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QUALITY OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND WOMEN´S SAFETY PERCEPTION. COMPARISON OF TWO NEIGHBORHOODS IN CUENCA, ECUADOR

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QUALITY OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND THE PERCEPTION OF SAFETY FOR WOMEN[1]

COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO NEIGHBORHOODS IN CUENCA, ECUADOR

CALIDAD DEL ENTORNO URBANO Y PERCEPCIÓN DE SEGURIDAD DE LAS MUJERES
COMPARACIÓN DE DOS BARRIOS DE CUENCA, ECUADOR

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1 Este trabajo ha sido desarrollado en el marco de la investigación de tesis de pregrado titulada “Influencia de la calidad urbana del espacio público en la percepción de seguridad de las mujeres. Ciudadela Eucaliptos y urbanización Río Sol”, en la Universidad de Azuay, Ecuador.

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La mayoría de ciudades han sido planificadas y construidas en base a un sujeto universal: un hombre, sano, con trabajo remunerado y de mediana edad. Como resultado, las ciudades se han convertido en un entorno que visibiliza las desigualdades sociales, dado que obstaculizan el desarrollo de la vida cotidiana de los grupos más vulnerables. Entre estos grupos se encuentran las mujeres. En este contexto, el siguiente artículo busca exponer los resultados de un estudio que tuvo por objetivo conocer la influencia de la calidad del entorno urbano en la percepción de seguridad de las mujeres en dos barrios, con diferente índice de calidad de vida, de la ciudad intermedia de Cuenca, Ecuador. Se tomaron como casos de estudio los barrios Río Sol, cuyo índice de calidad de vida es de los más altos de la ciudad, y la Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos que, a pesar de estar a tan solo 500m del anterior, tiene un índice de calidad de vida medio-bajo. Metodológicamente, se aplicaron tres herramientas: e-MAPS, para conocer la calidad del entorno urbano de los dos barrios; una adaptación del Diagnóstico Urbano con perspectiva de Género “DUG” para medir la percepción de seguridad de las mujeres; y la observación no participante. Los resultados mostraron que existen diferencias en el índice de la calidad del entorno urbano entre los dos barrios, pero que este no está directamente relacionado con la percepción de seguridad. La observación no participante sugiere que existen otros factores que componen la vida de barrio que inciden en la percepción de seguridad de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Diseño urbano, espacio público, mujeres, seguridad, barrios.

Most cities have been planned and built based on a universal subject: a male, healthy, paid, and middle-aged worker. As a result, cities have become an environment that makes social inequalities visible as they hinder the daily lives of the most vulnerable groups. Among these groups are women. In this context, this research looks to present the results of a study that aimed at determining the influence of the quality of the urban environment on the perception of safety for women in two neighborhoods, with different quality of life indices, in the intermediate city of Cuenca, Ecuador. The case studies were the Rio Sol neighborhood, whose quality of life index is one of the highest in the city, and Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos, which, despite being only 500m from the previous one, has a medium-low quality of life index. Methodologically, 3 tools were applied: e-MAPS, to determine the urban quality of the two neighborhoods; an adaptation of the Urban Diagnosis with a Gender Perspective (DUG, in Spanish), to measure the safety perception of women; and non-participant observation. The results showed there are differences in the urban environment quality index between the two neighborhoods, but that these are not directly related to the perception of safety. Non-participant observation suggests that there are other factors that make up neighborhood life, that affect women’s perception of safety.

Keywords: Urban design, public space, women, safety, neighborhoods.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is analyzing the relationship between the quality of the urban environment and the perception of safety for women. For this, two neighborhoods of the intermediate city of Cuenca, in Ecuador, which record different quality of life indexes, were taken as case studies.

The issue arises in a context where it is has been seen that the city, and in particular its public space, is not neutral. That is to say, it has different implications depending on the gender of its citizens. The right to the city, understood as a right to urban life, to freedom, to the individualization in socialization, to the habitat, and to inhabit (Lefebvre, 1978), has been restricted to just one kind of subject: a healthy, salaried, middle-aged man. Within the factors that limit the appropriation of the public space by all male and female users, one that stands out most is the perception of safety. This is because, for women, there are specific fears, like the fear of sexual violence, the fear of being attacked, and the fear of road safety due to excessive traffic (Santiso, 2000).

Although the United Nations General Assembly approved the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1979, the rights of women were only included in the New Urban Agenda in 2016, which suggests that there is a lack of depth and knowledge on this issue. In recent years, approaches have been made that take on the concern for women and their relationship with the public space through urbanism from a gender perspective, understanding this as an urbanism that needs to act on all scales (Sánchez de Madariaga, Gregorio Hurtado & Novella Abril, 2016). As an example, UN Women has outlined the development of the "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces" program (2017), whereby 27 cities have collected updated data on violence and insecurity in cities, to create future action models, and to promote safer cities for girls and women (UN Women, 2017). However, these projects generally take place in large metropolis, so there is the need to look further into the subject in intermediate cities. Intermediate cities promote a "balanced sustainable regional development", and also more than half of the global urban population lives under this city model (United Nations [UN], 2016, p. 1). For this reason, they constitute ideal scenarios for research and proposals for public policies and improvement strategies.

In Latin America, "the gender equality agenda has been strengthened by converging the domestic agendas on each scale, in particular with social and feminist movements that demand equality and non-discrimination" (Allen, Cárdenas, Pereyra & Sagaris, 2019, p. 24). However, there is still much to do in the region, one that is characterized on having high levels of economic and social inequality. In Ecuador, for example, 65 out of every 100 women state they have been victims of violence in any of its forms in their life. Specifically in Cuenca, in 2019, 725 cases of sex-crimes were reported (Citizen Security Council, 2019). These numbers, although official, do not show the real numbers. Just as Tapia (2021) states, a large percentage of crimes are not reported.

This research project was made within this context, analyzing the relationship between the quality of the urban environment of two neighborhoods with different quality of life indexes in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, as well as the perception of safety for the women living there. The article starts by reviewing the specialized literature and providing an explanation of the methodology, through a description of the neighborhoods studied and the instruments used: a geo-spatial revision of the quality of the urban environment, an audit of the perception of safety for women, and a non-participant observation. Finally, a discussion based on data triangulation is presented, to explore the relationship between the quality of the urban public space, and the perception of safety for women in the analyzed neighborhoods.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent decades, concerted efforts have been made to study and analyze the urban quality of the public space, bearing in mind that this allows collective gathering, social interaction, and participation among citizens (Carrión, 2010), but that, despite being "reclaimed and occupied by the citizens is, above all, a space defined from power" (Egizabal, 2019, p- 229). In parallel, "urban quality" is understood as the wellbeing of people in their daily activities, based on the quality of the environment they live in (von Wirth, Grêt-Regamey & Stauffacher, 2015). Ewing and Clemente (2013) assert that the quality of the urban environment is defined by different subjective characteristics that affect the user's perception when using a specific space: capacity of image, human scale, transparency, safety, order, and complexity.

One of the variables that conditions the use of the public space the most is the perception of safety, with "a feeling of anxiety and danger on facing the possibility of being a victim of crime" (Bjornstrom & Ralston, 2014, p. 9). For Avendaño (2006), often fear is not based on "real events and data", but rather, on occasions, it is defined by the perception of an area. In this regard, several studies have been made that analyze the relationship of the perception of safety with the quality of the urban environment (Frank *et al*., 2010; Valenzuela, 2016). The study of Valenzuela (2016) suggests that the perception of safety does not solely depend on the built environment, but also on the urban dynamics (land uses, presence of people, among others).

Figure 1. Map of living conditions. Source: Osorio & Orellana (2014, p. 33).

Likewise, it has been shown that the perception of safety in public spaces is related to the gender of people (Rashid, Wahab & Rani, 2019; Ciocoletto & Col.lectiu Punt 6, 2017; Diaz, 1989). For women, using public spaces entails fear of sexual violence and of being attacked (Santiso, 2000), which forces them to always be vigilant; hence, this limits their use and enjoyment, and conditions their movements in terms of times and areas. Some authors have called this "fear spaces" for "those which women perceive as more hostile or where they are more prone to suffer aggression" (Egizabal, 2019, p. 220), whether these are defined as such because of objective or subjective reasons. According to the author, in the former it is easier to act because their characteristics are evident, but it is in the latter where the intervention becomes complicated. Generally, spaces with a diversity of users and a greater presence of people increase the perception of safety for women (Rashid *et al*., 2019; Ciocoletto & Col.lectiu Punt 6, 2017; Jacobs, 1973; Amat, Cardona, Goula & Saldaña, 2015).

Within Latin America, the studies made by Rainero (2009) in several cities find a vicious circle: the socioeconomic level of neighborhoods conditions the characteristics of the place where women live and, particularly, the streets they walk along. These become some of the determining factors for the "appropriation of the city by women" (Rainero, 2009, p. 169), and that the lower urban quality of the neighborhoods is related "almost directly to their greater perceptions of fear in them and, as a result, with lower ranges of use of the city" (p- 169). Falú (2014) asserts that violence is a core daily life problem to develop women's rights over the city.

III. METHODOLOGY

Case Studies

The study was carried out in two neighborhoods of the intermediate city of Cuenca, in Ecuador. The city is located to the south of the Ecuadorian Andes mountains, and has a population of approximately 600,000 inhabitants (including the rural and peri-urban areas). As an inclusion criterion, it was established that the chosen neighborhoods were located within the urban limits, as such, the Parish of Monay, on the banks of the Cuenca River, was chosen. When it comes to analyzing information about this parish, it was interesting to note the difference of the Living Conditions Index between the two neighborhoods: Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos and Río Sol. The former had an index of 0.73, and the latter, of 0.85 (Osorio & Orellana, 2014). These two neighborhoods were chosen as case studies for this reason

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(Figure 1). Both are located on the banks of the Cuenca River, a sector that is mainly formed by houses, but that is surrounded by different facilities that complement it.

Instruments

This research used different instruments to study the quality variables of the urban environment and the perception of safety for women. Data collection was made using a mixed methodology with an explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2013), and with a correlation and explanatory scope. The following instruments were used for this: a) e-MAPS to collate the quality of the urban environment; b) a survey to measure the perception of safety; and c) non-participant observation. The comparison of the quantitative results of the quality of the urban environment and the perception of safety for women was made using the application of Spearman's non-parametric correlation test. The articulation of the quantitative and qualitative results was made using methodological triangulation (Valencia & Mercedes, 2000).

e-MAPS

The quality of the urban environment in both neighborhoods was measured using an adaptation of the MAPS tool (Cain, Millstein & Geremia, 2013) in the city of Cuenca, namely the e-MAPS tool (Orellana, Quezada, Andino & Peralta, 2019. e-MAPS is a questionnaire comprising closed questions, that evaluates the quality of the urban environment considering pedestrians, by analyzing the following variables: route (land use; urban landscape, aesthetic); segment (highways and sidewalks); crossings (crossing signs and elements); and dead ends (ludic elements). The result of the analysis rates the quality of the urban environment in a range from 0 to 12, where 0 is the worst, and 12, the best. For this study, 51 segments of analysis were generated, each one with their respective questionnaires which rate the urban environment. The data collection was made during the first week of February, 2020, using the Kobo Toolbox tool (http://www.kobotoolbox.org), a free digital tool which can be accessed using mobile devices, where the results are exported to a ..csv file to display them in Qgis.

Safety Survey

To evaluate the perception of safety, an adaptation of the "Urban Diagnosis with Gender Perspective" Safety survey of Col.lectiu Punt 6 (Casanovas *et al*., 2014) was used, which was applied during the second week of February, 2020. This questionnaire analyzes spatial visibility, social visibility, information, and prohibited spaces using 14 questions asked to female residents and users of the sidewalks in both neighborhoods, aged between 18 and 60 (women responsible for their own mobility).

Each answer of the questionnaire is scored with 1 point, which allows getting to know the perception of safety for women in a range of 0 to 14, where 0 is the worst index of safety perception, and 14, the best. The study universe was 601 female inhabitants within the two neighborhoods (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, 2010), and a total of 61 questionnaires were applied as a sample.

The sample used in the study was by convenience, that is to say, the questionnaire was applied to "the cases available that could be accessed" (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010, p. 401). Some women were directly recruited on the neighborhood's streets, who were asked to take part in the study. Other women were recruited through the "snowball" process, by reference from people who lived in the neighborhood. The snowball sampling was turned to as people in the Rio Sol Neighborhood do not walk in the public space. The remaining questionnaires were sent to residents and female users of the public space in the two neighborhoods by e-mail, to complete the sample.

Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation, where the researcher is limited to taking notes of events without having a relationship with the subjects from the setting involved (Campos & Lule, 2012, p. 53) was done during the third and fourth week of February, 2020. Each neighborhood was visited to record important situations that characterized the space, using notes and photographs. The visits were made during two time periods: first, in those hours where there is a greater movement of people on needing to commute (06.30-08:00 and 12:30-14:00); and second, at those times where movement is reduced (10:00-11:30 and 16:00-17:30). It was seen that there are 4 factors that affected the use of the public space by women: the meeting places, the variety of land uses, the elements that allow socializing, and the empty lots and blind points.

III. RESULTS

Urban environment quality results

The scores from the application of the e-MAPS tool allowed obtaining an urban environment quality index of both neighborhoods of the case study (Figure 2). The results of each segment have a score of 0 to 12, respectively, where 0 is the worst, and 12, the best. A statistical comparison was made between the means using the Mann Whitney U non-parametric statistical test for two independent samples, from which it was seen that there are significant differences (p-value<0.01) between the means of Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos and those of the Rio Sol Neighborhood ($x1=0.71$ and $x2=4.42$, respectively).

Figure 2 shows that the segments of the Rio Sol Neighborhood, whose quality of life index is the highest, have a better urban environment quality rating than the segments of Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos. Another piece of information that stands out is that most of the segments that have a middling urban environment

Figure 2. Urban environment quality results. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

quality index in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos are those which restrict the entry of motorized vehicles. In the Rio Sol Neighborhood, the fact that stands out is that most of the segments which have a middling index are those that have green areas; and those with the best scores are those that have a safety buffer between the sidewalk and the street.

Female safety perception results

The results obtained using the adapted survey of Casanovas *et al.* (2014) allowed getting to know the perception of safety for women in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos and in the Rio Sol Neighborhood, using a single index. Figure 3 shows the female safety perception index of female residents or users of the two neighborhoods: each circle represents a geo-referenced survey, and their color indicates the perception of safety. The safety perception range is set from 0 to 14, where 0 is the worst safety perception, and 14, the best. From this, a comparison was made of the mean female safety perception of both neighborhoods, using Mann Whitney's U non-parametric statistical model for two independent samples. It was noted that there are significant differences (p-value<0.01) between the means of Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos and the Rio Sol Neighborhood (x1=10.02 and x2=7.73, respectively). The result that was obtained was that the female safety perception index in the public space of the Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos neighborhood (whose living quality index is lower), is higher than that of the Rio Sol neighborhood.

The existence of the dependence hypothesis (statistically significant, p-value<0.01) between each question of the safety perception survey was tested using the Chi-squared test. 2 interesting relationships were found from the Independence test. The first significant one arose in the questions "Are there dark or abandoned spaces in this block?" and "Are there areas in the block where people do not walk?". With this data, it can be concluded that the presence of dark or abandoned spaces generates rejection among the female users, and they prefer to not walk close to them. The second significant relationship occurred with the questions, "Are there abandoned, wild spaces, or unbuilt lots in the block?" and "Is there any space in the block where domineering groups, delinquents or gangs meet?". This finding suggests that, when there are abandoned spaces, these are used for domineering groups, delinquents, or gangs to meet.

Correlation between the variables

The comparison of the urban environment quality data of both neighborhoods with the female safety perception data in the public space revealed that there is actually a statistically significant correlation between the two variables (p-value<0.01; rho=-0.36). However, this correlation is negative and not very strong. According to Figure 4, the behavior of both neighborhoods follows the

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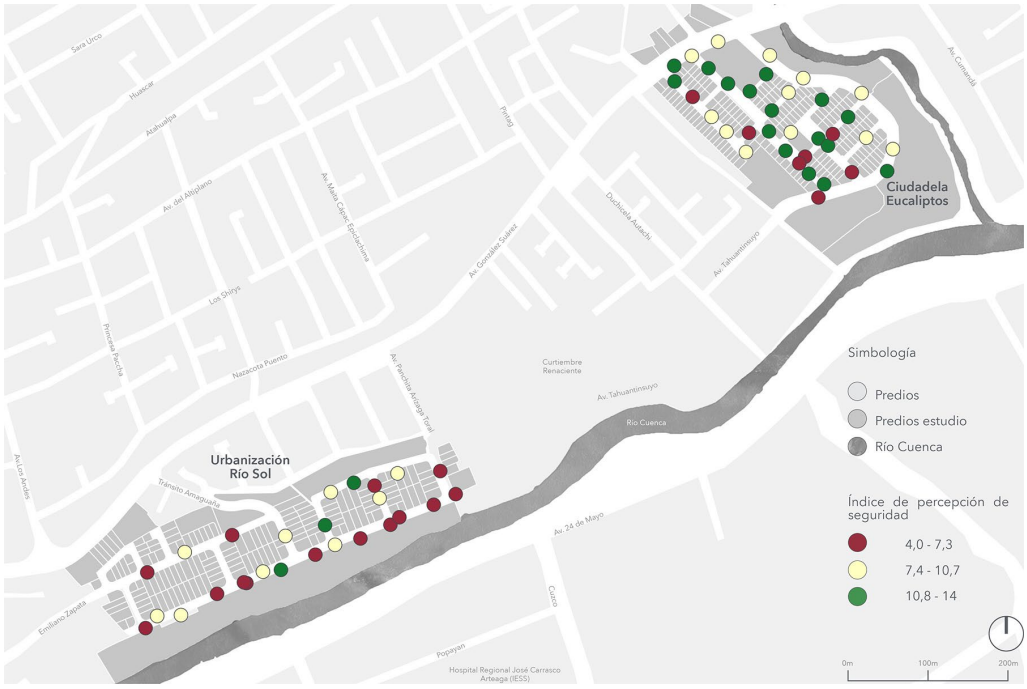

Figure 3. Safety perception results. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

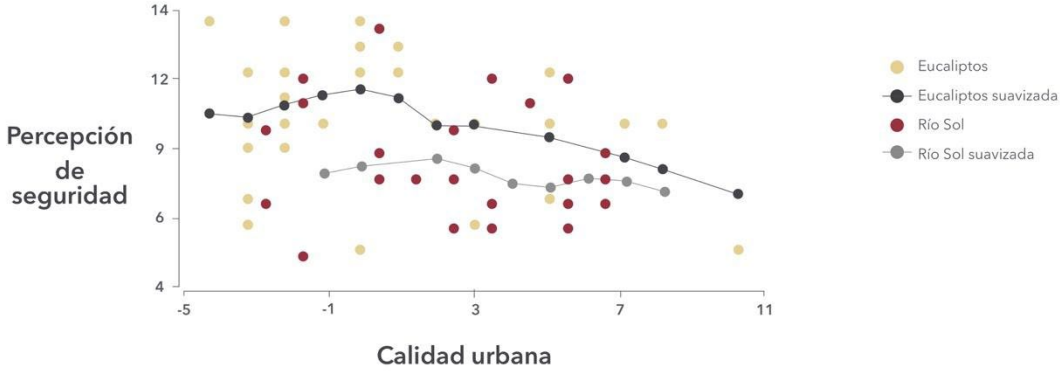

Figure 4. Scatter graph of the safety perception and urban environment quality of both neighborhoods. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

Figure 5. Meeting places map. Source. Preparation by the Authors.

same trend, although it is important to emphasize that Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos has a tendence curve above that of Rio Sol. This phenomenon indicates that the female safety perception in the public space of Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos is better than that in Rio Sol, despite the quality of the urban environment of the former having a better score than the latter.

Non-participant observation results

From the information collated during the non-participant observation, the existence of three factors that favor the use of the public space by women could be recognized in both neighborhoods, and one that, on the contrary, inhibits it.

The first factor is the presence of meeting places. As can be seen in Figure 5, there is a higher number of meeting places in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos (the neighborhood with the highest safety perception index). In Rio Sol, only one meeting place was registered, which is the path shared with the river bank.

The second factor that can affect it, is the variety of land uses. Figure 6 shows that there is a greater variety of land uses in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos: there is housing, small stores, health centers, educational centers, food points, among other shops; while in Rio Sol there is just one lot, which, apart from housing, sells food. This leads to the public space not having life, because there are no activities that invite people to circulate or to remain in the public space.

The third factor that has an influence on whether the public space of a neighborhood is used more than another one, by women, is the presence of physical elements like park benches, slopes, and playgrounds, that allow socializing. As can be seen in Figure 7, Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos has several of these facilities. An important feature of this neighborhood is its topography, as stairs and slopes have been built to connect the different levels of the area. The importance of these spaces is that, given their shape, they invite people to sit down, chat, rest, among other things. Rio Sol, on the contrary, does not have this type of elements. Despite there being several places for public use, their only purpose is to favor the landscape. This suggests that the green spaces of this neighborhood were planned to be seen from above, but not to generate activities onsite.

On the other hand, the presence of empty lots and blind points inhibit women from using the public space. Just as can be seen in Figure 8, the public space that is close to the banks of the rivers of both neighborhoods, largely comprises

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Figure 6. Land use map. Source: Preparation by the Authors

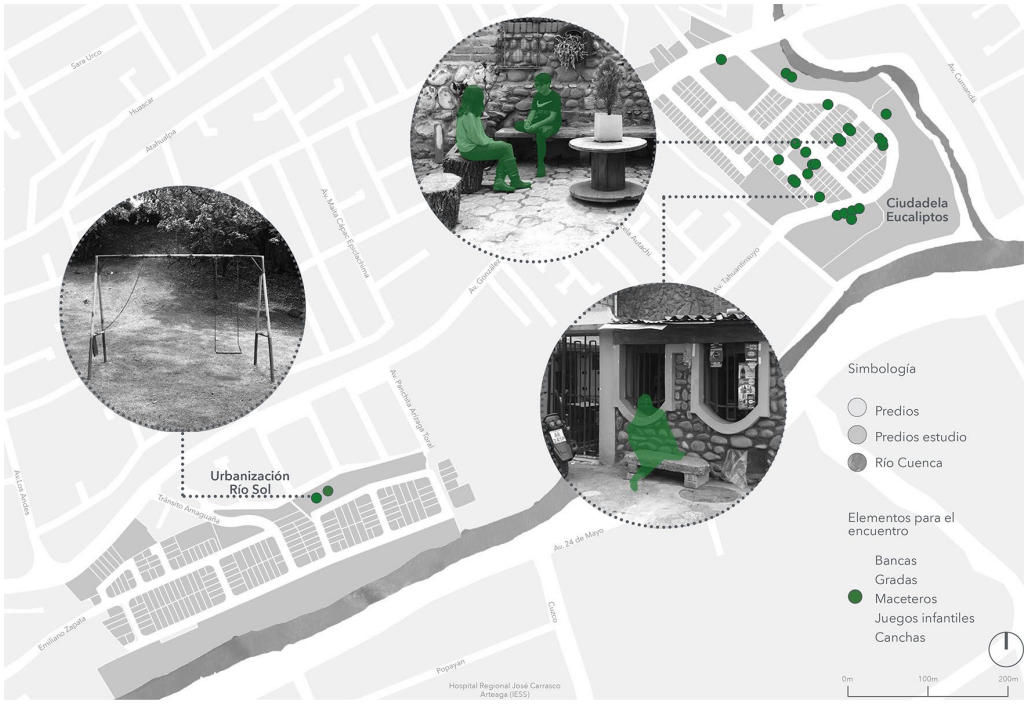

Figure 7. Map of elements for meeting. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

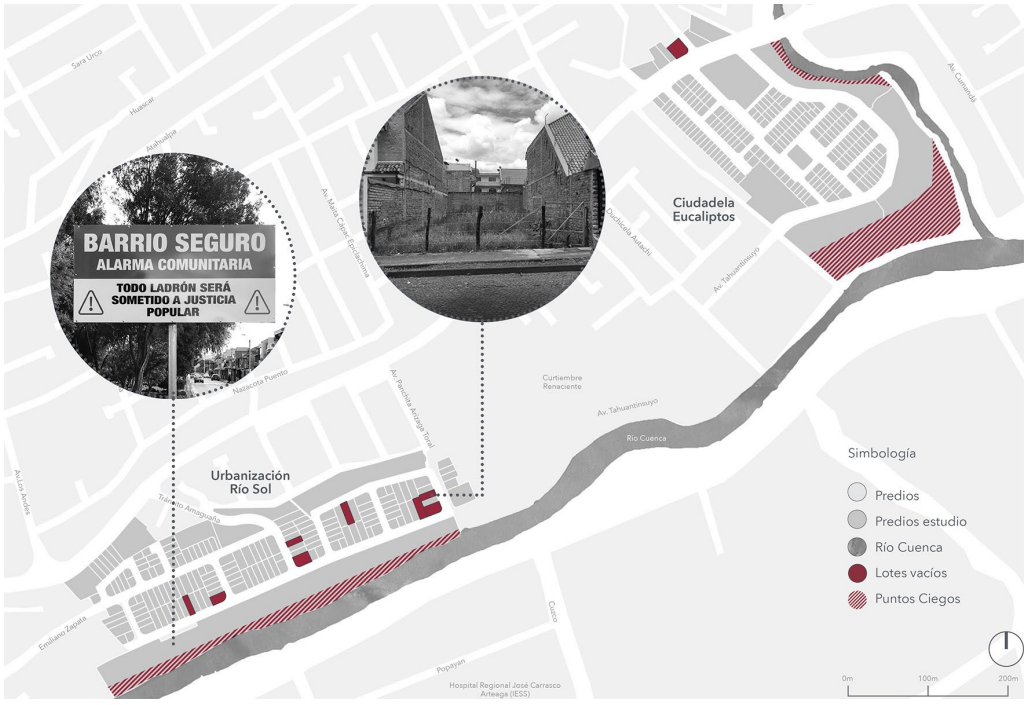

Figure 8. Map of empty lots and blind points. Source: Preparation by the Authors

blind points. Another aspect that can be seen is the presence of several empty lots in Rio Sol. These spaces mean that women will feel more insecure, as there are desolate sites where nobody goes.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results presented in the previous paragraphs allow reflecting about what the quality of the urban environment really implies. It is clear that this goes beyond the physical-spatial elements that can objectively be seen through tools like e-MAPS. Thus, it corroborates that stated by Ewing and Clemente (2013), when they state that the quality of the urban environment is defined by different subjective characteristics that affect user perception, and by Valenzuela (2016), who considers that the perception of safety depends both on the quality of the built environment, and the urban dynamics.

Thus, from the results obtained using the e-MAPS tool, it could be seen that the neighborhood which has a higher living quality index is Rio Sol, as it has a higher urban environment quality index (mean x=4.42) than Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos (mean x=0.71). Rio Sol has a higher urban environment quality index due to elements like vegetation, safety buffers, and signage.

However, Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos has a higher female safety perception index (mean x=10.02 compared to x=7.73 of Rio Sol), because the neighborhood has some features that improve the daily life of its residents and female users, such as: different land uses, spatial visibility, proximity to services and amenities, and meeting spaces. These results are in line with studies made previously by feminist groups that confirm that the perception of safety for women is directly related with the capacity to take over the space, and that, for this reason, the space must have visibility, clarity, alternative routes, a variety of land uses and activities, presence of different people, among other aspects (Casanovas *et al*., 2014). These also coincide with what Egizabal (2019) states: "changing the built environment of the "spaces of fear" would be just one step to avoid aggression and encourage women to move around freely" (p. 236-237), through which she emphasizes that intervening in the built environment is important, but it is not enough.

Just as the specialized literature states, one of the most relevant factors for making women feel safe when they are in the public space, is that there is a presence of people (Rashid *et al*. 2019). This is because the presence, short-stays, and circulation of people implies the presence of informal surveillance in the public space, which improves the perception of safety for citizens (Amat *et al*., 2015; Gehl, 2014). According to that revealed in this study, when there are several meeting places, with

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elements that invite people to sit down and stay in the space, and also a diversity of uses as in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos, women feel safer. In addition, the proximity to services and shops related to the houses are essential for women to carry out daily activities inclusively and effectively (Casanovas *et al*., 2014). Among the land uses, it is necessary to have a balance between residential use, third-party use, and leisure use, because this allows the neighbors to meet one another and to create neighborhood support networks. A clear example of this is found in Ciudadela Los Eucaliptos, where the neighborhood shops are key for the day-to-day life of the families that live there, because the ladies who work in these shops, known as the "vecis" or "neighbors", become the "eyes of the neighborhood".

Finally, as was mentioned before, statistical significance was obtained on cross checking the questions "Are there dark or abandoned spaces in this block?" and "Are there places in the block where people do not walk?", as well as the questions "Are they abandoned, wild spaces, or unbuilt lots in the block?" and "Is there any space in the blocks where the domineering groups, delinquents and gangs meet?". This finding leads to reflect about the importance of applying strategies to mitigate the existence of this type of spaces, as it coincides with what has been stated by other authors, like Filardo (2010), who says that a place can be considered as insecure when one group in particular uses a given space and takes it over, leading to the people who are not part of this group avoid using or even approaching it.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Although the academic reflection on the perception of space from an inclusive perspective is an emerging issue, there are several studies that have approached it. As an example, in Latin America, the "Safe Cities" program (UN Women, 2017) has made great efforts to address the issue by collating data on violence and insecurity in the public space. However, generally these projects are done in the large metropolis of each country, which is why the need has arisen to look further into this issue in intermediate cities, to promote a sustainable and balanced development at a regional level, as it is in these where policies and practices can have an impact, in shorter periods, in the improvement of the perception of safety for women.

This study has sought to contribute in this sense, on considering the case of two neighborhoods in the intermediate city of Cuenca, Ecuador. It is shown that, in the case studies, female safety perception has no direct relationship with the quality of the urban environment, measured objectively using tools such as e-MAPS, and that, on the contrary, it is crossed by other aspects, like those related to being able to socialize with neighbors.

This project has opened new research questions. One of these aims at looking at the river banks from the safety point of view, as throughout the survey collection process, some residents would elaborate their answer, stating that the river bank is a threat. Likewise, in terms of gender, there are some challenges left outstanding for academia, such as research and reflection on the perception of safety in the public space for the LGBTQI community, and also in girls under 18 (as this research did not address female minors).

Studies like this show, once again, that the city is not neutral, that the same conditions do not govern for men and for women, which is why expanding upon urbanism with a specific approach for women, today continues to be a valid subject.

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