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Article

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Journal of Illicit Economies and Development (JIED)

Provided in Cooperation with:

LSE Press, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Suggested Citation: Rivera, Lirio Gutiérrez; Delgado-Mejía, Luisa (2022) : Agency in contexts of violence and crime: Coping strategies of women community leaders vis-à-vis criminal groups in Medellín, Colombia, Journal of Illicit Economies and Development (JIED), ISSN 2516-7227, LSE Press, London, Vol. 4, Iss. 3, pp. 282-295, <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.130>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/320664>

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Agency in Contexts of Violence and Crime: Coping Strategies of Women Community Leaders vis-à-vis Criminal Groups in Medellín, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores women community leaders' relationship and interactions with criminal groups in Medellín, Colombia. Based on in-depth interviews in low-income neighborhoods, this article shows that women community leaders develop coping strategies to deal with the everyday violence that is largely connected to the presence of *combos*, which are criminal groups. We identify three coping strategies: confrontation, negotiation, and avoiding confrontation, which are not exclusionary from one another. These coping strategies are understood not only as a form of surviving in environments with high levels of violence and crime, but also they are part of women community leaders' development of agency. We aim to go beyond the 'passive/agency binary' (Hume and Wilding 2020) by understanding women community leaders' coping strategies as a form of situated and contingent agency.

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KEYWORDS:

Women; agency; criminal
groups; Medellín; Colombia

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gutiérrez Rivera, L and
Delgado Mejía, L. 2022.
Agency in Contexts of Violence
and Crime: Coping Strategies
of Women Community
Leaders vis-à-vis Criminal
Groups in Medellín, Colombia.
*Journal of Illicit Economies
and Development*, 4(3), pp.
282–295. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.31389/jied.130](https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.130)

What kind of interactions do women establish with male members of criminal groups in urban contexts? How do these interactions help us understand more about gender and security in contexts of violence and crime? These are some questions this article aims to explore, showing the ambiguity of these interactions in three low-income neighborhoods in Medellín, Colombia. The ambiguity that characterizes these interactions is, on the one hand, part of residents' daily routines and coping strategies in contexts of violence and crime (Auyero 2012; Doyle 2021; Moser and McIlwaine 2014). On the other hand, it also forms part of criminal groups' authority over populations and neighborhoods as they provide protection and security, among others (Arias 2006; Schubert 2016; Venkatesh 1997). This article explores the gendered aspects of these interactions, focusing on the experiences of women who are community leaders in their neighborhoods.

Studies about women living in contexts of urban violence and fear of crime have observed that their experiences with violence tend to be silenced, normalized or ignored (Falú 2009; Hume 2004, 2008; Pain 1991, 2021; Wilding 2016). This is partly because of the tendency focus of male actors and criminal groups (Wilding 2010). Feminism has pointed out that the neglect of other forms of violence is rooted in patriarchal epistemologies (Hume 2009) which simplify women's experiences, ignore their roles, and present forms of violence as normal (Hume 2008; Menjivar 2008; Wilding 2010). In a similar vein, feminist urban scholars acknowledge women's everyday strategies and actions as a form of knowledge (Peake 2017; Sandercock and Forsyth 2005). In the context of urban violence, scholars have seen women's strategies and actions as a form of knowledge and agency (Gutiérrez Rivera 2020; Hume 2009; Hume and Wilding 2020; Moser and McIlwaine 2000; Wilding 2010).

There is much literature on women's agency in grassroots movements with social demands and political agendas (Alvarez 1990; Conway 2021; Conway and Lebon 2021; Molyneux 1985; Safa 1990; Stephen 1997). Agency is generally understood within the liberal tradition; it equates to freedom and autonomy (Mahmood 2001; Hume and Wilding 2020). Feminist scholars have questioned this notion of agency pointing out the universal tone underlying the idea of freedom and the 'desire for autonomy' (Mahmood 2001: 106) as well as its abstractness (McNay 2010). As Hume and Wilding (2020) point out, agency is more complex and ambiguous, yet, it tends to be understood within the agency/passivity binary, which sees women as either unable to exercise their free will or are successful and autonomous by leaving a situation of violence. Hume and Wilding (2020) argue that women's strategies vis-a-vis criminal groups should be read beyond this binary. This is especially the case for women living in neighborhoods under control of criminal groups. Women play various roles vis-a-vis criminal groups: they seek their services, other times they fear and hide from them, women have been victims, or they join and participate in criminal groups, among other roles (Álvarez and Auyero 2014; Auyero and Berti 2015; Baird 2015; Tickner et al. 2020). These actions do not follow a political ideal of transformation and individual will (Hume and Wilding 2020). Rather they represent 'small acts' (Hume and Wilding 2020: 253) that can be read as forms of surviving or coping with generalized forms of violence in their neighborhoods. As feminist scholars point out, these actions may not transform gender relations, yet they indicate women's capacity for action in violent environments (Cornwall and Sardenberg 2014; Hume and Wilding 2020; Mahmood 2001; Zulver 2017).

In this article, we seek to contribute to this discussion of women's agency in contexts of urban violence by thinking agency beyond the liberal tradition. We center our attention on women who are community leaders living in low-income neighborhoods controlled by criminal groups in Medellín, Colombia. Women community leaders struggle with what Bourgois identified as 'everyday violence,' understood as daily practices and expressions of violence on a micro-interaction level (Bourgois cited by Menjivar 2008: 121). Everyday violence is entangled with criminal groups' activities in the neighborhoods. In this article, we contend that it is important to consider women's community work in the neighborhood to understand their interactions and development of agency vis-à-vis criminal groups.

The experiences of women living in contexts of violence and crime have gained scholarly attention in the past decades. Feminist scholars contributed to understand different experiences of violence and perceptions of fear of crime and insecurity among men and women

(Johansson and Haandrikman 2021; Pain 1991). The aim is to situate knowledge to understand ‘embodied epistemologies of security and protection’ (Hyndman 2004: 309); particularly of people who have been historically marginalized and/or excluded. As Hume has pointed out, women’s experiences of violence, fear, and insecurity tend to be silenced in part because they are normalized, even unquestioned. In focusing on the interactions and the development of women community leaders’ agency vis-a-vis criminal groups, this article seeks to advance the debates of women and security.

We develop our argument as follows: in the next section we briefly discuss the literature on criminal groups and women’s experiences in contexts of violence in Medellín. The third section presents the methodology and the analytical framework we use to understand women community leaders’ interactions with criminal groups. The fourth section presents the analysis of the in-depth interviews in which we look at three coping strategies of women community leaders vis-à-vis everyday violence from criminal groups and their connection to the development of agency. Finally, we present conclusions pointing out the importance of considering women’s prior work with the community and activism in the development of agency in contexts of violence and crime.

CONTEXTS OF URBAN VIOLENCE: CRIMINAL GROUPS AND WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN MEDELLÍN

Criminal groups are predominantly male, and its members play a role in the ‘new violence’ (Koonings and Kruijt 2004, 2007) that has characterized the region in the past decades. This new violence involves a variety of state and non-state actors (e.g. paramilitaries, street gangs, guerrilla, death squads) that participate in criminal activities, street violence, settling of scores, social cleansing, among others (Wilding 2010). Recent studies show the gendered aspects of criminal groups’ violence looking at the construction of masculinities and how violence affects men and women differently (Baird 2017; Moser and McIlwaine 2014). Despite engaging with a gender perspective, feminist scholars note that there is a tendency to construct men as perpetrators and women as victims (Hume 2008, 2009; Wilding 2010).

Recent studies have sought to understand women’s experiences with violence beyond the women-victim narrative. We are not affirming that women are not victims of violence; however, women have a complex role in violence. Women play various roles in criminal groups (e.g. as girlfriend of a gang member or directing criminal activities). Despite being subjected to male domination and violence, studies coincide that women develop agency as they achieve status, identity, and self-esteem (Baird 2015; Tickner et al. 2020).

Studies demonstrate that women’s experiences with violence are not isolated local incidents, rather they are part of larger political and economic structures (Hyndman 2004; Gutiérrez Rivera 2018; Menjivar 2008; Pain 2020). Similarly, Auyero and Berti notice that the use of violence is ‘part of a larger interactional sequence’ (2016: 8). Residents develop routines and practices to cope and deal with everyday violence. Sometimes they develop a controversial form of ‘ethics’ that also involves violence (Álvarez and Auyero 2014). These studies contribute to discussions about everyday forms of violence put forward by Scheper-Hughes (1993) and Bourgois (2003 [1995]). Their seminal work on life at the urban margins show how the coping strategies of the marginalized and poor are connected to structural forms of systemic racism, patriarchy, class, and shifts in political economy.

In this article, we look at women’s coping strategies with criminal groups, understanding them as a form of survival and as a way of developing agency. Specifically, we focus on women community leaders. Women involved in community work in Colombia are generally understood as activists or leaders (Arango-Vargas 2021; Rodríguez Castro 2021). Scholars have seen these women as political agents in the country’s peace process, rights to the city, and women’s rights (Arango-Vargas 2021; Gutiérrez Rivera 2020; Koopman 2011; Krystalli 2021; Maclean 2017; Zulver 2021). Most of these studies understand women’s community work as part of a political and social transformation in which women are agents of change and are reclaiming their identity as political agents (Arango-Vargas 2021; Stephen 1997). In our research, only some community leaders were part of women’s social movements with an elaborate agenda; others worked more locally. Their community work involved political participation in community

decision spaces, planning projects, mediating with authorities and criminal groups, and helping community members. They were not part of a liberal agenda that has a rights-based, transformative approach seeking freedom and autonomy of the subject. Rather women's community work in these low-income neighborhoods demanded enduring and coping with everyday violence by criminal groups in which agency is contingent on the context (Hume and Wilding 2020; Zulver 2021). This article contributes to these discussions in which agency is read as a 'capacity for action' (Mahmood 2001: 203) in complicated contexts.

METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

For this qualitative study, we selected three low-income *comunas* in the north-oriental/oriental area of Medellín with presence of *combos* which are local street gangs. These *comunas* are connected geographically and are intercommunicated. We contacted various women community leaders in the three *comunas*. We presented the research project and asked if they were interested in participating. The participants belonged to certain organizations which had previous contact with the one of the researchers.

In order to gather information, we implemented a snowball sampling strategy because we were interested in the networks and bonds among women community leaders. Although this method was very useful for contacting women, it implies a disadvantage given that the sample is limited to certain organizations, nevertheless, the information collected presented diverse strategies and perceptions regarding violence.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews aimed at understanding women community leaders' day-to-day life in the neighborhood, which involved their community work and how they dealt with *combos* and everyday violence.

We conducted a total of 24 in-depth interviews between May and July 2021. Each interview lasted approximately two to three hours, some required more than one session. We carried out interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of data collection, the Colombian government had recently lifted the lockdown, therefore we were able to carry out some in-depth interviews face to face. In other cases, the participants preferred to use virtual platforms such as Google Meet or Zoom. We recorded and transcribed all interviews.

Given that our research topic was sensitive, we intended to generate spaces as safe as possible for women to speak. This is why the participants chose the locations for every interview and we followed their instructions every step of the way (e.g. how to arrive and leave the neighborhood). We anonymized all interviews and excluded details that could reveal their identity.

We knew from the beginning that the participants were going to omit details that could compromise them or other people; however, we were able to obtain substantial information about everyday violence due to diverse factors. Many of the interviewed women had previous bonds with the university where we work, which may be one key factor for appearing reliable as researchers; also, a lot of them had already denounced violence and criminal activities and already had a structured discourse on the subject. They were clear from the beginning that they would not reveal information that could put them at risk, and we promised to erase anything that they would no longer want to be in the investigation. Also, being women investigators was crucial in gaining confidence from our interviewees.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our analytical framework builds on the literature that has explored women's coping strategies with everyday violence by *combos*, as well as women's development of agency in these contexts. In these circumstances of violence, women tend to be understood within the 'passive/agency binary' (Hume and Wilding 2020: 4). Yet, in an environment of everyday violence, women's actions are contradictory and ambiguous. For instance, exiting a situation, such as leaving the house or the neighborhood, or filing a report with the authorities, are not always options. Women develop agency, 'within the context in which women are able to act' (Hume and Wilding 2020: 4). Agency in this sense, as Hume and Wilding (2020) point out,

does not resemble the somewhat idealized liberal notion of women exercising their free will as individuals. This notion of agency is inappropriate to understand women who live in contexts that are embedded in larger structures of inequality, as is the case in the urban margins, and that are ambiguous, such as neighborhoods controlled by criminal groups. Rather, agency needs to be understood as a process; it needs to be situated in 'local contexts in which [women] reside' (Hume and Wilding 2020: 5). Women's day to day acts are coping strategies that resist and challenge everyday forms of violence in their neighborhoods. Moreover, these acts, understood as 'political acts' are contingent on complex and violent environments. In this article, we explore community leaders' acts vis-à-vis *combos*, understanding them as coping strategies and within this situated notion of agency.

To explore the ambiguity and complexity of relations with criminal groups, we built a simple typology that involves three types of coping mechanisms that we identified in women's interactions with *combos*. The types of coping mechanisms go beyond the agency/passive binary because: a) women community leaders are not trying to exit a situation (e.g. leave the neighborhood) nor are they trying to be autonomous, rather they are trying to stay and do community work; b) women community leaders' decisions and actions are contingent on the situation with the *combos*; c) their actions are not framed within a liberal transformative project, instead they depict ways of surviving day-to-day life in the neighborhood, which includes everyday violence by *combos*.

The first coping strategy that we identified among the interviewed women was confrontation, which refers to interactions that imply some sort of unresolved disagreement between women community leaders and *combos* and that leads to intimidation and violence towards community leaders. This kind of interaction differs from others because it seems to be the most dangerous for women, although some women are more likely to come out unharmed from confrontation, depending on age, social position, and bonds with combo members.

The second strategy was negotiation. Negotiation refers to actions through which women community leaders bargain security for them or their families regarding their social position or their possibilities to give something in return. The final strategy identified was avoiding confrontation which entails women's actions that do not defy combo authority nor reinforce it. These actions do not interfere with criminal activities because women hope that in doing this they will not be bothered by *combos*.

It is important to note that these types do not correspond to each woman in general because women can oscillate between categories depending on the situation, and also because these interactions depend on the *combos*' own actions, which are not homogeneous. In the next section we discuss the three types of coping mechanisms in more detail.

WOMEN'S COPING STRATEGIES IN GANG-CONTROLLED NEIGHBORHOODS

The day-to-day life of women community leaders is marked by the presence of criminal groups. Medellín has a variety of criminal groups which are known to be structured and organized hierarchically. Local street gangs (known as *combos*), militias, self-defense groups, and criminal groups became involved in criminal activities headed by larger criminal organizations that are part of the global drug trade. Drug trade alone does not explain the consolidation of various criminal groups. This is connected to the country's nearly half-decade armed conflict, which involves various armed groups (e.g. guerrillas, militias, and paramilitary groups), high levels of inequality, and rapid urbanization (Arias 2018a; Angarita Cañas 2003; Blattman et al. 2021; Ceballos Melguizo and Cronshaw 2001; Maclean 2015; Moncada 2016; Moser and McIlwaine 2000).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Medellín witnessed local government's social policies to reduce the violence. Part of these social policies are known as Social Urbanism, which involved slum upgrading projects aimed at improving the lives of low-income populations through the built environment (Maclean 2015; Samper 2013, 2017). Social Urbanism helped to reduce violence, in particular the homicide rate, in Medellín. Yet, criminal groups are still present in neighborhoods. These morphed into better organized organizations with substantial resources through their control of illicit markets, taxation, extortion as well as providers of a variety of services in the

areas they control (Arias 2018b). Thus, criminal groups play a central role in neighborhoods (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014).

Residents have normalized the presence of criminal groups, in particular *combos*. The women interviewed had become used to their presence. Carla, for instance, who lived in her neighborhood more than half of her age (she was 74 when she was interviewed), recalls that there have always been criminal groups in her neighborhood:

‘There’s been a little bit of everything here: paramilitaries, guerrilla, *combos*. I used to go out and there were 2–3 dead persons in the street...I’d open the door and it was the first thing you saw... and there have been truces between the *combos*.’ (Carla, May 20, 2021).

Despite the familiarity of women community leaders like Carla of seeing *combos* and their use of violence, women did not feel safe. As Cockburn notes, militarized men engaged in crime and armed with guns are a threatening presence in everyday life and the women community leaders had to deal with their presence (2013: 445). The threat of *combos*’ presence, however, did not translate to their subordination or passivity. As we discuss in the rest of the article, women community leaders developed coping strategies to deal with them, making decisions based on the circumstances.

STRATEGY 1: CONFRONTATION

Women community leaders from the sample stood up against *combos* for different reasons. The main reason, though, was to protect their families, especially their children. Recruitment of young men and women is a problem for women community leaders, particularly if they are mothers. Rosa, for instance, describes that her son, who was a *combo* member, defied the *combos*’ authority. Other *combo* members wanted to retaliate against him. Rosa put her own life at risk, confronting the *combos* and the organized crime structures that the *combos* had ties with to avoid turning her son in:

[Four *combo* leaders] arrived at my house and told me ‘Ms. Rosa, we need your son to turn himself in because he could damage our peace process between *combos*’... A leader called me from jail and asked me to collaborate. I said ‘No I don’t care about that, I don’t know you’ and I hung up. That was when (*combos*) told me ‘if you don’t cooperate with us we will not answer for your life or your children’s, I answered ‘you don’t answer for me, I will not let you intimidate me, you didn’t ask my permission when you recruited my son, so you find him’ (Rosa, June 24, 2021).

Rosa’s confrontation could be read as a mother protecting her son, but it shows her decision to challenge the status quo which, paradoxically, her son –a *combo* member– reproduced and reinforced. Rosa was able to confront the *combos* not only because they knew her –she was the mother of *combo* member– but because she had gained respect among the community and *combos* because of her work as a community mother (*‘madre comunitaria’*), who are women who look after children, and because she was a member of the neighborhood’s community action board (Junta de Acción Comunal). Gang’s status as an authority in a neighborhood rely in part on the community (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991). This is the case of the *combos* whose social base is the community (Doyle 2021), thus, interacting more often with community workers like Rosa regarding issues of the neighborhood. Rosa had some leverage vis-a-vis *combos* due to her known community work. Her confrontation against *combo* leaders to protect her son is a ‘small act’ (Hume and Wilding, 2020: 254) that is political as Rosa challenges the status quo of her neighborhood.

Another situation of confrontation occurs when *combos* drag girls, adolescents, and young women into sexual exploitation or as drug dealers and gun keepers. Women community leaders who are mothers expressed fear for their daughters as they were courted by *combo* members. Sofia, for instance, confronted a *combo* member who was romantically linked with her daughter. She tried to get her back home:

‘I called (the *combo* member). I told him that I had talked to the police, the district’s attorney... that I had sought help everywhere and that there wasn’t anything they could do for her. “Juanita”, I told him, is a child, she’s 15 years old, has no experience, she’s only wandering down the streets with you’ (Sofia, May 5, 2021).

Like Sofia, most women community leaders were concerned about how *combo* members tend to obsess with young women and girls. Though some girls, adolescents, or young women actively seek gang members because they gain access to material benefits, money, and obtain status in the neighborhood (See Baird 2015), others do not want to be involved with *combos*. Rejecting their advances could mean that they (and their families) can be expelled from their neighborhoods. Confrontation is a struggle for women community leaders who are mothers. Motherhood, care, and protection are prominent for women who grapple with keeping children on the 'right path' (Álvarez and Auyero 2014; Wilding 2010). Confrontation is not only about women openly criticizing or standing up against *combo*'s actions while trying to protect children, it also involves women's refusal to play along with them. Confronting is a solution to this type of gang socialization especially for young women who were forced to be with a *combo*.

Women community leaders mentioned that disagreements with *combo* members or members of the communal action board who are associated with *combos* lead to intimidation. *Combos*' intimidation strategies include threats, physical violence, and being followed and harassed. This was the case of Teresa, a member of the communal action board. She disagreed with some community board members who had previous agreements with *combos*. Teresa noticed that *combos* began following her around in the neighborhood. She decided to confront a *combo* member:

I told him, 'If you are following me, you should be more clever, walk with me, stick by my side'. I looked at him and told him 'I already know where all of this is coming from, tell them to be still, that nothing is going on here'. I kept walking and he accelerated, then he came back and got off the bike and continued to follow me on foot (Teresa, May 24, 2021).

Despite being intimidated, Teresa's response is not passive. Instead, she responds by challenging the *combo* member and the community board members associated with him (though they are not present). Teresa's response may be seen as insignificant, yet, as Hume and Wilding (2020) point out, this 'small act' actually challenges a status quo that seeks to control women in certain participation spaces.

In some cases, women community leaders' confrontations have led to violence against them and their loved ones, such as assassination, forced displacement, sexual violence, threats and attacks against them or their families. The acts of violence towards women community leaders resemble a 'patriarchal backlash' in which women in hyper-masculine spaces, are targeted for being women and for their leadership roles (Zulver 2021). Women's leadership is a form of resistance in highly violent contexts (Zulver 2021) that seeks to achieve social change in the communities (Phillips and Cole 2009). These interactions not only mean a risk to women's lives, but also doing community work under constant danger and fear.

Although the majority of women who confronted *combo*'s authority were adult/senior community leaders, younger women community leaders have other ways of confronting *combo* members. These women considered that they were at higher risk of violence than senior women community workers who had gained respect and protection from the community. Most of these women described themselves as feminist activists and were involved in feminist organizations in the neighborhood. They helped women who were in abusive relationships with *combo* members and wanted to escape. Karina describes a situation in which she helped a woman escape a *combo* member:

'[I took] the daughters of a woman who was with a *combo* member to their grandmother, but she stayed with him. He left her locked in and she managed to call me when he had left, so I helped her escape. We had literally 10 minutes (...) I managed to get her out...and took her to a foster home' (Karina, May 31, 2021).

Karina's description can be understood as a case of liberal agency in which a woman wants out of a situation as part of a decision of free will. It is not. Karina's act is a confrontation against asymmetrical gender power relations affecting mainly women. Karina provides a safe space (a foster home) for the woman whose relationship with the *combo* member has led to her 'spatial entrapment' (Pain 2014: 527). As Hume and Wilding (2020) have noticed in the case of women in Salvador, creating safe spaces is central to women who live in violent environments.

Women community leaders also negotiate with *combos* in order to gain security for them and their families. Many are mothers and fear that their sons might join the gang or buy and consume drugs. As for their daughters (and young women in general), women community leaders identified a risk of being involved in situations of harassment, sexual violence, human trafficking, and even violent sentimental relationships with members of *combos*. This risk is identified by Consuelo, who describes how she had to start cooperating with *combo* members to prevent them from harassing her daughter.

‘[My daughter] was courted by one of the ‘boy s (member of a *combo*) and I was like “my God, if I went against these *muchachos* it would be worse for my daughter” so I started working with these men, trying to keep her from hanging out with them’ (Consuelo, Interview, May 4, 2021).

Negotiating with *combos* is a coping strategy that is between collaboration and avoiding confrontation. This coping strategy allows women community leaders to set boundaries by giving something in exchange or because of their social status. Some of them stated that, because of their age and their social position, they could feel safe around ‘the boys,’ as Rubi said: ‘Yes, they respect older women, me, for example, I had a business up there, and it lasted almost nine years’ (Rubi, Interview, July 11, 2021). When older women community leaders negotiate, they seem to be in a better position than younger women and girls.

Women’s role as caretakers is central to the negotiation strategy. Members of the *combos* acknowledge that some community leaders are close to their own mothers and grandmothers, therefore they respect them. Women in positions of negotiation apparently felt protected by *los muchachos*. This is contradictory given the fact that *combos* have been violent towards women community leaders. ‘Feeling protected’, however, needs to be understood within the community base and ties that *combos* establish with residents in which *combos* sometimes provide security (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Doyle 2021). Piedad, for instance, recalls when shootings between *combos* occurred; members warned her not to go out:

‘When shootings happened... I remember, because [the *combos*] would shoot from the front of my house... and the boys would say “mother, don’t go outside, this is about to explode”. (Piedad, interview June 6, 2021).

Piedad mentions that she knew the members of this *combo* before they joined the gang; she recalls when they were growing up: ‘[One of them] would say I was his sister.’ Feeling protected is linked to that bond of having grown up together in the same neighborhood as well as having gained respect in the community through her work as a caregiver and mother. Protection, however, is contingent. Women community leaders mentioned how these bonds allowed them to negotiate with them knowing that, in some cases, it could protect someone. Piedad mentioned how she protected her sister from *combos*. As Wilding (2010) observes, women establish complex and ambiguous relationships with gangs in which they play a variety of roles that includes moments of vulnerability, at risk, and/or agency depending on the situation.

Most of the women interviewed believed that joining *combos* is related to financial need and marginalization. Many manifested feeling sympathy towards some of the *muchachos*, as they recognized the structural conditions of poverty and violence in their neighborhoods that can drag young people into criminal structures. Some of the interviewees, such as Patricia, even tried to persuade boys and young men to stay away from the *combos*’ violence, putting their own lives at risk in order to ‘save them’ from a future of violence: ‘I caught him, as if he was my own child, and I got him out of here, he sees me every day and he is grateful’ (Patricia, Interview, June 19, 2021).

Negotiation also occurs in contexts where women are in charge of community projects. In many neighborhoods, projects cannot be carried out without the *combos*’ approval because of the kind of control they have acquired in territories. ‘Consuelo’ admits having negotiated with members of a *combo* to be able to carry out projects in her territory because of their authority status. Negotiation also entails that women community leaders can influence the decisions of *combo* leaders:

So, I said to the *combos*, ‘Well, we have 60 million pesos, what are we going to do? Twenty contracts have been approved [...] let’s give it a good thought to what we are going to do’ (Consuelo, May 4, 2021).

Combos have power not only in the execution of projects, but also in economic aspects in their territories, for example, food supplies, and even public services (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Mesa 2014). This explains why women community leaders encounter them on a day-to-day basis as they are involved in illicit and licit markets. *Combos* are also involved in community events, especially in those related to children. This appears to be a way of obtaining social recognition, a status as a 'legitimate community leader' which allows them to secure a position in the neighborhood as well as recruit children (Venkatesh 1997). Some women community leaders admitted having received money from the *combos* out of fear or because they needed the funds. However, this seems to be a strategy to keep the community from openly confronting *combos*. Either way, *combos* are still often recognized as part of the community. Amparo describes the ambiguous relationship with the *combos* that is connected to their authority status in the community:

'[The *combo* member] said to me [...] "You bring here a lot of health brigades and all, but I thought that you were a snitch. I have looked into you and no, you are a good person, suit yourself, you can stay here in the territory. Whatever can come into this neighborhood is welcome. If you need something from us, let us know right away, we will be supporting you. Not just you, but your board' (Amparo, June 18, 2021).

Negotiation sometimes implied voluntary or involuntary collaboration with the *combos*. Women hid weapons, mostly out of fear, hoping that *combos* would not turn against them. Cristina describes how women often get involved in illicit activities:

'[*Combos*] used to fight against each other and many times they would throw away their guns, and guess who they asked to hand them in? [...] and I'd go, so I would carry a towel and I would wrap it around the gun, we never touched them ourselves, always with a towel' (Cristina, June 3, 2021).

Cristina's experience not only shows the ambiguous relations with the *combos* when negotiating their own security, but also how she becomes involved in criminal activities. In doing so, she played role, though small, within the large structure of organized crime. The role resembles what Tickner et al. (2020) identified as 'logistics and coordination' (2000: 17) in which women house members of criminal groups, transport arms, and drugs. In some cases, this kind of negotiation is more complex, involving the organization of shipping schedules and movements of traffickers. This, however, did not appear in our interviews.

STRATEGY 3: AVOIDING CONFRONTATION

Avoiding confrontation with *combos* is another coping strategy among women community leaders. As long as they do not interfere with the *combos*' activities, women seem to not be at risk. Rubi followed this strategy and mentioned having a cordial relationship with *combos*. Avoiding confrontation sometimes allowed women to establish boundaries with some members, ask for favors, and even treat *combos* as any other community member. However, interactions between women community leaders and *combos* are less personal:

'I was never afraid of [the *combos*], I respected them, but I did not fear them. I mean, I respected them when they'd come to my business, that was my strategy, to serve them as if they were normal people, the same service for everyone' (Rubi, Interview, July 11, 2021).

Rubi describes an impersonal treatment toward the *combos* in her small business in the neighborhood. By treating them this way, and avoiding problems, she was able to maintain her business open. Rubi's coping mechanism shows a form of agency. Women community leaders tend to normalize violence, yet not in the sense that they do not do anything about it or just accept it (i.e. passivity or victims). Normalization means that women are aware that they live in a neighborhood in which some residents -namely *combos*- can be violent and dangerous. In this circumstance, avoiding confrontation vis-a-vis *combo* members is a strategy of surviving their constant presence. It indicates women community leaders 'capacity for action...to enable and to create', rather than a 'resistance of relations of domination' (Mahmood 2001: 203) that is part of a transformative project.

Other women, such as Catalina, express discomfort when avoiding confrontation with *combos*. This is because women community leaders are against *combos*' authority, yet they know they cannot express this openly, thus, they keep quiet in order to not be targeted by *combos*: 'I haven't had many problems with [combos] because they are there and I am here' (Catalina, Interview, June 17, 2021).

A similar situation occurs to Karina, a member of a juvenile feminist organization. She disagrees with the *combos*' authority, yet she understands the dangers she and the members of her organization can experience if they confront them. Karina questions, however, the strategy of avoiding the *combos*:

'We [at the feminist organization] have asked ourselves how not to get in [combos'] businesses? How to keep existing in the territory without being exposed and without ending the organization? How to be and live in the neighborhood without being scared?' (Karina, Interview, May 31, 2021).

Karina reflects about the avoid-confrontation strategy by questioning if it really contributes to women's safety in her neighborhood. At one point, she wonders if women are complicit with *combos* with this avoid-confrontation strategy. Karina's reflections indicate the ambiguity and complexity of these strategies as women have played roles in reproducing the violence (Baird 2015; Tickner et al. 2020; Wilding 2010).

COPING STRATEGIES AND AGENCY

These are strategies of survival. Some of the women negotiated with the *combos* and then confronted them at some point. Not only does this show the ambiguity of these interactions, but also that women's actions in these contexts are situated, that is, their decisions are largely based on the context (Hume and Wilding 2020).

These three coping strategies are ways in which women community leaders resist and challenge day-to-day life with *combos*. Leaving the neighborhood was not an option for many, in part because they were active in the community and had developed emotional ties to the neighborhood which were complex. For instance, many have known the '*muchachos*' for years as they saw them growing up or raised by someone they know.

As Mannell et al. (2016) point out, the coping strategies resembled 'simple solutions to highly complex problems' (2016: 66) as occurs in neighborhoods under gang control. Not all women in the neighborhood develop these coping strategies vis-à-vis the *combos*. This appears to be the case of young women, adolescents, and girls. Sofia, a community leader, mentions that young women tend to be unemployed and, in some cases, they actually seek *combos*:

'I've noticed young women who are in prostitution. They do this consciously...they want to be the girlfriend of some *duro* (badass *combo* member), they want to have a certain type of body, they want a motorcycle, but their parents can't buy one. So, what to do? Some approach these guys and he leads them to a pimp... I don't know, they don't realize how damaging that is. They like that role...' (Sofia, Interview, June 18, 2021).

Contrary to the young women mentioned by the interviewees, women community leaders appear to have some leverage vis-à-vis the *combos*. This was because of their age and their background in community work in the neighborhood or *comuna*. Most of the interviewees were over 40 years and had a decade-long experience in doing community work and/or activism in the neighborhood. They gained 'respect' from the *combos* as they witnessed that they 'did things for the *barrio*.' By contrast, younger women were usually sexualized by *combo* members. Agency for women community leaders in this context of violence and crime, as discussed here, is a process linked to their lives in the neighborhood, in particular their community work, in which they are actively participating in building women's security (Zulver 2017) by situating their agency. Women community leaders' agency involves making decisions to survive everyday violence in a neighborhood. Not only do these decisions seek their safety and protection in ambiguous ways, but also, they challenge the status quo.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explored women community leaders' coping strategies vis-à-vis *combos* in Medellín. Based on in-depth interviews, we show that women community leaders develop three coping strategies: confrontation, negotiation, and avoiding confrontation in their interactions with criminal groups. Not only are these coping strategies a way of surviving everyday violence caused largely by criminal groups in these neighborhoods, they are also a form of agency.

In understanding these coping strategies as part of women's agency process, this article goes beyond the 'passive/agency' binary (Hume and Wilding 2020). Agency has been explored among female leaders and mobilizations (Arango-Vargas 2021; Zulver 2021) and more recently in contexts of intimate partner violence (Hume 2009; Mannell, Jackson, and Umutoni 2016). This article seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring agency in contexts of violence and crime (Stallone 2021; Zulver 2021), specifically in neighborhoods controlled by criminal groups.

Women community leaders interact ambiguously with *combos* in part because of their level of control of territory and of resources. Women community leaders confront, negotiate and/or avoid confrontation depending on the situation; in some cases, they even take part of criminal activities. The strategies seek to ensure women's (and their children's) security in such difficult and complex environments.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The subjects who participated in this research signed a letter of consent and the research was approved by the ethics committee of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was funded by CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de las Ciencias Sociales). Grant Number 52857.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Gutiérrez Rivera and
Delgado Mejía
*Journal of Illicit
Economies and
Development*
DOI: 10.31389/jied.130

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gutiérrez Rivera, L and
Delgado Mejía, L. 2022.
Agency in Contexts of Violence
and Crime: Coping Strategies
of Women Community
Leaders vis-à-vis Criminal
Groups in Medellín, Colombia.
*Journal of Illicit Economies
and Development*, 4(3), pp.
282–295. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.31389/jied.130](https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.130)

Submitted: 14 September
2021

Accepted: 29 March 2022

Published: 21 December 2022

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*Journal of Illicit Economies
and Development* is a peer-
reviewed open access journal
published by LSE Press.