to the city for women, in Tijuana and beyond, and building safer and more equitable urban environments.

Addressing fear in a very violent city, only with women of different ages, seems insufficient, if you don't listen to the men, who also live there. However, there is no doubt that this group of the population is more vulnerable in the regional context of violence in northern Mexico. Understanding the fear that violence causes in public space among women in Tijuana, because they are victims, witnesses or because they hear about violent events from third parties, reinforces the idea that this fear is multi-causal. It is structural and at the same time subjective. Addressing the various causes serves to generate focused strategies, such as empowering women to reduce their self-perception of vulnerability.

This study, contextualized in the complex socio-cultural and demographic fabric of Tijuana, provides an introspection on the perception of violence and its interaction with various evolutionary stages in the life cycle of women. It is evident that endemic factors, such as socialization and contextual stimuli, exert a dominant influence on the construction and manifestation of threat perception. Notably, younger age cohorts, especially between 18 and 25 years old, who have witnessed intense episodes of violence in their formation, demonstrate perceptions intricately woven with feelings of fear and distrust. This observation resonates with academic literatures that postulate that formative stages, such as adolescence and early youth, play a cardinal role in shaping the perception of the surrounding world.

By contrast, older cohorts, in the 46-50 age range, offer a panoramic view of violence, extending beyond physical aggression to encompass deeper structural and psychosocial elements. This multidimensionality is testimony to an accumulation of experiences and perspectives acquired throughout different phases of Tijuana's personal and social development. There is a progressive metamorphosis in the perception of violence as women advance in their life cycle. This perceptual evolution not only reflects immediate physical threats, but encompasses a series of concerns deeply rooted in structural social dynamics, such as the erosion of the social fabric and violence in professional spheres.

Ultimately, this study offers not only a deep and nuanced portrait of the perception of violence among women in Tijuana, but also serves as a call to action for policymakers, academics, and activists. The need to address violence, in both its tangible and intangible manifestations, and to provide safe spaces and support for women, becomes imperative. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these women is testament to their strength, but it also highlights an urgent demand for more holistic and contextual interventions that address the root of such issues and aspire to a safer and more equitable future.

A longitudinal study will yield a better understanding of the relationship between fear of crime, sex, age, place of residence in the city. However, this research offers valuable information to continue

thinking about the fear of crime in violent cities and the interaction of women in public spaces, so that through public or private actions to counteract this harmful situation.

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