

## Original Research

## The social, cultural, and historical complexities that shape and constrain (gendered) space in an SDP organisation in Colombia

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### ABSTRACT

Recent research on the role of 'safe space' within Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) shows that the social inclusion of young women in traditionally male sporting spaces may shift who can comfortably access and shape public spaces. Framing safe space as a social construction and a dynamic process, and drawing from six months of ethnographic research conducted in two volatile neighbourhoods with a Colombian SDP organisation, this paper will explore the social, cultural and historical complexities that shape and constrain safe space. It will argue that while the SDP organisation's ability to adapt to change and resign control makes it accessible to the local community, the positioning of both the organisation and participants simultaneously permits the continuation of gendered space. This data is then analysed through Spaaij and Schulenkorf's multi-dimensional interpretation of safe space. In conclusion, further research about the physical and psycho-social barriers that constrain females from participating in SDP programming is suggested.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) organisations have used sport as a method to recruit youth who are labelled as vulnerable or disadvantaged.<sup>1</sup> In addition to and sometimes in conjunction with sport, these programs provide educational curricula catered to the various issues faced by participants. Sport, Gender and Development (SGD) emerged from the SDP movement with Brady & Banu Khan's report exploring the

relationship between the SDP movement and girls' participation.<sup>2</sup> During this period, thoughts of improved gender relations related to girls' inclusion in sport entered the discourse.<sup>3-5</sup> These observations led Saavedra to question the extent female participation in gender-sensitive SDP programs 'has the power to upend what is seen/presented as 'normal' and [to] become a major force to social change beyond sport by challenging gender norms'.<sup>4</sup>

Top-down donors and SDP organisations were quick to note, or assume, progressive gender-related outcomes. For example, Read and Bingham, respectively representing Right to Play and UK Sport, point to anecdotal evidence of SDP contributing to the Millennium Development Goal of 'promoting gender equality and empowering women'.<sup>5</sup> But researchers have been cautionary. They propose further research that explores how circumstances and specific sports may result in positive gender-related outcomes, acknowledges sport's historical baggage as a colonial tool, and notes the North/South power dynamics that underpin SDPs placement within the neo-liberal world order.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Other concerns include how the 'girl' SDP participant is framed as either 'empowered' or a 'victim', with arguments that the SDP movement may draw heavily from Third Wave feminist and post-feminist critiques, resulting in a general and limited conceptualisation of gender and thus gender equality.<sup>9</sup>

The current SDP paradigm includes the 'girling of SDP', whereby there is an increased presence of female participants, specific SGD agenda's targeting girls, and

more research being conducted on the complexities of gender within sport and SDP as a global industry.<sup>10,11</sup> Providing a critical review of SDP literature, Chawansky exposes how girls within SDP fall into two categories as organisations either ‘allow’ girls to play in a mixed-gender environment, or ‘empower’ girls in a single-sex program.<sup>11</sup> She argues SDP takes a Western ontological perspective and consequently, the SDP movement is missing an opportunity to make concrete social change. Asking for a reimagining of gender relations within mixed-gender SDP programs, she suggests researchers and practitioners look beyond the Western hegemonic framing of gender as binary to consider the structural restrictions and realities of girls’ positions in SDP, particularly when their involvement is positioned within boys’ social privilege and a masculine-oriented SDP structure. Adding to this, Hayhurst et al. found female participants challenge gender norms in a self-defence SGD program in Uganda, but at the cost of experiencing emotional abuse.<sup>12</sup> As such, the cost attached to participants’ ‘increased self-esteem, confidence and self-defence skills’ that assisted them in challenging gender-based stereotypes, to begin with, is questioned.<sup>15</sup> Recently scholars have begun to encourage more creative research approaches, including feminist, intersectional and decolonial that question researchers’ ontological positioning and the broader power relations, which are the impetus for participants to need these programs to begin with.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>

The term safe space has been adopted and adapted throughout history to the point that academics argue it has lost meaning, is overused, or may undermine critical thinking.<sup>15</sup> The Roestone Collective explain the concept of safety varies by context and time, noting ‘the categories of safe and unsafe are socially produced and context dependent’.<sup>16</sup> The term space is also fluid; ‘It moves and changes, depending on how it is used, what is done with and to it, and how open it is to even further changes’.<sup>17</sup> In this research, space is understood as ‘an imaginary construction reliant on ritualized forms of control’, with control coming in multiple forms such as from parents, gangs, and the government.<sup>21</sup>

Central to this paper is framing safe space as a social construction and a dynamic process, or as Gotham articulates: ‘the idea that spatial boundaries, identities and meanings are negotiated, defined and produced through social interaction, social conflict and struggles between different groups’.<sup>18</sup> For purposes of this paper, the term safe space relations will incorporate several considerations: the notion of non-physical violence in a physical space; a metaphorical space for unabated emotional expression; and, the relational negotiations constantly changing due to

internal and external players and factors (e.g. groups, government legislation, common law). It is the third aspect, here recognised as the volatile nature of the communities studied in this research coupled with the positioning of participants, community members<sup>i</sup> and the organisation that fosters an environment where participants can be ‘safe’ while experiencing risk-taking.<sup>19</sup> Viewing the term as dynamic, constantly evolving, and relational allows us ‘to understand how the people who cultivate safe spaces recognise and negotiate sometimes deeply problematic differences’.<sup>21</sup>

Safe space is well established in educational studies and social work but is still under-researched within SDP. In 2005, Brady presented a significant analysis on the relationship between SDP and safe space, illustrating the realities of challenging the normative acceptance of gendered space in society.<sup>3</sup> Gendered space refers to girls and ‘women’s lesser access to certain spaces, and the association of space with gender stratification’.<sup>20</sup> Drawing on research conducted in Egypt and Kenya concerning young women’s participation in SDP programming, Brady argues it is the characteristics of the local culture that heavily influence how space is occupied and used rather than the physical space itself.<sup>3</sup> An argument also demonstrated through Hayhurst’s research in Uganda.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Brady notes that a young age girl’s physical mobility is limited due to cultural norms and security, and these restrictions increase with adolescence.<sup>2</sup>

Restrictions to space can be varied. For example, Spaaij and Schulenforf analyse safe space as multi-dimensional, including *physical, sociocultural, psychological/affective, experimental and political*.<sup>22</sup> These dimensions are also explored through the methodology of participatory mapping and personal geographies, where it is argued local voices are heard in the process of gaining knowledge on the physical and psychological relations within local space.<sup>23</sup> Sobotová et al. illustrate the ‘social geographic role of sport and physical activity and how they influence the use and perception of insecure or dangerous places’, concluding with an endorsement for sport as a pathway to improve local security, but noting that access can be problematic.<sup>34</sup>

Safe space is a critical issue for the SDP organisation under investigation because power and control in the neighbourhoods where it operates is continuously being negotiated by various actors such as local citizens, gangs, and the government. The positioning of the SDP organisation, as neither a strict insider nor outsider in the community, allows the organisation to play a unique role as it operates across class lines and in multiple neighbourhood

<sup>i</sup> A vulnerable community in this research is one that has experienced previous or on-going conflict (disaster), and is statistically rated below the world standard in literacy, birth rate, childhood mortality, and women’s rights, typical factors that often lead to cyclical poverty (for more on vulnerability, see, Birkmann J. Measuring vulnerability to promote disaster-resilient societies: Conceptual frameworks and definitions. Measuring vulnerability to natural hazards: Towards disaster resilient societies New Delhi, India: United Nations University Press: 2006.

zones while providing community members with opportunities to do the same. As such, it has become a rare instigator for safe space relations in the community.

The SDP organisation under investigation allows girls to access sport in a mixed-gender setting, but it does not address female ‘empowerment’ or gender equity. While conducting this research, it was evident through low female participation numbers and gendered staff roles that the organisation and public space was gendered. However, participants, community members and staff were confused as to why female participation numbers were significantly lower than males as the door was metaphorically ‘always open to everyone’ (Field notes, Chévere and Bacano). Drawing from six months of ethnographic research and building on the works of Brady, Sobotová et al., and Spaaij and Schlenker, this paper will explore the contextual complexities – social, cultural and historical – that shape and constrain space in an SDP organisation in Colombia.<sup>11</sup> To be clear, what I want to explore here is not the perception of ‘equal access’ to space, but rather how the local hegemonic culture – particularly violence – establishes and normalises gendered space, which in turn reinforces girls lack of participation.

This paper will begin by addressing the research location and methods. Next, the exogenous processes that affect the organisation’s agency, and the intimate relationship between safe space and gendered space will be discussed. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of the SDP organisation’s delivery will be analysed through Spaaij and Schlenker’s dimensions of safe space before suggestions for addressing gendered space and gender equity will be made.

### Location and SDP in Context

Colombia began 2017 as a post-conflict nation that has made great strides towards peace, but its citizens have endured the longest running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Since 1985, more than 5.8 million people or 10% of Colombians have registered with the national government as victims of conflict: an estimated 5.7 million people have been displaced with more than 2.6 million being women and more than one million children under 12 years of age.<sup>24</sup> The conflict was not only physically gruelling but psychologically testing as Colombians were further racially and economically segregated along class lines.<sup>25</sup> Although the Colombian government and the largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), signed a peace agreement in 2016 and the nation celebrated the lowest national homicide rate since 1974,<sup>26</sup>

the legacy of violence remains prevalent in the form of fear and stigmatisation.

Colombia’s history includes excessive inequality, resulting in social discrimination.<sup>38</sup> Elite families own vast quantities of land and the government class system, which is administered through residential property, reinforces segregation, thereby producing a hotbed for social stigmatisation and ‘othering’.<sup>27</sup> A product of colonialism, the dominant people in power are of Spanish descent with light skin.<sup>38, 28</sup> Whereas, the majority of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) identify their ethnicity as indigenous or Afro-Colombian<sup>29</sup> and occupy the two lowest socio-economic classes.<sup>30</sup> These details are noted for purposes of this paper because Colombia’s history of violence (which has reproduced a violent heteronormative masculinity as standard<sup>31</sup>) coupled with an organised class system, shapes social roles and the use of space in Colombia.<sup>38</sup> In other words, class, race, and gender are intersectional and significantly impact the production and reproduction of who can own, access, and shape space. Colombia’s history combined with localised violence affects how the SDP organisation discussed in this research operates.

With the recent exceptions of Cardenas<sup>32</sup> and Sobotová et al.,<sup>34</sup> the SDP movement in Colombia has received little attention in academic research even though the application of sport as a development and peace-building tool in Colombia began in the mid-1990s and is rapidly expanding. In response to the murder of professional soccer player Andrés Escobar, grassroots and multi-sectorial football for peace programs were implemented to combat football’s negative connotation and to use it as a tool for positive social change; a fundamental component of this movement was the inclusion of girls.<sup>33</sup> Although Colombians identify football as a national source of pride, customarily only men are encouraged to play.<sup>34</sup> Although girls are included within SDP, their participation remains ‘allowed’ within a mixed-gender context that prioritises boys.<sup>11</sup>

Six months of ethnographic research was conducted in two field offices of a leading SDP organisation identified by the pseudonym, VIDA.<sup>ii</sup> Operating in multiple locations throughout the nation, VIDA work with children starting at age six and encourage them to continue as trained ‘leaders’ or coaches into early adulthood. Sport is what connects the organisation to the SDP movement, and although it is a fundamental aspect of their methodology, their primary concern is psycho-social support; this includes supporting children in school, creating a safe environment, preventing drug use, and teaching conflict resolution and tolerance

<sup>ii</sup> Due to the volatile nature of the neighbourhoods, pseudonyms will be used to provide anonymity for the organisation and participants.

practices. Because they work in many diverse geographical settings, they do not uphold a single methodology but adjust their practices by location.

Two of VIDA's field offices are in the neighbourhoods of Chévere and Bacano. Citizens live in insecure, overcrowded houses and many work menial, unreported jobs. It is common for residents to have observed extreme violence, lost family members, and have limited social networks. Chronic stress, which leads to high levels of depression, is common.<sup>iii</sup> VIDA staff were empathetic and had developed strong relationships with the local community; as such, they were cognisant to the problems these citizens encounter.<sup>18</sup> Their presence in the community is on an insider/outsider spectrum as this consideration depends on who is asked. Participants and their families considered VIDA staff to be 'family', and most community members appreciated VIDA's efforts (field notes, Chévere and Bacano). But a few community members' responses were slightly colder including a man in Bacano who complained of VIDA's 'outsider methodology' (field notes, Bacano). Through observation, it was apparent that VIDA employees, although not considered wealthy, were from more stable social classes: most had university degrees; they did not live where they worked; they tended to have lighter skin than participants and be able-bodied. In the field offices, jobs were gendered with men occupying coaching roles and women in psycho-social support roles (field notes, Chévere and Bacano). Local volunteers (adults and youth leaders) worked closely with VIDA staff and in the field offices and fostered a horizontal power structure.<sup>18</sup> It should be explicitly noted that many community members were also not raised in the neighbourhoods where they currently reside, and the insider/outsider status as well as power dynamics within these neighbourhoods is complex and ever-changing.<sup>iv</sup>

When asked to explain everyday challenges in Chévere, Lorena, an employee, highlighted the complexity of gender roles, the normalcy of anti-social behaviour, and the different zones organised within the neighbourhood. She stated, 'Boys join together to steal. They are immersed in drugs, but the biggest problem is the gang mentality. Obviously, there are drugs, weapons, but crime in that area is more marked gangsterism...There are girls who are sexually exploited.' And in response to the same question in Bacano, a mother of two female participants, Valery, labelled her neighbourhood 'dangerous' and spoke of regular crime that results in her family spending most of their time indoors.

## METHOD

Experiencing local social pressures, such as those explained by Lorena and Valery, was critical in my attempt to understand participants' lived experiences, but working in these communities required adaptable research methods. An ethnographic approach permitted me the flexibility to explore the cultural phenomena of gender relations in relation to space and sport, and the capability to do this through the voices of local community members, especially the young female participant. By conducting interviews, and participant observation, I could be flexible in my daily routine, but also pay attention to local knowledge and processes.

Interviews were based on the life-history method. This approach encouraged open dialogue and storytelling and allowed me to subtly guide the interview, but gave the participant autonomy to respond at their discretion. Interlocutors were purposively selected based on two primary conditions: their involvement (or lack of involvement) with the SDP organisation, and the role they held in the community. For example, of the sixty (n=60) people interviewed, 48% were directly involved with the organisation (e.g., participant, previous participant, staff member), whereas 26% had indirect relations (e.g., shop keeper, local electrician), and 26% had little to no interaction (e.g., professional player, local social worker, grandparents at senior centre). The aim of this selection was to have a heterogeneous combination of interviewees. I looked for diversity in both age (interlocutors ranged from 18-81) and perceived role in the community, as varied perspectives (theoretically) would provide me with a better understanding of how social relations have changed (or not) over time. This strategy also prevented me from only hearing potential VIDA 'evangelists'.

Most interview participants could walk from their home to the field in less than 15 minutes, resulting in regular interaction (a few days per week) with the organisation. Even though there were more male participants in the program, to gain a broader perspective on the experiences of young women, more female SDP participants were interviewed than male (60%). I wanted interviewees to feel comfortable and for the conversation to focus on their story rather than a specific facet of their identity, so I did not explicitly ask them to identify their gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity or religious affiliation. However, these markers became evident through dialogue. Overall, 56% of all interlocutors identified as female. Most interlocutors were from mestizo (mixed) decent, but many, especially in Bacano were Afro-Colombian or Indigenous.

<sup>iii</sup> Source withheld for location anonymity.

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To gain a broader understanding of the SDP movement, women's sport, and macro-social relations, Colombians not associated with the organisation who lived outside the research neighbourhoods were also interviewed. These interlocutors were selected because of their role within women's sport, academia or the SDP industry. Interviews took place within the organisation's offices, on fields, in cafés, or in participants' homes. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Participant observation included travelling to the field location four days a week to play, coach and assist in the field offices. My level of active participation varied by what the office needed and my interview schedule. On some days, I strictly took notes (looking for gendered words and actions) as I observed interactions in the office, on the field and public transit; whereas on another occasion, I managed the office for a week while the staff attended a conference. During that time, I jotted notes randomly when I had a spare moment.

Participant observation allowed for ripe and constant reflection not only about my social positioning but about the interactions between participants, employees, and community members in various public and private spaces across time. My aim was social immersion, but the task of immersion is not simple as it depends on many factors that make up habitus, including the local context, researcher's character, and participant buy-in.<sup>35</sup> I could not pretend to be ignorant of Colombia's colonial past or its dark, sorted relations with the United States (my native country). Moreover, my middle-class neo-liberal academic experience influenced by Western feminism and my white skin colour are elements embedded in my psyche. Although I identify as cis-gendered and heterosexual, due to my 'outsider' status and vocal acceptance of homosexuality, many 'closeted' Colombians (inside and outside of VIDA) directly sought me out to discuss their experiences of being gay in Colombia. And because female athletes are assumed to be lesbians, upon recommendation from Colombians, I feminised myself according to *narco-beauty* standards with pink nails and mascara.

Undoubtedly my 'privileged' status as a white, Western academic impinged on my data. Following the security protocol required by my research institution and VIDA, I lived in wealthier (safer) neighbourhoods distanced from the research sites, could only access the communities during select hours (8am-4pm) four days a week, and had to be accompanied by local leaders while in public. Many leaders felt this protocol stigmatised them and the neighbourhood (Field notes, Bacano). I felt that this distance, literal and

metaphorical, isolated me as a researcher because I lived between social classes. I recognised these limitations in moments where potential interlocutors agreed to speak with me but refused after I had explained I needed their signed consent. And, when youth leaders rattled off the organisation's values that sounded rehearsed and contradicted observations.<sup>36,37</sup>

The leaders' escorts bolstered my research in many ways, however, as with them I momentarily became a legitimised, but superficial 'insider' as I had secure access to many areas of the neighbourhood. Because of regular interaction with leaders, we developed a comfortable rapport whereby we would discuss everyday 'mundane' situations in our lives. These conversations provided me with a greater understanding of life within the neighbourhood. Although my connection with leaders did 'superficially' legitimise my presence in local spaces, my connection to them – although unlikely – may have influenced interlocutors who were indirectly involved with VIDA. Participant observation coupled with regular interaction, allowed me to question and compare what I observed to what I heard in relaxed conversation and interviews, which was often vivid contradictions laced with double standards and implicit sexism.

Initially, all data was systematically analysed and compared based on (theoretically informed) themes, such as safe space, which were identified before collecting fieldwork. In addition, themes were identified inductively through a second analysis using NVivo 11 software, which assisted with thematic analyses and to identify patterns.<sup>38</sup> Full human ethics approval was obtained from my University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## RESULTS

### The Complexity of Safe Space Relations and Gendered Space

VIDA endeavours to cultivate safe space relations by fostering relationships and investing in local infrastructure,<sup>18</sup> but the reality of VIDA's social positioning is a state of continuous troubleshooting. VIDA operates in public spaces, but a lack of urban planning has resulted in minimum communal space for playing. Below I will demonstrate how young women are in a weak social positioning and at-risk of losing their choice to participate.

Recently, Chévere, the oldest of VIDA's programmes with more than 450 participants (40% female), received notice that in three months the government would commandeer the public field for an infrastructural project. Despite VIDA's connections and support in the community, their lack of agency threatened their continuation. An employee spoke about the impact of this change:

*Before we trained on a field where for [a number of] years VIDA made necessary adjustments to make it work. There was a mountain in front and sewage drained onto the field, so we flattened the earth to open ditches around the field...Over time VIDA did an excellent job in that space, so much that we gained recognition in the community because we recovered that space. That space was recovered for the community not only for VIDA. But in [year], the state intervened with a special government project...So we had to close the operation at that point and look for other places to continue. This year, the children with VIDA continue to have a positive reputation, but it's complex. We are starting the programme from zero in [different zones in the neighbourhood]. Today we can say that we have approximately 100 children of 450 that we had last year, we only have 100. (Staff member, Chévere, Julio)*

The original field, discussed by Julio, was located at the base of three adjacent hills. Steep stairs and roads led to houses stacked along the hills. This geographic layout permitted parents (mostly mothers) to observe their children from countless vantage points. In turn, parents could see that their children were secure.

However, the new field location does not have the built-in security structure of the original field. Parents can only observe their children from the sideline. Moreover, it is a twenty-minute walk from the original field up steep terrain. Once VIDA moved facilities, they retained only one-quarter of their participants. The number of female participants reduced from 180 to 20, meaning on average that at the new field, only 20% of participants were female (Field notes, Chévere). Although participant numbers drastically dropped for all children, the percentage of girls dropped by half. The situation quickly became gendered, a problem that appeared to be either unrecognised, trivialised or ignored by staff and community members. Concerned, Julio spoke about this change: 'We are really well structured and we were very strong, but with the series of changes, we are really falling short with the female population' (Staff member, Chévere, Julio). Another employee was less concerned:

*It is not our goal. I cannot tell you 'Oh, we're going to look for the method!' because now it is not on my mind to look*

*for more girls. In my head, I need to stabilise the population there and for children to know how to reach us, boys and girls. The idea after a while is to stabilise them at all points and then if I reflect and ask why are children not coming? But I have no focus on gender. (Staff member, Chévere, Lorena)*

Community members voiced confusion as to why the number of female participants reduced as a repercussion of the change. Female participants took the change in stride as 'normal', while most interlocutors avoided the obvious conversation regarding local power dynamics, a topic I indirectly and tentatively probed. For example, during a post-interview discussion when the tape recorder was off, a young man referred to the issue of gendered space and asked me, 'what do you know about the paramilitaries?' He proceeded to explain his lack of agency, the ever-shifting neighbourhood boundaries, and his opinion that a new field is in a dangerous territory (Field notes, Chévere). Unlike most interlocutors, a female leader cut straight to the point regarding local violence:

*Well, because the football pitch is really far. The girls are more in danger, because there are people, for example, the guerrilla, do you understand me? Sometimes they take the children, normally the children who are nine years old and they enlist them as soldiers. But with the girls its worse because they cannot defend themselves, so they abuse them. For this reason, the mothers are more careful with the girls than with the boys, because they are weaker and the boys, for example, if there is a problem they can run away as opposed to the girls who get scared and stay there. So because the mothers are scared that something bad is going to happen to their girls, they prefer to not allow that they go to the football field, because it is really far from their home. (Participant, Chévere, Lourdes)*

An international volunteer noted the girls who continued to play at the new field were accompanied by their brothers and often a dog (Field notes, Chévere). Lourdes confirmed this, 'Yes, if they come it is with their brothers, or they come with other boys, but never alone.'

In conjunction with gendered space, a social worker connected the young women's drop in participation to gendered roles and expectations, a statement corroborated by observations, but that many community members refuted by arguing that all people are equal, free to do as they choose, and that ultimately girls do not enjoy playing as much as boys (Field notes, Chévere):

*Well, the fact is that it's not handled like you say, above and below [referencing the location of the fields]; but here the girls are more dedicated to studying, [parents] are taking care of them a little more because there are so many risks that exist: deaths, violations and all the things that exist against women – So, the parents now are looking after their children more because of what's happened and more so for girls. So, the boys are a bit freer than the girls to go and play and everything and as you may see there are many dangers, but the parents see that it is more dangerous for the girls. (Social worker, Chévere, Yuli Andre)*

The majority of female participants interviewed discredited gender stereotypes that reproduced the idea that girls do not like sports as much as boys. But when asked why there are fewer girls, a Chévere participant, Cesi, then justified the numbers through this gender-based stereotype: 'There are not many girls that like to play football, while the majority of men like to play football. Because they feel more interested in it. Instead women are more interested in studying English and things like that.'

Cristina, who is a Colombian student volunteer at VIDA in Bacano believed girls' participation is phenomenal but discussed that she does not play sports because she is not interested and could not pinpoint why. From her perspective, there are many girls who want to play, but do not because of stigma; 'it has a big influence because there are always stigmas. For example, if you play football they ask you *why do you want to play a man's sport?* They see this sport as just for men and not for women'. Daniela, a female participant concurred,

*Yes, maybe there is lots of exclusion. The things that a woman does, maybe a man can't do and maybe this is what happened with football. Maybe they don't accept women playing football as much as men playing football, maybe because if you play football you are a man, you are a 'machorra' (butch) so you feel like the men can do more and women can do less. (Participant, Bacano, Daniela)*

Yuliza, a participant in Chévere, argued that things have changed in the last decade, but that it is parents who do not want their daughters to play. When I asked Yuliza how her life differs from girls who do not play, she highlighted girls who participate at VIDA have the freedom to move and enter more spaces. Referencing girls who do not play, she said,

*They do not leave the house. As soon as they finish school every day, they stay in their houses. Their fathers don't allow them to leave the house... When I was playing with my*

*neighbours [before entering VIDA] and the other girls saw me playing, they wanted to play, but their mothers-didn't let them. (Participant, Chévere, Yuliza)*

When discussing gender roles and participation numbers, Lourdes addressed how religion shapes gender roles, which may constrain girls from playing as well:

*For example, there are religious, some Christians, evangelicals. So, supposedly the rules do not allow that the girls to play football. They cannot play football, because the girls are meant to be for their homes. They must learn how to cook and how take care of their husbands and children. (Participant, Chévere, Lourdes)*

Through discussion and observation, it became clear that for girls to participate in sport, physical and psychological security are critical.

But the psychological aspect was more apparent in Bacano, where standards of feminine performativity were more restrictive. Although female and male participants and athletes accessed communal spaces, girls and women did so with hesitation:

*I see [girls] as players, but for people from other communities it is different because it is thought that playing sport is for men... and when that happens, it skews or limits the space for men. Women think [women] should not participate. (Social worker, Bacano, Martha Cecilia)*

Here, female participation looms at 10%, and as previously heard through the voices of Cristina and Daniela, access to space is about psychological regulation.

Although the numbers of female participants in Chévere were reduced with a field change and the numbers in Bacano continue to be dismally low, girls and young women's participation revealed a micro-shift in culture. Through everyday negotiation and interaction, female participants were challenging normative rituals that had previously rendered them invisible and excluded their presence in public spaces. This was supported by Lourdes who argued that despite lower numbers, there has been a shift in community members' collective mentality:

*The way that they have treated us changed when we start to play the championships. Before, the men just saw us as women, which meant we were not really good at sports. Nowadays, there are some husbands who go to watch their wives play soccer. They support the women, for example, they have brought water to the matches. We are now more*

*recognised. Now we are seen in a better light because lots of women have been successful at sports and have been winners...They have a different perception of us. (Participant, Chévere, Lourdes)*

The notion of social change in relation to gendered space was also heard in conversation with male participant Diego, who believed sport is one facet of this change:

*Yes, in the era of my grandparents, they tell me that the woman could not leave her house, if she did it was only to go to school and to go from school to home. But now it's changed. Women have a bit more freedom in where they can visit with friends and partake in recreation, they can enjoy spaces like shopping centres, they chat in the beauty salons and they are finding out that there are many women entrepreneurs and workers. (Participant, Bacano, Diego)*

Although VIDA and a handful of other SDP organisations work in marginalised communities, the presence of these groups has influenced meso- and macro-social relations. For example, in macro-terms, the directors from a few SDP organisations, including VIDA, have worked with the Colombian government on legislation to implement sport across the nation. And addressing meso-social relations, a young Colombian woman who is not in the programme and does not play sport commented on the importance of girls and young women's participation to her and how despite a lack in gender equity in sport, strides have been made across class lines:

*I know that the girls are doing something that socially or historically girls did not do as it was reserved for men, men are implicated, especially with public space, on the courts, in the neighbourhoods...Usually you see a woman in public space and her relationship with space is that it does not belong to her. And people then believe that 'I can do with you practically what I want, or tell you what I want', because the public space is not [hers]. I feel that [girls playing sport] is a re-appropriation of public space, and that is very cool. They are there and they are admired and observed from another point of view. So, it is not what is sought, but it is what happens. That is to say, they are only there doing something, but the spaces were not always there, or it was not organised to happen [for them] or certain things were given. (Sociology student, Bogota, Urcela)*

Urcela highlights the dynamic process of altering gendered space that is influenced by girls' participation in these programs. However, she alludes to a critical aspect that is void to VIDA: the cultivation of young women's agency in

terms of overcoming normative psychological repression and physical participation in public space. In other words, we must question how much control the organisation has in terms of socially including girls? How much control do the young female participants have in terms of their access to participation? Finally, what can the organisation offer young women growing up in volatile spaces if their social inclusion is not an explicit goal?

## DISCUSSION

'Social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism', revealing that 'space is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification'.<sup>39</sup> The ethnographic research with VIDA demonstrates truth to Massey's statement. What became clear when analysing safe space relations with VIDA is there is a close relationship between safe space and gendered space. This research draws many parallels with Brady's<sup>3</sup> findings concerning girls' participation in sport and gendered public space, and Spaaij and Schulenkorf's<sup>33</sup> work on the multiple dimensions of safe space. To explore the contextual complexities – social, cultural and historical – that shape and constrain space in an SDP organisation in Colombia, the findings will be discussed in relation to the five dimensions of safe space: *physical, sociocultural, psychological/affective, experimental, and political*.

The *physical* dimension addresses the importance of physical infrastructure, such as the field. Although Brady<sup>3</sup> argues that the physical space is less restrictive than cultural elements, when applying Spaaij and Schulenkorf's<sup>33</sup> idea of *physical* dimension to this research, the extent that structure influences behaviour is far-reaching as the lines between physical space and psychological space become blurred. Concomitantly, as noted in Brady's research, cultural elements are critical. In Bacano and Chévere, girls' access is regulated and thus their freedom and autonomy minimised. The security of the field alone does not explicitly determine their social inclusion. Paramount is their psychological comfort combined with their physical mobility and access to that space, in conjunction with other complex factors. Applying Brady's reasoning, when girls are restricted, public space becomes 'defacto' men's space; moreover, boys are encouraged to explore their freedoms, whereas girls are socialised to accept restraint and subordination.<sup>3</sup> The *physical* dimension also considers what games are played, taking into consideration their cultural appropriateness, and the extent by which they are gendered. In Colombia and at VIDA, football is the most popular sport. However, football (and all contact sports in Colombia) is gendered and not welcoming for girls. As

argued by Spaaij and Schulenkorf,<sup>33</sup> the activities offered should be culturally suitable, but not to the extent of exclusion of any group.

The second element, the *sociocultural* dimension, refers to participants feeling socially accepted and comfortable despite individual differences. There are two pertinent elements to this dimension: the stigmatisation of female footballers and the importance of role models. First, female footballers are pejoratively labelled as ‘butch’ or ‘lesbian’, markers that contradict the idealised ‘delicate’ and ‘heterosexual’ Colombian woman. The female leaders at VIDA openly condemned and ignored these derogatory labels, but they are a minority. Interlocutors (inside and outside VIDA) believed girls want to play but are forbidden by their parents for both security and gender-based reasons. Second, but relational, is the aspect of female role models. Although VIDA employs men and women, roles are gendered with women predominantly in care-taking positions and men in coaching positions. The upcoming female leaders are providing the first generation of female role models in sport in these neighbourhoods, which is promising. However, having female staff members dress for and participate in sport, regardless of athletic ability, would encourage girls to overcome psychological barriers learned in socialisation.<sup>40</sup> In discussion, Urcela noted the first obstacle for girls is the psychological hurdle of challenging normative gendered behaviour: ‘The first challenge is to overcome that barrier of “I cannot do it”, because it is not something that “women do” - that mental obstacle’ (Sociology student, Bogota, Urcela). Urcela’s argument was verified at Bacano where female participation was minimal. However, evidence revealed that the psychological aspect was not as threatening in Chévere where interlocutors stated they now see girls’ participation as ‘normal’ and ‘no big deal’, which they noted was different to ten years ago and is a different perspective to outside the VIDA ‘bubble’ (Field notes, Chévere). In other words, a ‘multiplier effect’ and a contribution to the wider community is occurring in Chévere, however slight.

VIDA’s strength is their ability to create what Spaaij and Schulenkorf<sup>33</sup> label the *psychological/affective* dimension, meaning protection from psychological or emotional harm (e.g. trust, purpose, identity). Participation in VIDA provides a unique outlet where girls and boys can take risks and perform in alternative ways that contradict strict gender norms without severe repercussions. Moreover, the communal bond through participation between female participants, as well as female and male participants, allows for a new practise of communication and a reframing of what young women can accomplish (Field notes, Bacano

and Chévere). This is intentionally facilitated through VIDA’s emphasis on psycho-social support through the hiring of social workers and psychologists and their activities. The psychological dimension was also evident in the behaviour (e.g. polite, responsible) of youth participating in the program versus those who did not (Field notes, Bacano and Chévere).

The fourth dimension, *experimental*, refers to secure risk-taking. VIDA works closely with the local community, and there is little separation between the two. The organisation is not exempt from local challenges, and their daily operations include risk-taking. Additionally, opportunities for participants to play on external competitive teams, to travel to conferences and games, and to continue their education, permits participants opportunities to take risks through new experiences (crossing class, race, and gendered lines) and to experience settings with different socio-cultural norms. As noted above, VIDA provides a rare space for boys and girls to interact, and thus a space where this interaction becomes normal and as the boys noted, communication improved (Field notes, Bacano and Chévere).

The final dimension is *political*, which relates to equal representation and power-sharing among the population. It is here that this research adds insight into the complexities of safe space in SDP practice. Due to Colombia’s political history, the class system, and the diversity of citizens, the *political* dimension is rife with complications, with lines between insider and outsider (family, gang, community) on a continuum. In many ways, VIDA has capitalised on its complicated positioning because even though many of its staff live outside the neighbourhood, they make the organisation accessible and comfortable. Albeit VIDA, like community members, are constantly troubleshooting. The organisation’s position and influence on safe space relations raises questions: to what extent does VIDA’s positioning allow them to be a local change maker? To what extent do safe space relations allow young people to gain a sense of control (i.e. agency), particularly the young women in this context? And thus, what role does sport *actually* play in these girls’ lives?

## CONCLUSION

This research revealed that although ‘the door is always open’ for female VIDA participants, the door is not the problem, but rather, the literal and metaphorical path to the door. The use of space, and in particular, how boys and men are socialised to dominate sporting spaces has become an implicit and explicit ritualised form of control in Chévere

and Bacano. This physically preserves space for boys and men, and psychologically restricts girls from participating. In this research, staff and participants alike touted that 'everyone is equal', but did not acknowledge the psycho-social barriers that shape and constrain the reality of 'equality'. Proverbially treating all participants as 'equal' – in other words, institutionally applying a word to the extent that it loses meaning – minimised female participants' gender-based restrictions.

Actions such as participatory mapping,<sup>34</sup> organising meeting places for girls to walk in groups,<sup>3</sup> and assembling girls together regularly (formally or informally) to discuss their opinions and concerns, are short-term ways to potentially improve female participants access to VIDA and contextually similar SDP organisations. Drawing from this research, SDP organisations, policy makers and researchers are encouraged to consider how female participants may not be supported to play sport due to various sociocultural contextual elements that look and feel 'normal'. Further research concerning the normalisation of the physical and psycho-social constraints of gendered spaces on female participation in SDP programming and examples of ways to successfully combat inequality through locally-determined, context appropriate ideas, is needed.

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