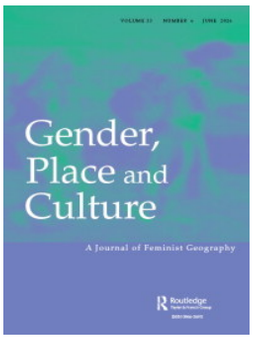

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'Indeed, it all starts with safety': analysing the gender perspective through (un)safety rationale in Basque urban governance

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ABSTRACT

Urban policies with a gender perspective in the Basque Country have evolved significantly over the decades, yet persistent challenges remain in addressing deep-rooted spatial and gendered power inequalities. This article investigates how gender is problematized and governed through the lens of (un)safety in Basque urban governance. Based on an in-depth analysis of municipal policy documents and interviews with planning and equality professionals, the study reveals how (un)safety operates as a central logic that renders gender perspectives actionable and politically legible. While this framing enables interdepartmental collaboration and facilitates the implementation of gender-sensitive interventions, it also risks narrowing the scope of gender equality work to technical fixes, thereby silencing more structural and intersectional concerns.

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Gender urban policies; (un)safety; gendered power relations; urban governance; rationalities

Introduction

Urban policies with a gender perspective in the Basque Country have a long history. In the late 1990s, several feminist groups began developing the so-called 'Critical Points Map' to highlight how women experienced cities differently, focusing on the interplay between fear, (un)safety, and power dynamics in public spatial contexts. Since then, a substantial development of urban policies with a gender perspective has emerged in the Basque Country, shaped by both top-down and bottom-up approaches. In this context, studying gender perspectives in urban governance in the Basque context is particularly relevant, as it integrates 'a gender perspective as a mainstreaming theme' (Basque Territorial Planning Guidelines 2019, 3) within its highest urban regulations, including the Territorial Planning Guidelines (hereinafter TPG) and the Bultzatu 2050 Urban Agenda, both established in 2019. These laws mandate that Basque municipalities incorporate a gender perspective into all areas of urban

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planning including the development of well-equipped and safe neighbourhoods; accessible public spaces for women, the elderly, and children; the mobility of care; safety in public spaces; and citizen participation from a gender perspective (art. 30 TPG, 2019).

However, while the gender perspective has been translated into guidelines and criteria to assist planners in integrating it into their professional practice, it has not been without challenges. Feminist scholars have pointed that, despite its transformative ambition, the gender mainstreaming approach often fails to address underlying power relations (Daly 2005; Prügl 2009; Rönnblom 2005) and their spatial implications (Huning 2020; Listerborn 2015, 2020). This gap between ambition and practice becomes evident in the Basque Country, where after more than two decades of gender-equality policies, the Basque Country still struggles to respond adequately to political demands related to women's multiple responsibilities, and to address deficiencies in mobility systems, housing, and safety (de Gregorio 2019).

Building on this observation, this study focuses on the everyday practices of urban policies with a gender perspective in Basque municipalities in order to understand, more broadly, the challenges faced in integrating gender considerations into urban governance. Given that the first urban initiatives with a gender perspective in Basque Country were linked to perceptions of unsafety and fear in public space, and that many contemporary policies remain closely related to these concerns, this study is focused specifically on policies related to (un)safety and gender in urban environments. Moreover, considering that unsafety remains a prominent concern within Basque society (DeustoBarometro 2023) this article aims to explore how (un)safety works as a rationality, that is, as a governing logic or way of reasoning through which issues are rendered intelligible and actionable, through which the gender perspective is given meaning and problematized in Basque urban governance. Drawing on Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach, we analyse how Basque urban policies not only address but also produce and reproduce problems related to gender and (un)safety by asking questions such as: How do urban policies and daily municipal practices influence the ways in which the gender perspective is understood and implemented through the lens of (un)safety? How has the rationale of (un)safety developed in the governance of the gender perspective? And what is unproblematized under the rationale of (un)safety? This approach allows us to identify the rationalities embedded in governmental practices, and to argue that (un)safety is a central rationale through which the gender perspective in Basque urban governance is represented and understood. Therefore, the paper seeks to highlight the ongoing structural and organizational challenges that persist despite these normative and procedural advances. The focus is not to suggest that progress has been absent, but rather to examine how the implementation of gender perspectives in Basque urban governance interacts with deeper structural limitations, such as institutional inertia, entrenched gender norms, and spatial constraints.

To meet this aim, this paper is situated within two broader fields. The first is gender and feminist approaches on policies and politics that have shown that when gender is simply 'included' as a goal without altering the underlying political structures in policy-making process, this diminishes the capacity to critically address the gender bias embedded within these frameworks (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Rönnblom

2005; Walby 2005). The second field is research on the geography of fear that has analysed the relationship between fear and power dynamics in space, concluding that (un)safety and fear are intertwined within gendered power relations, and are produced through everyday gendered practices (Koskela 1999; Listerborn 2015; Sandberg 2020). Finally, inspired by Campanini's 'Feminist Critical Friendship' approach (2024), which advocates that 'practising a feminist ethic of care in research focused on feminist pursuits within institutional contours' (2024, 18), this study critically explores the rationalities around (un)safety in gender-focused urban policies, acknowledging the significant contributions of both academia and feminist activism and work in addressing (un)safety and gender in urban spaces.

Analysing gendering practices in urban governance

In analysing (un)safety as a rationality through which gender is governed in urban governance, it is essential to start our theoretical approach by defining these concepts. Unlike security, which seeks to eliminate threats, safety focuses on reducing the likelihood and impact of hazards, fostering resilience and preparedness for potential dangers (Nas 2015). Feminist scholars have further examined how fear intersects with power dynamics in public spaces, highlighting how women internalize narratives of fear (Sandberg 2020), particularly those tied to the risk of sexual violence (Barjola 2019). This internalization generates a sense of non-belonging to public space, impacting women's use and enjoyment of it (Zúñiga 2014). As a result, women develop unconscious and naturalized strategies for navigating public spaces, understanding what is permissible in urban environments (Kern 2005; Pain 2001; Sandberg 2020). While perceptions of fear vary across race, class, and gender (Kern 2005; Kihato 2011), these narratives of unsafety and fear serve as a cautionary framework for women's behavior in urban spaces. They function as disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault 1980) and are integral to the axis of 'patriarchal control' (Silvestre, et al. 2023, 2), recognizing the varying experiences and positions of being a woman (Kern 2005; Sandberg 2020) in public spaces. Hence, rather than conceptualizing safety as a physical and measurable entity, in relation to security and fear of crime, we approach it as a relational construct, deeply intertwined with the production and reproduction of gendered, racialized, class-based, and other power dynamics that manifest in and through public spaces (Kihato 2011; Listerborn 2020). It is important to note that in Spanish, the distinction between safety and security is linguistically blurred, as both are commonly translated as *seguridad*. This nuance is crucial when interpreting citations from documents and interviews where the term *safety* is explicitly mentioned. For the purpose of this study, we interpret such references as pertaining specifically to safety and not security.

Building on Carol Bacchi's approach to politics and policy, we understand public policies as actively contributing to shaping the very issues they aim to resolve (2009, 2012). Bacchi argues that it is crucial to pay attention to 'the ways in which particular representations of 'problems' [in policies] play a central role in how we are governed' (2009, 11). Hence, public policies structure the ways we live our daily lives, becoming part of the technologies for governmental rationale (Foucault 1980, 1982). But, as we will argue, policies themselves are also structured by existing forms of knowledge

and thoughts (Bacchi 2009, 2012). Moreover, conventional approaches to policy analysis frequently fail to recognize how policies create and reinforce specific social relations, including gender dynamics. Bacchi (1999, 2009) proposed understanding policies as gendering processes that produce 'gender' as a relation of inequality, rather than merely responding to gender differences. In other words, policies actively participate in constructing what counts as gender and in shaping how gendered roles, relations, and inequalities are understood in society. Hence, gender does not have a single, universally applicable meaning; rather, it seeks to demonstrate the connections between certain political goals and particular problematizations. In this context, the concepts of gender and gender perspective are, and must be, continually evolving rather than seen as fixed or fully defined practices (Bacchi and Eveline 2010). As such, gender 'is not a fixed structure, but a contingent and situated social process, with specific effects of power and advantage' (Bacchi and Eveline 2010, 95).

Examining changes in the conception and application of public policies is essential to understanding how the gender perspective is being governed, by whom and through what means (Dean 2010) in Basque urban governance. In order to understand governance as a dynamic process of power rather than a static institution, critical approaches like governmentality (Foucault 1982) offer useful frameworks. Governmentality highlights 'the perceptions of power and influence' (Hudson et al. 2017) dimensions of governance, creating space to critically assess the naturalization of economic objectives and to explore the power dynamics and exclusions embedded within governance practices (Bacchi 2009; Foucault 1982; Hudson et al. 2017). Within this framework, neoliberal modes of governance can be understood as operating indirectly, fostering conditions of freedom and autonomy rather than exercising overt control (Brown 2015). In this study, references to neoliberal governance refer specifically to governance logics that have shaped urban policy implementation across Europe since the late twentieth century (Brown 2015) such as the emphasis on measurable results, fragmentation and externalization of responsibilities, and the depoliticization of complex social issues (Brown 2015; Jessop 2002). In the Basque context, these logics inform the current form of urban governance, influencing how gender perspectives are implemented. This is not presented as a universal explanation for gender inequality, but as a framework for understanding the particular institutional conditions in which our case is situated.

From this standpoint, power can be understood as not simply exerted through direct coercion or state mandates but manifested in the creation of subjectivities focused on self-regulation, competitiveness, and individual responsibility (Brown 2015; Dean 2010; Li 2007). This mode of power reorganizes social and economic relations, fostering a market-oriented rationality that permeates all aspects of life (Jessop 2002), including how to organize both governing and political aspects (Brown 2015). In the context of urban governance, this approach allows us to examine (un)safety political practices as mechanisms for governing gender, making social realities governable through the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault 1982, 341).

Methodological considerations

This study employs a two-step analytical approach that integrates Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), with Carol Bacchi's

(2009) WPR framework. In a blog post on her website (carolbacchi.com) Bacchi discusses how she has occasionally contrasted the WPR approach with RTA. She explains that while RTA researchers aim to identify themes, WPR focuses on identifying and interrogating problem representations. This distinction is crucial for our two-step analysis, allowing the two frameworks to play partially different roles in our analytical process. We use these approaches not as contrasting strategies but as complementary tools: RTA helped us identify patterns in the material, while WPR enabled a deeper analysis of how gender and safety are framed in urban governance. This combination allowed us to explore how public policies not only address issues but also contribute to their production (Bacchi 2009).

In the first step, we performed an RTA (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019, 2021) of policy documents pertaining to safety and gender in urban planning. We approached the analysis with a critical or discursive approach, meaning that we organized the findings around themes but understood them as connected to context, broader power relations, and social implications (see Byrne 2022). This initial analysis enabled us to uncover key themes, offering an initial understanding of these policies. We reviewed policy documents identified and collected through the municipal websites of the 251 municipalities in the Basque Country, specifically focusing on those linking safety and gender. In total, 214 documents were identified, covering the period from 2005 to 2023. These include formal municipal policy texts such as General Urban Plans (GUPs), safety-related policies, guidelines, and strategic plans, encompassing both top-down regulations and bottom-up initiatives. It is important to note that many of these documents are part of ongoing GUP processes, which typically take 10–15 years to complete in the Basque Country. Documents such as diagnostic reports, preliminary analyses, or mapping exercises represent the initial phases of the GUPs and are officially approved step by step before subsequent phases can proceed. Therefore, while some documents may appear as partial or preliminary outputs, they provide critical insight into the ways safety and gender considerations are framed throughout the entire planning process. While all documents were obtained from municipal websites, some were published in the news sections of these sites, meaning they appear in formats such as news articles rather than official PDFs. Of the 214 documents, 164 explicitly connect safety and gender in some way. Specifically, 60 are safety-focused policies, while the remaining 104 are GUPs that incorporate safety from a gender perspective. Given the volume and diversity of the material, RTA was an important step to unpack and identify significant patterns within the data. Through this review, various municipalities with different policy approaches were identified. These could be linked to safety maps, GUPs, or other policies related to safety, such as on-demand stops. Based on this first analysis, we identified municipalities with distinct policy approaches and contacted them for interviews. Moreover, since this study also focuses on governance, specifically, the framework within which these policies are shaped, involving the relationship between the public and private sectors, we also conducted interviews with external consultants from the Basque Country that work with municipalities on such policies. In total, nine interviews were done: four with Gender Equality Officers, three with Urban Planning Officers, and two with the external consultants, one specialized in inclusive urban planning, and the other in gender equality.

All interviews were conducted in person, in Spanish, except for two which were conducted online. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. While not formally structured, an interview guide ensured we covered the broad questions and main themes we aimed to explore, such as how the gender perspective has been introduced in urban governance, the relation between the different departments, and the difficulties and resistances to incorporating the gender perspective into urban planning. With permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed into Spanish. In accordance with ethical agreements, fragments of the interviews have been translated into English. For ethical considerations, both the names of the interviewees and the municipalities to which they belong, or the consultant's name, have been anonymized to ensure their identities remain confidential.

Based on the initial thematic analysis, we found it necessary to proceed with the analysis. Inspired by critical policy analysis (cf. Bacchi 2009), the second phase of our analysis involved utilizing Bacchi's (2005) WPR approach to build upon the insights gained from the RTA. In particular, we focused on the key questions posed by Bacchi's framework to deepen our understanding of the issues at hand. We particularly focused on Question 1: What's the problem represented to be?; Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?; and Question 4: What is left unexamined in this problem representation? Where are the silences? By focusing on the implications of these representations, we sought to make visual the underlying rationalities that influence urban governance concerning gender. This complementary approach not only helped us to connect policy documents with interview data, which served firstly to 'expose the gaps between words and deeds' (Ahmed 2007, 607) but also to better understand the complexities of implementing gender perspectives in urban planning.

Our aim is not to evaluate municipal performance or to diminish the progress achieved, but rather to highlight the persistent structural and institutional barriers that continue to shape urban policies and practice in the Basque Country and how gender and safety are conceptualized and governed. The quotes included illustrate how safety functions as a guiding principle and how gender perspectives are shaped within urban planning. Notably, the policy material includes examples from a broader range of municipalities than those represented in the interviews.

In the next section, the context of the Basque Country will be presented through a review of relevant policies and research, illustrating how this representation of the 'problem' come about (WPR Question 3), situating this study within a broader analysis of gender mainstreaming in urban governance. This contextual analysis will lay the groundwork for our discussion of the implications of these policies, particularly their role in shaping gendered experiences and power dynamics within urban spaces.

It all starts with safety: exploring the context of Basque Country

The integration of a gender perspective into Basque urban planning began in the late 1990s with the creation of the first Critical Points Map in Donostia-San Sebastián. Developed by the feminist movement Plazandreok, this map was a groundbreaking effort to document how women experienced feelings of unsafety and fear in specific public spaces at various times of the day. Through a survey and participatory mapping

process, women identified locations where they felt unsafe, marking these areas with red dots. This dynamic reflects Ortiz's (2017, 65) argument that fear is 'reproduced through the socialization process by reinforcing traditional gender roles that define women as vulnerable and men as strong and aggressive'. The creation of the Critical Points Map exemplifies how such initiatives apply the arguments of feminist geographers and urban planners from the 1970s, who emphasized that cities are not built from a neutral standpoint but from an androcentric perspective, often neglecting the needs of women and marginalized communities (Hayden 1980; Sandercock 2002; Valdivia 2018).

By 2012, 41 municipalities had conducted some form of urban analysis incorporating a gender perspective, from which 39 focused specifically on (un)safety and perceived fear (Goikuria and Jauregi 2012). By 2023, this approach had expanded to include 54 municipalities, each conducting diagnoses centered on (un)safety and fear perceptions. The establishment of the Critical Points Map also marked a turning point, resulting in the establishment of specific regulations regarding gender and urban planning. Three key milestones illustrate how safety has become a central focus in gender mainstreaming practices within Basque urban governance. The first significant milestone was the enactment of the regional Law 4/2005 on February 18, concerning Equality between Women and Men. Specifically, Article 46 of this law addresses how:

> the Basque public authorities are mandated to ensure that their policies and programs related to the environment, housing, urban planning, and transportation incorporate the gender perspective. This includes considerations such as safety, facilitating domestic work and caregiving, and promoting the participation of women in policy design and implementation (Law 4/2005, 2005, 3247–3248).

The second major development occurred in 2012, with two significant initiatives. In the first place, the Department of Housing, Public Works, and Transport began providing grants to municipalities to conduct their own urban diagnostics from a gender perspective (Leturiondo-Aranzamendi 2020), facilitating the continuation of studies related to the perception of fear and (un)safety in municipalities. This initiative was informed by a departmental study analysing the policies that municipalities had implemented in urban planning and gender, with the aim of 'providing data to maximize the effectiveness of the grants offered' (Goikuria and Jauregi 2012). These grants, which have continued to the present, have been instrumental in integrating gender considerations into municipalities' GUPs, as they support the external expertise needed to conduct Gender Impact Assessments. By enabling local urban diagnostics and facilitating the incorporation of gender objectives into planning processes, these initiatives have made the perspective of safety more visible and central in Basque urban governance. Secondly, the Guidelines for the Gender Impact Assessment Report across all Basque administrations, which works as a tool designed to incorporate 'gender equality objectives in the development and implementation of regulations and administrative acts. It consists of a document that combines the prior evaluation of gender impact with measures to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality for women and men' (Resolution 40/2012, August 21, first guideline 1.1).

Finally, the third milestone came in 2015, when the review process for the Territorial Ordinance Guidelines began to address new challenges in urban planning. This process concluded in 2019 with the approval of the new Territorial Ordinance Law, which established gender mainstreaming as a core principle for all aspects of urban planning in Basque municipalities (Leturiondo-Aranzamendi 2020). The law emphasizes the development of well-equipped and safe neighbourhoods, the creation of dynamic and accessible public spaces for women, the integration of care-related mobility, the guarantee of public safety, and the promotion of citizen participation with a gender perspective (Article 30, TPG, 2019). This regulation establishes the requirement for mainstreaming the gender perspective in urban planning, representing a significant paradigm shift. It acknowledges that urban planning is not neutral and emphasizes the necessity of incorporating women's experiences and perspectives into urban development. Consequently, this legislation not only mandates the gender perspective but also highlights the importance of creating safe, well-equipped neighbourhoods, positioning public safety as a fundamental aspect of inclusive urban development.

These three milestones demonstrate that significant progress has been achieved both in raising awareness of gender equality and in integrating it into urban planning practices. They also reflect a shift from a narrow focus on perceptions of fear to a broader emphasis on caregiving and sustainable urban development (TPG, 2019). However, this framing of the context demonstrates that unsafety is represented as a significant problem in the Basque Country, with gender perspectives described as playing a crucial role in addressing it. The initiatives arising from the Critical Points Map have not only shed light on women's experiences and fear in public spaces, but have also driven important legislative reforms that institutionalize gender perspectives in urban governance.

'That's what we aim for': the institutionalization of daily safety practices

Since this study examines how the gender perspective is given meaning and represented to safety rationality, we need to begin by focusing on how both the gender perspective and safety are described in policy documents.

> Incorporating a gender perspective is not just about establishing various criteria in planning and projects, but more importantly, it requires that work culture, methodologies, and practices intersect (Critical Point Map, Municipality 024, 2019).

> We define a gender perspective as an analysis of how norms perpetuate or alter the conditions, situations, and positions of women and men, and thus, a description of the impact urban planning has on equality (General Urban Plan, Municipality 076, 2017).

> Analyse the consequences of neglecting daily activities—primarily borne by women—in urban planning and management. It aims to study the dysfunctions affecting work-life balance, seeking successful experiences in other contexts to reshape concepts and plans (General Urban Plan, Municipality 039, 2009).

The quotes above illustrate that the gender perspective serves as a critical lens through which existing structures are analysed, norms governing urban life are

re-evaluated, and the daily activities affecting women are consciously acknowledged. Safety, in turn, is framed as a condition for equal access to public space and services

> Safety in public space guarantees that everyone can use public space equally. This means ensuring access to all city services, thereby generating equal opportunities (Critical Point Map, Municipality 002, 2015).

It is not only associated with physical violence but also with symbolic violence that limits the enjoyment and use of urban space (Zúñiga 2014; Ortiz 2017). As one Gender Equality Officer explained 'It is about not only looking at the buildings but also at the use and interaction of people in that public space' (Interview A, Gender Equality Officer). This broader understanding of safety was central to the early Critical Points Map initiative, which aimed to show how gender intersects with all dimensions of urban planning and public policy. In this context, the gender perspective extends beyond safety, intertwining with social constructs of gender within public spaces. However, when discussing the necessity of integrating gender perspectives in urban planning and the relevance of Critical Points Maps, safety often takes on a more physical, tangible meaning.

> In our daily work, we might consider these issues (…)—in day-to-day life when we must solve a problem, such as ensuring accessibility, well-being in the use of space, adequate lighting, and avoiding creating areas that may cause a sense of unsafety, for example, in the closures of construction fences (Interview B, Urban Planning Officer).

> In urban planning, the issue of safety is mainly addressed by designing spaces that prevent the feeling of fear and unsafety, that perception of safety. That's what we aim for. We aim for spaces with a certain level of activity and critical mass, ensuring there are no isolated, lonely spaces (Interview E, Urban Planning Officer).

Safety thus becomes embedded in everyday planning routines and is treated as a practical concern. It also functions as a central consideration in urban planning when applying a gender perspective, serving as a rationale through which municipal daily practices are conducted (Bacchi 2009; Brown 2015). In the interview with the Gender Equality Expert Consultant, the improvements in gender and urban planning are especially mentioned through the idea that 'safety is important, especially because of violence, right? It's clear that there is more awareness and social sensitivity, and you can see how this is integrated and translated into the physical space' (Interview I, Gender Equality Expert Consultant). Another example is with one of the urban planning officers explained that they added lights to a construction scaffold because the scaffold made the area very dark.

> (T)he fact that it's illuminated from the beginning was indeed a notion that a few years ago we wouldn't have done, we would have done it once the complaint comes (…) but that initial foresight I think now we are gradually becoming aware in day-to-day-life. It's in the short term, I mean in immediate actions (Interview B, Urban Planning Officer).

Although these actions are essential and it is crucial that municipalities recognize the need to introduce the gender perspective in urban planning, over time, they risk becoming checklists, focusing solely on spatial safety without addressing the power relation in how spaces are used and inhabited (Hayden 1980; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992). While most policy documents address broader issues such as

accessibility, mobility, safety, symbolic representation, public services, and daily life, one external consultant noted the difficulty of moving beyond the safety narrative.

> We always propose eight axes. One is safety (…) there is almost no need to comment on it (…) but it has a sort of red line, until you don't see that [unsafety] we won't talk about another issue (Interview H, Urban Expert Consultant).

As Brandén and Sandberg (2021) argue, safety is often reduced to 'small fragments, rather than interpreting them in their totality' . When safety functions as a governing rationality, immediate technical actions, like installing lighting, simplify complex gendered safety issues into manageable physical problems (Li 2007). However, the significance of (un)safety extends beyond these tangible measures, as it shapes the broader governance model and the way gender is framed within it. From a problematization lens (Bacchi 2005), we can reveal an underlying limitation in how gender-based violence in urban space is approached. While these measures may provide a temporary sense of safety, they fail to tackle the deeper, systemic roots of violence and inequality. Taken together, these examples illustrate how (un)safety has become institutionalized in the day-to-day routines of municipalities, operating as a rationale that shapes both immediate actions and the ongoing governance of gender in urban spaces.

'Providing effective solutions': governing gender through (un)safety

Municipal responses to gendered safety concerns often rely on spatial interventions, like lighting, visibility, and avoidance of isolated areas. These actions are typically framed as practical solutions, yet they rarely engage with the broader social and structural conditions that produce unsafety. The continued reliance on such measures reflects how (un)safety has become a dominant logic in urban governance, shaping not only the types of interventions but also the way gender itself is understood and addressed.

While policy documents and some municipal actors call for integrating broader dimensions, such as care, accessibility, and well-being into planning, these tend to be eclipsed by safety considerations, which are more politically legible and administratively manageable. As one Urban Planning Officer reflected 'It's very challenging because people's first thought is about dangerous spots, because those are easily recognisable. Safety is quickly understood, especially with news about assaults, which we hear constantly' (Interview G, Urban Planning Officer). This framing is not without tensions. As Listerborn (2015) observes, safety discourses often face the paradox of seeking to highlight women's vulnerability without reproducing it, and they risk reinforcing existing social and spatial power dynamics. Consequently, municipal practice tends to revert to a narrow, reactive understanding of safety, one that is more amenable to technical fixes than to confronting the structural and intersectional roots of gendered inequalities.

> There are still many social myths about violence, for example. For instance, the idea that everything can be fixed with more light. It is a demand from citizens: It is too dark; we

> need more light. And the argument is that women are afraid to walk there (Interview A, Gender Equality Officer).

While such demands are politically salient they tend to overlook insights from feminist scholarship, which highlights that fear is socially produced and embedded in structural power relations (Kern 2005). However, this 'technical fix' mentality extends beyond lighting.

> Recently they put in random train stations a purple thing with a red button that is like, if you feel unsafe, you press the button. And what happens? Does the alarm go off? Does it call the police? Because one of the demands of the feminist movement was also that the solution did not involve surveillance, nor did it involve calling the police (Interview D, Gender Equality Officer).

This quote raises questions about the persistence of safety as the dominant framework in Basque urban policy, even two decades after its introduction. While the policy documents define gender perspectives and safety in relation to broader concepts such as accessibility, mobility, or care, the practical sections of these documents primarily emphasize actions and solutions grounded in technical safety fixes. For instance, 'critical points' are often described in highly stereotyped terms

> These spaces are perceived as prison-like, dangerous alleyways that discourage use. From a gender perspective, they are considered entirely inadequate (General Urban Plan, Municipality 006, 2021).

> The most common factors that generate a sense of insecurity are tunnels, isolated areas, dark or poorly lit zones, and degraded areas. (…) Measure 38: Installation of safety elements. Measure 39: Installation of safety measures in abandoned or ruined buildings (General Urban Plan, Municipality 076, 2017).

> "Black Spots" are locations where, due to poor lighting, low visibility, or other factors, there is a higher risk of harassment, assault, or violence against women. Identifying these places, understanding their issues, and providing effective solutions is essential (Critical Point Map, Municipality 063, 2013).

These interventions reflect what Koskela and Pain (2000) call the 'designing out fear' approach, the belief that physical design alone can reduce fear. This logic tends to silence the role of structural inequalities and spatial power dynamics. Day (1999) argues that such silences make it difficult for non-privileged groups to participate in problematization. Similarly, Kern (2005: 358) warns that uncritical safety discourses risk 'downplaying the significance of race, class, sexuality and other differences among women, and ignoring hierarchical relations among women'. In response, some municipalities have begun exploring approaches that challenge this narrow framing. For instance, several municipalities (Interviews: D, E, F) are incorporating both individual and collective empowerment strategies to complement physical interventions, engaging directly with the social and structural dimensions of (un)safety. For example, some work with boys and men to reflect on how they occupy public space, aiming to address gendered power relations beyond environmental design (Interview A). Physical interventions in school playgrounds also illustrate this shift (Interview F). Although these changes are material, they are informed by observations of how children occupy space: boys tend to dominate

playgrounds, while girls often remain on the periphery. Additionally, in Interview D, the Gender Equality Officer explained that in 2022, funding through employment grants was allocated to revisit the Forbidden City Map, originally created around 2002–2003. This initiative reflected the department's commitment to reassessing perceptions of (un)safety, prompted by feminist movement demands and renewed attention to previously identified unsafe points, highlighted by an assault at a train station.

> the trigger was the Euskotren (train station) assault. That place was already marked as unsafe in 2003, so it was like what has happened that almost 20 years have passed, and this happens, right? (…) and it was changed. What happens? That tunnel was still perceived as unsafe (…) (they) installed a lot of light, the walls were painted white and then to give it a little twist a mural was made (Interview D, Gender Equality Officer).

In this case, the feminist movement, citizens, and the institution itself recognised the need to reinterpret the concept of safety. Importantly, the willingness to revisit long-standing interventions signals institutional self-critique and a shared recognition across equality and urban planning departments that it is necessary to move beyond dominant narratives linking gender, (un)safety, and urban planning. These practices open opportunities to integrate more structural and intersectional approaches. As municipal actors seek to incorporate gender perspectives into urban planning, (un)safety emerges as a practical and politically legible entry point. While interventions continue to rely on technical fixes, such as lighting, redesigning tunnels, or installing emergency buttons, these measures also open opportunities for addressing broader structural and social dimensions, including empowerment, care, and the redistribution of gendered responsibilities. Yet, such openings are fragile. As administrative practices and governance structures often prioritize tangible, measurable outcomes over deeper structural change. In practice, this tension has led municipal actors to reinterpret or 'rename' gender-sensitive interventions, framing them in terms of (un)safety to facilitate implementation and interdepartmental collaboration.

'Call them something else': going back to (un)safety as a strategy for municipalities

Recognizing that (un)safety serves both as a technical and politically legible framework, municipalities are increasingly reframing gender-sensitive interventions through this lens in their everyday urban practices. Interview data suggest a growing awareness and evolving priorities in municipal gender work. Building on the recognition that (un)safety is both a technical and politically legible framework, municipalities are experimenting with ways to reframe gender-sensitive interventions in everyday urban practices. Interviews suggest a perception of progress and evolving priorities in municipal gender work. As one Gender Equality Officer reflected, 'the focus was previously reduced to [gender and sexual] violence (…) now, one of the key issues is care' (Interview F, Gender Equality Officer). This shift is visible in practices such as school routes (Interviews C–H), which aim to allow children to travel safely to school independently. While framed as promoting autonomy, these interventions also reflect

underlying logics of care redistribution, often relieving tasks traditionally assumed by mothers.

Such examples illustrate how (un)safety continues to function as a practical and politically viable entry point for integrating gender perspectives. By anchoring gender concerns in safety, municipalities facilitate interdepartmental coordination. In Municipality A, for instance, a dedicated group was established to monitor the Critical Point Map, demonstrating how (un)safety can institutionalize gender-sensitive planning. Similarly, another interviewee described how councillors from different areas worked with the architect of the municipality to reinterpret critical points, and even 'went by car to see all the points that we have seen in the municipality and see a little what was proposed then and whether it had been carried out or not and why' (Interview D, Gender Equality Officer). Despite these efforts, implementation remains uneven: 'its till depends a lot on the individual. It's not yet structural or systematized; it depends on the sensitivity of the person doing it' (Interview A, Gender Equality Officer). This reflects a broader governance challenge, where depoliticization, central to neoliberal governance (Brown 2015), shapes policy formulation by removing political dimensions from decision-making Hence, the combination of technical quantifiable policies and fragmented institutional collaboration. The combination of technically framed policies and fragmented institutional collaboration risks reinforcing existing silences and power dynamics. It also highlights tensions between a structural, interdisciplinary vision and an implementation constrained by administrative inertia. As one consultant explained:

> We link a streetlight to the idea that the area will be safer. In terms of protection against traffic, adding something to slow down the speed is linked to the idea that it will indeed slow down traffic, so the cause-effect relationship is clearer. An urban elevator connecting a high neighbourhood to a low one, well. The purple block we have here about well-being, care, coexistence, no, the link isn't so clear. The connection isn't as immediate, meaning that putting something there [referring to the elevator] doesn't make us suspect or expect such an immediate benefit (Interview H, Urban Expert Consultant).

In this context, safety becomes a key facilitator of collaboration, both within municipalities and with external actors. Its tangibility makes it easier to implement across administrative domains (Koskela and Pain 2000; Listerborn 2015). As highlighted in the quotes below, (un)safety operates as a rationality that simplifies, quantifies, and governs 'gender' in urban spaces, shaping not only policies but also administrative practices across departments. However, when 'problems and solutions' stop being more tangible, interdepartmental collaboration becomes more complex. Furthermore, the gender perspective is often misunderstood, being perceived as something ethereal or even ideological.

> The mindset they have regarding gender equality, equality at this moment, and in urban planning, also with mobility, is something ethereal. But safety is not ethereal. So they have a very clear understanding of the safety issue because it is a political mandate (Interview C, Gender Equality Officer).

> It often seems like we, as technical professionals, are simply applying regulations. For example, accessibility is quickly understood. But when it comes to the gender perspective (…) other issues seem more ideological (Interview G, Urban Planning Officer).

The quotes above illustrate the significant challenges of incorporating concepts such as gender, care, or structural inequalities into urban design. Some policy documents reflect this struggle, stating, 'we won't question the importance of maps of the Forbidden City (…) However, when we talk about the gender perspective in urban planning, we refer to a broader framework than just incorporating (un)safety into public space' (General Urban Plan, Municipality 003, 2022). This highlights a lack of understanding regarding the integration of a gender perspective in urban planning, often perceived as abstract, which influences how gender issues are framed and addressed (Bacchi 2009, 2012). In response, municipal departments are developing their own strategies and reframing interventions to align with existing political and administrative priorities.

> When you bring up certain topics—balconies, bus stops—people start asking, "Is this only for women?" or, "So, does this mean we are going to put a bus stop so that it's always the woman who picks up the child?" It's hard to make people understand. What does it mean to apply a gender perspective? You go to the root of the issue, which is challenging. To avoid arguments, in practice, you often implement changes but call them something else. Call it whatever you want (Interview G, Urban Planning Officer).

This strategic renaming reflects a broader tendency to make gender concerns quantifiable and auditable, often at the expense of addressing underlying power dynamics (Andersson 2018). These administrative practices compromise policymaking by prioritizing visible outcomes over structural transformation (Verloo 2005). In doing so, they align with neoliberal logics that reduce complex social issues to technical and managerial solutions (Brown 2015). Ultimately, while (un)safety offers a politically legible and administratively manageable entry point for gender-sensitive planning, its dominance risks narrowing the scope of gender equality work. The framing of gender through (un)safety enables collaboration and implementation, but also silences more transformative approaches that address structural inequalities and power relations. This ambivalence between strategic utility and conceptual limitation underscores the need for governance models that can accommodate both pragmatic interventions and deeper structural change.

Concluding discussions

Through our analysis of the institutionalization of safety, the emphasis on measurability and auditability, and the consistent use of safety as a strategic framework, we conclude that (un)safety functions as a rationality through which the gender perspective is problematized and given meaning in Basque urban governance. Before anything else, it is important to emphasize the progress achieved over the past twenty years in implementing a gender perspective in Basque urban planning. These advances are evident not only in policy frameworks but also in the everyday practices of equality and planning professionals who, while acknowledging the achievements made, remain critically aware of the challenges that lie ahead. Progress is undeniable, yet certain patterns within administrative models continue to constrain the possibility of a truly transformative change.

Firstly, feminist scholars highlight that (un)safety is often perceived as a fundamental concern shaping decisions about space usage, fear, and risk management (Listerborn 2015, 2020). In the Basque Country, (un)safety has been a pivotal concept for incorporating gender perspectives into urban planning since the late 1990s. Initiatives like the Critical Points Maps have positioned (un)safety as a gender issue in urban spaces, leading to its institutionalization as the primary method for addressing gender inequalities. Over time, this has resulted in a routinization of safety-focused interventions, where gender concerns are increasingly addressed through technical and spatial solutions. However, this governance model also contributes to the depoliticization of gender discourse (Brown 2015). By emphasizing tangible, measurable actions, such as improved lighting, surveillance, or spatial redesign, urban policies risk overlooking the relational and structural power dynamics that shape gendered experiences of public space (Hayden 1980; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992). Our analysis reveals how safety, within a governance framework and through a governmentality lens, prioritizes physical interventions, reducing gender concerns to auditable and technical actions while overlooking the deeper inequalities embedded in urban design and use (Brandén and Sandberg 2021; Listerborn 2015).

Importantly, we also identify a duality in how safety is mobilized: both as a strategic entry point and as a strategy form of resistance. In this sense, the governmentality approach has helped us better understand how the rationality of (un)safety functions as an effective, politically neutral tool (Brown 2015) that facilitates the integration of gender perspectives into everyday practices. In contexts where consensus on the importance of gender perspectives in urban policies is lacking, prioritizing safety allows policymakers to establish a baseline that minimizes opposition. Safety thus becomes a link between traditional urban governance and more progressive, inclusive frameworks. While strategically incorporating safety can provide a practical entry point for introducing gender perspectives into urban design, an ongoing focus on technical solutions without addressing the underlying structural and social dimensions of inequality risks stifling transformative change (Andersson 2018). This dual approach, viewing safety both as a necessary foundation and a starting point for broader change, reveals the complexity of governing public spaces through a gendered lens.

Finally, our analysis does not aim to identify which municipality has adopted a specific approach, but rather seeks to uncover how safety functions as a rationality in everyday governmental practices. In this regard, it is notable that a (un)safety rationality shapes not only policy content but also administrative routines, professional roles, and interdepartmental dynamics. Even when actors attempt to move beyond safety, they remain bound by its logic, reframing interventions to fit within its parameters. This approach reduces gender concerns to technical, measurable actions and overshadows deeper issues of inequality. As a result, these practices risk perpetuating prevailing safety narratives without challenging the power relations that are produced and reproduced in urban spaces (Ortiz 2017). And, additionally, as urban policies evolve to integrate more inclusive and intersectional perspectives, the challenge lies in reconciling the ongoing importance of safety with the need to critically examine and transform the power dynamics that shape how public spaces are used and experienced (Listerborn 2020; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992), even setting aside the differences among women, considering their distinct experiences and lived realities (Kern 2005; Kihato 2011).

Indeed, it all starts with safety, as focusing on safety opens possibilities for collaboration and can be used strategically as a lens to reframe and better address gender perspectives into urban planning. Yet, there remains a tendency to stop at safety, treating it as an end in itself rather than a starting point for more transformative change. This narrow focus risks reducing complex gender concerns, confronting deeply rooted power dynamics and structural barriers, which is often challenging in institutional contexts that favour measurable outcomes and risk-averse strategies. Overcoming this limitation demands more than 'individual willingness'; it requires a comprehensive shift in perspective that permeates the entire institutional framework. Therefore, we argue that advancing truly inclusive urban planning requires combining pragmatic safety measures with a critical and structural perspective that integrates intersectionality and the socioeconomic and political dimensions of gender. Such integration will help move beyond superficial, immediate solutions toward deeper transformations in urban planning practices and policies. Embracing critical approaches across all levels of organizational practice is essential. Such a transformation pushes the boundaries of how (un)safety is understood, ultimately reshaping how gendered urban spaces are planned and experienced.

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