



Psychosocial needs of relatives of missing persons: Experiences and testimonies of women leaders of Mexican collectives

Necesidades psicosociales de familiares de personas desaparecidas: experiencias y testimonios de lideresas de colectivos mexicanos

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Abstract

Introduction: The objective of this research is to identify, describe, and systematize the psychosocial needs of relatives of individuals who are victims of forced disappearance or disappearance by private actors, from the perspective of seven women leaders of collectives located in four states of the Mexican Republic

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with high levels of violence (State of Mexico, Guerrero, Jalisco, and Veracruz). Method: A qualitative study with a cross-sectional, exploratory, and descriptive design was conducted using in-depth interviews. Results: The study highlights the urgency of strengthening comprehensive and multidisciplinary approaches that address the psychosocial dimensions of victims' needs. At the same time, it underscores the importance of ensuring the safety and protection of family members throughout the search processes, as well as dignified and respectful treatment by institutions. Finally, it emphasizes the relevance of community participation and empathy in the regeneration of the social fabric and the construction of peace. Conclusions: The findings of this study may contribute to the improvement of public policies and the development of more effective programs that are sensitive to the needs of relatives of missing persons in Mexico, thereby supporting their recovery and overall well-being.

Keywords

Psychosocial needs; Forced disappearance; Indirect victims; Collectives; Leadership; Psychosocial accompaniment; Psychosocial care.

Resumen

Introducción: el objetivo de la presente investigación es identificar, describir y sistematizar las necesidades psicosociales de familiares de personas víctimas de desaparición forzada o por particulares, desde la perspectiva de siete líderes de colectivos ubicados en cuatro estados de la república mexicana con altos índices de violencia (Estado de México, Guerrero, Jalisco y Veracruz). Método: se realizó un estudio cualitativo con diseño transversal, exploratorio y descriptivo, mediante entrevistas en profundidad. Resultados: el estudio destaca la urgencia de fortalecer enfoques integrales y multidisciplinarios que aborden las dimensiones psicosociales de las necesidades de las víctimas. Al mismo tiempo, subraya la importancia de garantizar la seguridad y protección de los familiares en los procesos de búsqueda, así como el trato digno y respetuoso por parte de las instituciones. Finalmente, resalta la relevancia de la participación comunitaria y la empatía en la regeneración del tejido social y la construcción de paz. Conclusiones: los hallazgos de este estudio pueden coadyuvar al mejoramiento de políticas públicas y programas más efectivos y sensibles a las necesidades de los familiares de personas desaparecidas en México, contribuyendo a su recuperación y bienestar integral.

Palabras clave

Necesidades psicosociales; Desaparición forzada; Víctimas indirectas; Colectivos; Liderazgos; Acompañamiento psicosocial; Atención psicosocial.

Introduction

With the so-called *Dirty War* in Mexico¹, the emergence and consolidation of organizations and collectives composed of relatives of missing persons became increasingly evident (Albarrán, April 24, 1995). The Committee in Defense of Political Prisoners, the Persecuted, the Disappeared, and Exiles for Political Reasons—which later became known as the *Eureka Committee*, led by social activist Rosario Ibarra de Piedra—was the most representative organization in terms of political activism and human rights advocacy in Mexico during those decades (Ramírez, March 17, 1997). However, with the so-called “war on drugs” in 2006, numerous collectives and organizations emerged en masse in response to the State’s ineffectiveness in addressing the problem of missing persons (Villarreal, 2014).

Members of these organizations and collectives began to make the problem of disappearances—whether forced or perpetrated by private actors—visible through various actions and strategies. Villarreal (2014) classified the main activities of these organizations into five broad categories: (1) registration and documentation of disappearance cases, (2) public denunciation, (3) dialogue with authorities, (4) promotion of legal frameworks, and (5) network-building.

In this regard, Villarreal (2014) aptly notes that:

[Collectives] have filed complaints with public prosecutors’ offices, carried out their own investigations, and verified that preliminary investigations fail to progress. In addition to these individual efforts, family members have chosen to demonstrate in public squares, where they have encountered others in the same situation. They have gradually formed groups and created organizations of varying degrees of stability, with regular meetings, planned activities, media presence, and some have even decided to formalize themselves as civil associations. (p. 112)

Through the direct and systematic contact they established on a daily basis with their members, Mexican collectives—which gradually increased in number and presence throughout the country—began to develop strong bonds and mutual support networks, forming systems of accompaniment and consolation both within and beyond the organizations themselves. According to the *Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico* (*Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México*, n.d.), there are more than sixty collectives nationwide, most of which emerged in the context of the so-called “war on drugs.”

¹ The Dirty War in Mexico encompasses the period from 1960 to 2000 and was characterized by violent, excessive, brutal, and criminal coercion exercised by the Mexican State against broad sectors of the population, with the aim of silencing organized political groups. During this period, various political and social events occurred, manifested through protests, guerrilla movements, strikes, or rallies. Specifically, within this context, disappearances were forced in nature and were used as tools to silence, oppress, and intimidate social groups or left-wing political opposition of that era.

The role of women leaders within these organizations has been, and continues to be, of paramount importance, particularly due to their dual condition: on the one hand, as direct relatives of a disappeared person (most often a son or daughter), and on the other, as leaders who exercise organizational roles and become key cohesive elements in the organization and self-organization of emerging social movements dedicated to the search for missing persons.

Throughout their own socio-historical trajectory, these collectives have faced common challenges. One of them—perhaps the most pressing—has been identifying, addressing, and meeting the numerous “needs” they experience on a daily basis, whether at the individual, family, organizational, or socio-community level. However, despite their enormous relevance, we argue that these psychosocial needs, taken as a whole, have not been sufficiently explored, articulated, grouped, or classified (and even less so from the perspective of the victims themselves).

In this regard, it is of great importance to reflect on the voices and perspectives of a significant group of Mexican women leaders, who have arguably borne the greatest informational burden—both experiential and documentary—regarding the issue of disappearances and all that they entail. Moreover, in their role as leaders and guides of the movement, they are the ones who have established direct, close, personal, and daily contact with each and every member of their organizations and collectives. This provides them with a broad and comprehensive view of the problems, psychosocial needs, difficulties, and distress faced by the relatives of missing persons who belong to their collectives.

Psychosocial Needs

From a general perspective, “needs” can be defined as “emotional, social, structural, and cultural variables that are essential for a person’s growth and development” (Saunders, 2022, p. 1). However, the specific needs of victims in contexts of violence or social conflict tend to have more precise and delimited nuances than those broadly identified by Saunders.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2015), the needs of individuals living in contexts of violence have particular characteristics of their own, and identifying them represents the first link in any process of psychosocial intervention and accompaniment for victims. A context of violence may include numerous populations, such as victims of traumatic experiences or individuals who have faced certain adversities—humanitarian crises, mass migrations, social conflicts, wars, among others.

Furthermore, these needs often have a “psychosocial” character. The WHO (2015) defines them as “those that are felt and expressed by the persons [victims] themselves and constitute problem areas in which they would like to receive help” (p. 41). These needs are considered psychosocial because they are linked to, or even determined by, social factors. Understanding the psychosocial approach as an integrative perspective that addresses the complexity of human relationships within their historical and structural context (Martín-Baró, 1990; Ibáñez, 1994), this theoretical framework allows us to understand that human phenomena cannot be reduced to the dichotomy between the individual and the social. Rather, they “transcend the union of concepts and relationships” (Trujillo-Urrego & Palacios-Moreno, 2020, p. 45). In other words, the psychosocial is not merely a way of studying individuals within their environment, but also a critical tool for deconstructing the structures that shape social reality. This makes it possible to analyze how individuals position themselves within their context, not only as recipients, but as agents with an active role in social construction and transformation.

To date, psychosocial needs have been addressed in various populations affected by violence, including families of migrants (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2014), victims of violent crime (Boccellari et al., 2007), victims of intimate partner violence (Dufort, 2015), victims of child trafficking (The International Academic Forum, 2014), younger siblings of homicide victims (Freeman et al., 1996), victims of armed violence (Patton et al., 2019), migrant children affected by war (Stewart, 2012), victims of torture or severe violence (Luci & Di Rado, 2020), and refugees (Evangelidou et al., 2018), among other populations.

Although in several Latin American countries—such as Argentina, Chile, and Colombia—multiple studies have been conducted on relatives of missing persons, most of these focus primarily on psychological consequences, emotional impact, and psychosocial interventions experienced by these individuals (Romero & Cuellar, 2022; Hernández-Brussolo et al., 2022; Camacho, 2024). However, few studies specifically address the psychosocial needs of these relatives (Beristain, 2012; ICRC, 2016).

Beristain (2012) points out that the impacts generated by violence are individual, familial, and collective, and that these impacts must be explored when addressing psychosocial needs. Consequently, “some of the needs of victims and affected communities have a strong psychosocial component” (Beristain, 2012, p. 44). Among these are the so-called “basic psychosocial needs”: (1) safety and protection, (2) identification and recognition of the experience, (3) the need for information, (4) reconstruction actions, (5) participation in decision-making, (6) the right to dignified treatment, and (7) attention to emotional impact (Beristain, 2012).

For its part, the ICRC (2016) identified and described—specifically in a qualitative study conducted in Colombia—seven needs among relatives of missing persons, listed as follows: (1) knowing what happened to their loved ones and that they are searched for; (2) the return of human remains in order to carry out funerary rites; (3) means of subsistence, including employment, education, adequate housing, and financial support; (4) protection and security; (5) psychological support and psychosocial accompaniment; (6) dignified treatment; and (7) dignifying the memory of their loved ones.

Although the positions proposed by Beristain (2012) and the ICRC (2016) are similar, we consider that it is still possible to distinguish certain specific features in cases involving missing persons with regard to psychosocial needs, as compared to those of other victims of humanitarian crises (for example, victims of torture or persons displaced by war). In the Mexican context, academic studies addressing the characterization or typology of the psychosocial needs of relatives of missing persons are scarce—and even more so from the perspective of women leaders of collectives—making a focused and specific study on this issue essential.

Some research conducted in Mexico has focused on clinical and legal aspects without directly addressing the psychosocial needs of this group; many others have centered on psychosocial impacts and only indirectly allude to such needs (Sánchez, 2016; Antillón et al., 2017; Sánchez et al., 2018; Salazar et al., 2022). While these contributions are highly relevant for generating information, knowledge, recommendations, and for documenting these problems, the issue of psychosocial needs in Mexico has been treated in a partially oblique manner, despite being a fundamental topic for designing and implementing—among other actions—more effective intervention and accompaniment strategies for relatives of missing persons.

Based on the foregoing, we propose the following research questions: 1) What are the main psychosocial needs of relatives of individuals who are victims of forced disappearance or disappearance by private actors, from the perspective and point of view of seven women leaders of Mexican collectives from the states of Guerrero, Jalisco, Veracruz, and the State of Mexico? 2) What are the main psychosocial needs of the collectives themselves?

The voices of the women leaders in this study are crucial, as they articulate, condense, and synthesize the experiences and perspectives of seven collectives. The four states of the Mexican Republic in which these leaders operate have a high number of disappearances. According to the National Registry of Missing and Unlocated Persons, a total of 39,101 missing persons had been recorded in these four states as of July 2024, representing 37.5% of the national total (Secretariat of the Interior [SEGOB], 2024). In Mexico, more than one hundred thousand missing persons have been officially registered from 1952 to the present (SEGOB, 2024).

In addition, it is important to note that the distinction between direct and indirect victims used in this text has primarily a technical and legal implication, aimed at delineating responsibilities and the effects of the crime. Nevertheless, this distinction does not, in any way, seek to minimize the pain experienced or to diminish the right to reparation, justice, and truth, since both groups are recognized as victims and are equally relevant from a human rights perspective.

Methodology

This research is grounded in a qualitative methodology (Flick, 2004; Vasilachis, 2006) with a flexible, phenomenological, descriptive, and cross-sectional design (Mendizábal, 2006). As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative methodology positions the researcher as an in situ observer of the world, tasked with collecting information, interpreting it, and presenting it in written form through various strategies. One of its distinguishing features is that its descriptive and reflective results—produced at a specific moment in history—allow for an understanding of the problem from the perspective of the individuals interviewed themselves.

The present study specifically aligns with the phenomenological referential framework. As Hernández-Sampieri et al. (2014) point out, “phenomenological designs explore, describe, and understand people’s experiences with respect to a phenomenon” (p. 469). Their analysis is based on how reality is perceived through the experiences of these social actors, which aids in understanding a specific situation or problem—in this case, the identification of the main psychosocial needs of victims and collectives.

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached. As Taylor and Bogdan (1987) state, qualitative interviews are characterized by their flexibility and non-standardized nature and are used to acquire new knowledge. This type of interview is implemented in order to delve more deeply into specific topics and thus obtain more comprehensive responses regarding a particular phenomenon (Gáinza, 2006). The main advantage of in-depth interviews, compared to other data collection techniques, is their ability to obtain more precise and focused

information from the perspective of the social actors directly involved (Bautista, 2011). For their implementation, an interview guide containing the central themes was used; these themes were previously designed by the researchers in this study.

Sampling and Participants

A non-probabilistic convenience and typical-case sampling strategy was employed in this study, aimed at including key individuals relevant to the research rather than forming a large sample or generalizing the results (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). As Sandoval (1996) notes, this type of sampling is characterized by obtaining the best possible information within a limited timeframe, while adapting to the particular conditions of the interviewees. Likewise, this sampling approach is used when the objective is richness, depth, and quality of information rather than standardization (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

In this context, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven women leaders of collectives composed of relatives of missing persons, who regularly work in four states of the Mexican Republic (State of Mexico, Guerrero, Jalisco, and Veracruz). These regions have a high number of disappearances (37.5% of the national total, as noted above) (SEGOB, 2024). Collectively, the seven collectives comprise approximately 960 members, all of whom have at least one missing family member.

The selection of dates for conducting the interviews was based on the availability of time of the women leaders. Accordingly, the interviews were carried out at different points in time, respecting the particular circumstances of the participants: the first set of interviews was conducted in late 2020, the second throughout 2021, and a final interview was completed in early 2022.

Procedure

Contact with the women leaders was established through two primary channels: (1) the civil society organization I(dh)eas, dedicated to strategic litigation on serious human rights violations and headquartered in Mexico City (CDMX), and (2) direct engagement with several collectives affiliated with the *Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico*. The organization was responsible for contacting and scheduling the participants, and the interviews were conducted at its facilities—except for those interviews carried out outside I(dh)eas. Interview sessions ranged from three to

four hours in duration. They concluded once no new categories emerged and the information collected began to recur consistently, indicating that informational saturation (not necessarily theoretical saturation) had been reached.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the women leaders. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the objectives of the meeting and the confidentiality protocols. Emphasis was placed on their right to interrupt or terminate the interview at any time and on their freedom to decline to answer any question or topic without consequence.

All names and surnames, as well as the names of the collectives, were altered. The names presented here bear no relation to the real identities of the interviewees or the collectives they represent.

Data Analysis

To identify and systematize the results, a coding and categorization strategy was employed. This strategy involves identifying themes, concepts, or ideas relevant to the research within one or more segments of the texts (Flick, 2004; Gibbs, 2012). The use of coding makes it possible to generate categories or subcategories and to distinguish units of analysis (Chernobilsky, 2000).

During the analysis of the interviews, two procedures characteristic of grounded theory were applied: open coding and axial coding. Open coding seeks to segment data into general codes or labels, from which concepts and subsequently conceptual categories emerge. Axial coding, in turn, relates open codes to one another, generating more precise and abstract emergent codes that respond to the research questions (Mendizábal, 2006; Flick, 2004; Gibbs, 2012). The software ATLAS.ti, version 9, was used for data analysis and coding.

Ethical Considerations

The objectives of the research were explained to the interviewees, and they were provided with an informed consent form guaranteeing absolute confidentiality. Although the participants expressed no objection to having their real names published—with the exception of one—in this study it was decided to preserve the anonymity of all participants in order to protect their personal integrity.

In the event that the women leaders required psycho-emotional support during the interviews, the research team had appropriate professional training in stabilization techniques. Some of the stabilization exercises were drawn from the *Manual on Mental Health and Gender-Based Violence* by Health and Human Rights Info (2016). These exercises constitute methods for managing anxiety and stress triggered by intense emotions or memories.

Grounding was another stabilization technique considered for use if necessary. This strategy seeks to restore emotional control by anchoring individuals in the present moment and reality. For the interviews, mental, physical, and comforting grounding techniques developed by UN Women (2012) were taken into account. None of the women leaders exhibited symptoms or episodes of crisis; therefore, it was not necessary to employ these techniques.

Results

Based on the testimonies of the women leaders, eight types of psychosocial needs were identified and systematized. Taken together, these needs are articulated across different levels or dimensions: family, socio-community, institutional, and social. They range from the pursuit of justice, psychosocial care, and multidisciplinary counseling to operational aspects inherent to the functioning of the collectives, with a close interconnection established among all of them.

Below, the eight emergent categories are described, based on the narratives of the women leaders themselves. All categories focus on the psychosocial needs of relatives of missing persons and of the collectives that represent them (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Psychosocial Needs of Relatives of Missing Persons and of the Collectives*

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| 1. Need to search for and find missing persons (with measures that ensure protection and safety for relatives) |
| 2. Need for psychosocial care, financial support, and multidisciplinary counseling for victims |
| 3. Need for fair treatment by institutions (without causing further harm) |
| 4. Need to restructure family dynamics and roles |
| 5. Need for empathy and for the reconstruction of the social fabric |
| 6. Need for truth and justice |
| 7. Need to acquire resources, supplies, and services for the functioning of the collectives |
| 8. Need to strengthen intra- and inter-collective cohesion |

Note: This table groups the psychosocial needs of relatives of missing persons and of the seven collectives to which they belong, from the perspective of the women leaders themselves. These needs may vary depending on the circumstances and the specific context of each collective.

Need to Search for and Find Missing Persons (with measures that ensure protection and safety for relatives)

The most important thing is to find my mother; work and money do not matter. What I need right now is to find her [...] I am not afraid of dying—the only thing that would hurt me would be not having found my mother. Nothing else frightens me. If they want to do something to me, they will do it. (C. Hernández, personal communication, October 10, 2020)

As Carmen indicates in the previous paragraph, relatives face numerous needs related to the disappearance of their loved ones; however, the most important of all is finding them alive. For this reason, they mobilize tirelessly to obtain information and locate their family member as soon as possible, since—as one of the women leaders notes—“time is relentless with us. Every day that passes is one less day to be able to find them.”

Questions such as “what happened,” “why,” and “how” are raised daily by family members; thus, the search for answers becomes an unrelenting struggle against the uncertainty, pain, and torment in which they live. Aware that they may die without ever obtaining answers, locating their loved ones becomes a race against time. Despite the adversities they face, love and the desire to find them drive families to continue the search.

Search activities carried out in high-risk areas frequently threaten the personal integrity and well-being of family members; nevertheless, for some of the interviewees, “the search is the heart of the collectives.” As a result, they are willing to confront dangerous situations, not only in the hope of finding their own relatives, but also of locating other missing persons.

For this reason, the women leaders affirm that it is essential for the State to provide protection and security measures both for those who conduct the searches and for their families, as this would allow them to continue search efforts without setbacks and without overexposing their physical integrity and mental health. According to Leonor, for example, authorities fail to respond adequately to the threats and dangers to which they are exposed:

The government has to act; it has to provide me with security—the security I need—because if I detain these people, what is going to happen to me? They are going to kill me, and not only me, but my family ... And that is what the government has denied me: security measures. (L. García, personal communication, July 20, 2021)

Consistent with their testimonies, the women leaders and members of the collectives have devoted themselves “body and soul” to the search for and location of their missing loved ones, even at the expense of their physical health or any other need. In their own words, this process represents an “act of love” toward their loved ones, despite being arduous and extremely risky work. Searching for and finding missing relatives thus constitutes the fundamental and primary need of all collectives.

Need for Psychosocial Care, Financial Support, and Multidisciplinary Counseling for Victims

According to the testimonies of the women leaders, the need for care and counseling for victims requires the articulation of different disciplinary areas—particularly legal, psychosocial, medical, and economic-labor fields.

On the one hand, family members face difficulties due to a lack of knowledge about the laws and rights of direct and indirect victims of disappearance in Mexico, since—especially at the outset—they do not know how, where, or to whom to turn in order to locate their missing relatives. Consequently, access to information and the provision of legal counseling and accompaniment throughout the processes of reporting, searching for, and locating their loved ones are frequent and priority needs identified by the women leaders and the collectives.

On the other hand, psychological care and psychosocial accompaniment are also essential. This entails access to specialized psychological support services, individual and/or group therapy, and psychosocial accompaniment provided by multidisciplinary professionals. Just as it is essential to address the psycho-emotional effects of disappearance, it is equally important to attend to the physical consequences of prolonged stress and anguish. For this reason, medical care represents an urgent need for relatives of missing persons. As Claudia notes:

I think health and the search are tied to economic issues. We should at least have decent medical services, but we do not. And added to those three elements... which are interconnected—without money you cannot have adequate nutrition; without health you cannot carry out an effective search, and you cannot endure or continue the struggle. (C. Trejo, personal communication, November 6, 2020)

Moreover, due to the ongoing and permanent nature of the search for missing persons, family members often face employment-related difficulties. According to Carmen, it is difficult to maintain a full-time job without neglecting search efforts:

When the disappearance happened, I was fired. They give you about a week of tolerance; your world collapses because you ask yourself: when am I going to work, and when am I going to go to the prosecutor's office to demand my rights? I missed a few days [at work], and they told me they were not interested in what had happened to me, that they had hired me to do a job—and they fired me. (C. Hernández, personal communication, October 10, 2020)

This illustrates the importance of having labor protection mechanisms in place, such as leave policies, flexible schedules, or employment support for indirect victims.

The multiple resources devoted to search efforts, combined with employment-related difficulties, make economic needs increasingly evident over time, leading family members to face additional adverse situations. The women leaders note that ensuring financial stability through programs, educational scholarships, and economic support would help alleviate the economic burden faced by indirect victims during their search processes.

Need for Fair Treatment by Institutions (without causing further harm)

Throughout the process of searching for missing persons, women leaders of the collectives and their peers encounter various challenges and obstacles. To ensure effective investigations, obtain answers, and achieve justice, family members require guarantees of due process and the fulfillment of institutional obligations.

Accordingly, they emphasize the need for institutions to treat victims with respect, sensitivity, empathy, and professional ethics. This includes—among other actions—providing clear and up-to-date information regarding the status of investigations. Likewise, the women leaders underscore the importance of laws and institutional obligations being applied equitably to all victims, regardless of whether they belong to a collective, their level of education, or their socioeconomic status.

The interviewees agree that it is crucial for public officials responsible for investigations to receive adequate training so that they can carry out their work in a timely manner and in accordance with established protocols and procedures. In this way, revictimization and the emotional impacts derived from improper practices could be reduced. Aurora illustrates this as follows:

We told the prosecutor that there was a proposal to provide them with a workshop on notification and the delivery of bodies, because sometimes they call me and say, “the body of so-and-so tested positive, so you should call the person,” but that is not my responsibility—it is the responsibility of the public prosecutor’s agent, and it should not be done over the phone. When they speak with the family, they must have all the documentation and a multidisciplinary team that explains everything to the family. (A. Gutiérrez, personal communication, October 20, 2020)

For the women leaders, it is essential that the State assume its responsibility in implementing preventive actions against serious human rights violations. According to them, promoting such strategies is an urgent task that benefits society as a whole, since—as Adriana points out—they would prevent the pain they have endured and the distress involved in confronting an institutional process of this nature.

Need to Restructure Family Dynamics and Roles

The disappearance of a person entails changes in all areas of life for their relatives. In addition to meeting economic and search-related needs, families must adapt to absence and assume new family responsibilities. According to the activists, these changes can affect communication and family relationships. For this reason, it becomes necessary to restructure the family system in order to initiate a process of adaptation to a new reality, modifying family dynamics and functioning as a unit. This involves everything from implementing new obligations and roles to adjusting family composition in response to the losses caused by the disappearance.

In this regard, it is common for the family nucleus to undergo significant changes, especially when there are disagreements about search strategies, which can lead to distancing and conflict. The women leaders recognize the value of fostering communication, family organization, and joint decision-making. This need seeks to create spaces for dialogue—particularly with younger family members—so that they can express their emotions, dissatisfaction, concerns, and needs in a respectful, assertive, and nonviolent manner. Claudia, for example, emphasizes the importance of “open and constructive communication” when recounting the experience of one of her peers, who became the primary caregiver for her granddaughter following the disappearance of her son:

My colleague did not know how to tell her granddaughter that her father had disappeared, so she found it easier to say that he had gone to work in the United States. But on the girl's birthday, she said to her: "Tell my dad I don't want anything. I won't drink much milk anymore or eat very much, but I want my dad to be here." My colleague decided to explain what had happened using little dolls ... the girl cried, hugged her, and said, "Mommy, when I grow up, I'm going to help you look for my dad." Now the girl goes to marches and sees life very differently. (C. Trejo, personal communication, November 6, 2020)

Establishing agreements, as well as assigning new roles, activities, and family norms, is essential. Meeting these needs promotes mutual understanding and emotional support, allowing some family members to continue actively participating in search efforts for their loved ones. As Claudia explains: "I promised to bring their sister back, as long as they do not interfere with my search; that is, without distressing me, because that could become a problem for me and cause me to stop searching."

Need for Empathy and the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric

Words of encouragement are our breathing and our oxygen. What we need most is encouragement—those things that push us to keep fighting every day. Our struggle is guaranteed because our children are involved, but when we receive that support, it goes far beyond material help—far beyond—and for all of us, that is a tremendous source of encouragement. (B. Fernández, personal communication, April 5, 2021)

As Beatriz expresses, demonstrations of empathy, solidarity, and social engagement with the movement and the struggle for the disappeared in Mexico have a significant and positive impact on the women leaders and their peers. The more people join the struggle, they affirm, the greater the likelihood of being heard and of generating pressure to ensure guarantees of non-repetition. Undoubtedly, participation and support from individuals outside the movement contribute to greater visibility, help demystify enforced disappearance, facilitate the creation of new support networks, and provide access to additional resources for the collectives and their members.

According to the women leaders, another fundamental factor in addressing disappearances in Mexico—without prejudice or misinformation—is media coverage, which must be responsible when reporting on these issues, given its influence on public opinion and its impact on how disappearances and victims are perceived. In addition to fostering social and institutional understanding and awareness, it is essential to recognize the activism carried out by family members and to guarantee dignified, violence-free treatment in the media. Such recognition, they argue, contributes to dignifying the search efforts they undertake.

Need for Truth and Justice

For the women leaders and their families, knowing the truth represents a means of achieving justice, as it provides clarity and understanding of what occurred—an essential element in accountability, guarantees of non-repetition, and the vindication of victims. Truth constitutes a crucial component in attaining genuine justice and an important step toward restructuring the life plans of relatives of missing persons.

In cases where their loved ones are located, indirect victims need the State to guarantee and administer justice efficiently. The lack of response and inaction on the part of authorities imposes an additional burden on the women leaders and their peers. For this reason, the interviewees agree that the justice process should remain under the responsibility of the State. Adriana recounts this as follows:

We are united by a shared purpose, because we want to know the truth—we want to find them. There are people who have already found their relatives, but they continue seeking justice ... that the authorities do what corresponds to them, that the justice process continues; we are really just there to oversee it. (A. López, personal communication, January 8, 2022)

For the women leaders, guarantees of non-repetition and the vindication of missing persons constitute a form of comprehensive reparation for harm, as they acknowledge and address the complexity of the suffering, experiences, and human rights violations endured by both direct and indirect victims. For family members, this implies honoring their loved ones and fostering the historical memory of disappearances in Mexico. For Aurora, oblivion represents one of the greatest battles they face:

We are not protagonists; we are simply the voices of those who are absent, who are disappeared. Ask for whatever you want for your family members—you are the voice, you convey it. You have to make them visible, because if we do not, they are forgotten ... Unfortunately, we Mexicans do not have much memory, and we constantly have to organize marches and invite people. (A. Gutiérrez, personal communication, October 20, 2020)

Need to Acquire Resources, Supplies, and Services for the Functioning of the Collectives

The women leaders emphasize needs intrinsic to the collectives, particularly those related to material supplies, professional personnel, self-care workshops, and specialized training courses. Having adequate resources and services creates opportunities to locate clandestine graves, optimizes internal organization within the collectives, and increases the likelihood of successful search efforts.

At times—according to the women leaders—field searches are postponed due to a lack of tools, specialized equipment, adequate transportation, and professional personnel, which delays their objectives. For example, Adriana recounts the following: “If we had a vehicle, we would not have suspended the search activity—we would have been able to carry it out. We also lack office equipment: sound systems, laptops, photographic or video equipment to document activities” (A. López, personal communication, January 8, 2022).

Relatives of missing persons are keenly aware of the need for ongoing training, especially when conducting field searches, as they must be careful not to damage evidence that could obstruct the identification of bodies. Consequently, they require continuing education courses led by professionals from various fields, such as law, human rights, and forensic anthropology. Likewise, self-care workshops would help strengthen capacities and networks among collective members, foster skill development, and provide tools for personal care and emotional regulation.

Need to Strengthen Intra- and Inter-Collective Cohesion

Within the collectives, we are all different—we all work differently—but we have also been neglectful of ourselves. Sometimes egos take over, and that harms us greatly. I feel that this does not help. I am committed to building. (C. Trejo, personal communication, November 6, 2020)

The quotation above highlights the need for greater communication and improved organizational processes among collectives engaged in advocacy and the search for missing persons in Mexico, as this provides an opportunity to work collaboratively toward a shared objective: locating their loved ones. In this regard, Itzel underscores the importance of teamwork: “Time is relentless—we have to change strategies, because if we continue working separately, we will not move forward. I have realized that the government is quite happy seeing us divided. We must not lose sight of our objective” (I. Castillo, personal communication, September 5, 2021).

Furthermore, strengthening collaboration among collectives facilitates the sharing of experiences, the exchange of strategies for engaging with authorities, and the expansion of knowledge and methods that have proven useful during field searches. Carrying out joint activities with different collectives represents a challenge not only for the women leaders, but also for members, since each collective operates and thinks differently, and opinions may vary depending on lived experiences.

In this context, Aurora expresses the urgent need to establish strong and efficient internal *communication before promoting collaboration among collectives*: “First, internal problems must be resolved, and then we must recognize the problems that arise from this recollectivization... because otherwise, you do not focus on conflict resolution, which is what will allow you to strengthen the movement” (A. Gutiérrez, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

For the women leaders, strengthening internal cohesion within collectives is a fundamental factor in promoting and sustaining solidarity-based, empathetic, collaborative, and effective work. Encouraging group activities is essential for creating spaces for dialogue, fostering environments of trust, and ensuring the active participation of most members. Moreover, having opportunities to engage in recreational activities together promotes bonding and fraternity among collectives and, above all, helps build a space of mutual care:

We had just gone to Veracruz [port city], and I managed to request a bus that was donated to me ... we had the whole morning to run, de-stress, cry, laugh... Seeing them laugh filled me with emotion—it was very beautiful. This May 10th [Mother’s Day in Mexico], I changed the dynamic: there was the march, the gallery, and at the end some dancing and raffles, because I said, “It is okay for them—after being exhausted from marching and chanting slogans—to arrive, sit down, eat, have something to drink, and smile.” (C. Trejo, personal communication, November 6, 2020)

Discussion

This study focused on the psychosocial needs of relatives of missing persons, analyzed through the experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives of women leaders of Mexican collectives. The main findings underscore the complexity of these needs, which span three dimensions: individual, family, and socio-community. Identifying these dimensions reveals how the lack of adequate attention perpetuates the pain, anguish, and uncertainty experienced by family members, highlighting the crucial collaboration required among the family, socio-community, and institutional spheres in order to comprehensively address these needs.

The Need to Search for and Find

The primary need identified in this study—and in nearly all empirical literature on the subject—is the need to search for and find missing persons (with protection and security measures for family members). This need—fully consistent with the ICRC report in Colombia (2016)—indicates that knowing what happened to loved ones is essential to mitigating the uncertainty and emotional distress that victims experience on a daily basis. Locating missing persons would allow families to

resume mourning processes—suspended due to the prolonged absence of information regarding their whereabouts—and would contribute to reparation and to the care of relatives' physical and mental health.

According to Guerrero (2014), locating missing persons, whether alive or deceased, provides the possibility of emotional closure and marks the beginning of a recovery process. The identification of human remains—in cases where individuals are found deceased—would facilitate the performance of rituals in accordance with the victims' cultural or religious beliefs, thereby supporting the grieving process, which constitutes a fundamental right for family members (Beristain, 2012). Furthermore, finding loved ones would entail a reconstruction of life projects and the resignification of lived experiences.

On the other hand, exposure to risk during search processes underscores the need to integrate adequate security measures and protocols. As Benyakar (2006) notes, violence and insecurity affect the physical and psychological integrity of family members, deteriorating their cognitive capacities and performance across different areas of life. Although such conditions may lead to social isolation and the fragmentation of social ties, they also involve a transition from an individual and private experience to a collective, political, and public phenomenon. During this process, women leaders reconstruct their personal and social identities through resilience expressed in collective action. In other words, they transform pain into a sense of purpose that responds to both emotional and social needs (International Catalan Institute for Peace, 2024).

Psychosocial Care, Financial Support, Multidisciplinary Counseling, and Fair Institutional Treatment

The subcategories of “psychosocial care, financial support, and multidisciplinary counseling for victims” and “fair treatment by institutions without causing further harm” are crucial to ensuring effective search practices for missing persons and to mitigating psychological and physical harm among indirect victims. Multidisciplinary care promotes recovery and well-being by providing emotional and social support, which are fundamental in reducing the psychological impacts derived from disappearance (Beristain, 2012).

According to the interviewees, a multidisciplinary approach—including community clinical psychology and psychosocial accompaniment—is indispensable. As Villa et al. (2016) point out, narrating and sharing experiences in group and therapeutic contexts generates positive effects for individuals who have experienced violence. Mexico's General Victims Law (2013)—Title Two on Victims' Rights, Chapter I, Article 7—establishes the right to receive various forms of support, including legal and psychological counseling and protective measures:

Victims have the right to request and receive timely, prompt, equitable, free, and effective assistance, care, and attention from specialized personnel addressing the harm suffered since the commission of the victimizing act ... as well as protection by the State, including physical and psychological well-being and environmental security, with respect for the victim's dignity and privacy. (p. 8)

On the other hand, in order to access financial support, victims must register in the National Registry of Victims and submit their application to the Executive Commission; however, this does not guarantee access to the Fund for Aid, Assistance, and Comprehensive Reparation. This constitutes a major obstacle for families and collectives seeking to continue their search activities. According to the United Nations (UN) (2023), receiving financial support is essential to meeting families' primary needs and, above all, to strengthening the capacities of their social movement.

In this regard, financial support for victims is particularly critical for those who are unable to access formal employment with social security, a situation that increases their vulnerability by depriving them of basic resources and social opportunities (Salazar et al., 2022). Labor and economic uncertainty compels family members to engage in informal self-employment, resulting in violations of their economic, social, and cultural rights, as documented by the Mexican Institute for Human Rights and Democracy (2020).

Indeed, the UN (2019) emphasizes that institutions must adhere to the principle of human dignity in the search for missing persons in order to guarantee fair treatment without causing further harm. Empathetic, respectful, and professional treatment of victims fosters trust in institutions and promotes collaborative work, preventing feelings of institutional abandonment that often deter victims from approaching authorities to file complaints (Antillón et al., 2017). In this sense, administrative negligence, malpractice, and institutional violence against relatives of missing persons not only generate rejection of institutions, but also foster revictimization, which frequently intensifies and/or prolongs the impacts of the victimizing event. This, in turn, produces negative effects on perceptions of the effectiveness of professionals and specialized institutions (Kreuter, 2006).

Accordingly, training based on a do no harm approach, as proposed by Bolívar et al. (2017), is essential to maximizing the effectiveness of support measures and preventing revictimization. This aligns with the need to contextualize victim care within sociocultural specificities and the historical nature of disappearances in Mexico, based on the premise that the State must minimize, as far as possible, negative impacts on victims. Consequently, insufficient resources allocated to victim care and accompaniment, along with the poor practices of public officials, represent significant obstacles for the collectives.

Restructuring Family Dynamics and Roles

The restructuring of family dynamics and roles constitutes another critical need identified in this study. Indeed, the absence of a loved one alters communication patterns and the fulfillment of roles within the family group, affecting its functioning and the emotional health of its members.

As noted by Delfín et al. (2021), assertive communication and the appropriate fulfillment of family roles contribute to the proper functioning of family systems; conversely, disruptions in these areas can generate negative effects on physical and emotional health, as well as alterations in interpersonal relationships and individual behavior. Modifications in family dynamics resulting from the absence of a loved one may also lead to conflict and distancing among family members, particularly when the reassignment of roles occurs abruptly and without adequate communication, thereby affecting family balance and relationships (Valdés et al., 2018). This often occurs, for example, when the disappeared person is the father or mother who served as the primary provider. In such cases, another family member must assume—at least temporarily—that specific and operational role associated with parenthood in one of its multiple functions.

Moreover, ambiguous loss—a defining characteristic of disappearances—exacerbates family impacts due to the lack of closure regarding the fate of the loved one, thereby prolonging the anguish and uncertainty experienced by those who grieve (Boss, 2001). In cases of death, farewell rituals contribute to processes of resignification and facilitate the transition toward family restructuring (Payás Puigarnau, 2010). However, in situations of disappearance, the loss remains ambiguous because there is insufficient information or evidence to confirm death; consequently, the impacts of absence are intensified (Boss, 2001). As Boss (2001) explains, there is physical absence and emotional presence. According to the testimonies of the women leaders interviewed, uncertainty regarding the condition of their loved ones prolongs family members' distress, preventing closure of the painful event and generating what is known as frozen grief.

For this reason, adequate role reorganization becomes particularly relevant because, as Boss (2001) argues, it facilitates understanding, mutual support, and the assimilation of a new reality. It also promotes the social sharing of experiences, concerns, and emotions, enabling families to collectively confront the impacts of absence. In short, relatives of missing persons require practical and therapeutic tools to manage and reassign new family roles that arise abruptly as a result of disappearance.

Empathy, Reconstruction of the Social Fabric, and the Need for Truth and Justice

The women leaders also emphasize that empathy and the reconstruction of the social fabric are indispensable for peacebuilding and community formation. Stein (2005, cited in Monjaraz, 2019) highlights the distinction between building community and forming a society, underscoring the importance of citizen participation and its capacity for empathy: “Building community necessarily implies recognizing the other, and within society [...] recognizing them as other” (p. 88). This distinction is clearly situated within citizen participation, as it not only recognizes indirect victims—the other—but also acknowledges their perceptions and lived experiences within a social context oriented toward the construction of the common good.

In this regard, recognizing and validating the traumatic experiences of indirect victims contributes to the regeneration of the social fabric and the transformation of the political environment. Societal support and empathy are fundamental for influencing strategies against human rights violations and for transforming the country’s social and political context. Such support reduces feelings of exclusion and social stigma toward victims, improves mental health, and mitigates the negative effects of stress (Beristain, 1999).

Likewise, community participation and state action are key to achieving truth and justice, reparation for harm, and the dignification of victims. Antillón (2013) argues that reconstructing the social fabric entails the right to truth, recognition of impacts at the family and community levels, and the application of sanctions to those responsible. Dignifying and preserving the memory of victims strengthens the construction of historical narratives from the perspective of those who have suffered violence, inhibits the normalization and mimicry of violence, and provides favorable conditions for achieving justice (Bartolomé, 2011).

Furthermore, as Flores-Morales et al. (2018) point out, justice does not solely involve legal conditions; rather, it also encompasses emotional, collective, and systemic dimensions. As such, justice can become a process that either dignifies or invalidates victims, depending on its outcome.

In sum, the pursuit of justice by collectives of relatives of missing persons must be addressed by the State through a human rights– and gender-sensitive approach, ensuring access to truth, justice, and comprehensive reparation in all their dimensions (UN, 2023). It is essential to provide resources for truth-seeking efforts, protection for family members, and the monitoring

of investigations (Rosas, 2020). This entails comprehensive reparation for victims, including the identification and punishment of those responsible, the location of missing persons, and the reconstruction of both the social and family fabric.

Acquisition of Resources and Strengthening Collective Cohesion

The need to acquire resources, supplies, and services for the functioning of collectives, as well as the need to strengthen intra- and inter-collective cohesion, are fundamental to sustaining field search efforts and strengthening organizational structures and dialogue with authorities. In this same vein, Villarreal (2016) highlights the influence of internal and external factors on collective action, emphasizing the importance of material resources and organizational support in the mobilization and growth of organizations.

From the perspective of the women leaders, material resources are of vital importance because they enhance collective capacities, growth, and cohesion, while also reducing excessive workloads and the impacts associated with them. Taken together, these factors increase the likelihood of locating missing persons. Additionally, such resources contribute to sustaining collectives so that they can carry out their activities effectively and establish communication and connections with other victims, thereby facilitating organizational and social processes that are fundamental to achieving truth, peace, and collective action (Castrillón et al., 2016).

One example of this is the support received by some collectives through the Small Grants Programme of the Spotlight Initiative—in partnership with the Centro de Estudios Ecueménicos. This program illustrates how material resources can strengthen collective capacities and cohesion, enabling more effective search efforts and improved organizational processes (UN, 2023).

Moreover, intra- and inter-collective cohesion influences what Barrera and Villa (2018) describe as the breakdown of psychosocial barriers, by dismantling individualized and stigmatizing beliefs and giving way to collective awareness-raising efforts grounded in the principles of peace and human dignity. In this sense, the need to strengthen cohesion both within and among collectives acquires particular relevance, as their collective strength can influence social and political change in the country and pave the way for the emergence of new social actors capable of fostering institutional and cultural transformations.

While it is true that collectives have provided spaces for cooperation, solidarity, and empathy among family members, it is also true that group dynamics have generated internal and inter-collective conflicts due to differences in perceptions and/or needs, as identified in several testimonies. Therefore, it is imperative to work from a standpoint of collaboration and group cohesion, without allowing “indifference” or the “egos” of certain leaderships to undermine the achievements attained. Consequently, it is essential to prevent protagonism and power struggles from eroding the unity of organizations and collectives. As Esquivel et al. (2009) argue, conflicts—when addressed appropriately and respectfully—can be transformative and lead to constructive and favorable resolutions.

Finally, and more broadly, it is important to note that although ICRC reports (2014, 2016) directly address psychosocial needs and present findings similar to those of this study, the context in which these needs arise introduces significant differences. Even when they may appear equivalent, their meaning and interpretation vary according to the specific environment in which they occur.

In Latin America, disappearances have been primarily linked to historical and political-social processes and have been used as tools of repression and control (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2012). However, although Mexico experienced disappearances in such contexts, the majority occurred during and after the so-called “war on drugs” (SEGOB, 2024), regardless of social class, age, or gender. In countries such as Colombia, Argentina, or Chile, institutional responses are more closely aligned with post-conflict and transitional justice frameworks, whereas in Mexico the phenomenon is characterized by family self-management in the face of structural violence and drug trafficking. Accordingly, while in other Latin American countries justice is largely conceived in terms of punishment and accountability of perpetrators, this study highlights the search for and location of loved ones as a fundamental component of the concept of justice.

Furthermore, although a common distinction is made between psychological and psychosocial needs, from our perspective it is not possible to strictly separate them, as both emerge from a social event and are deeply interrelated. These needs must therefore be understood and addressed through a comprehensive approach that recognizes their collective nature and their potential to promote processes of social transformation.

Conclusions and limitations

The findings of this study have several implications for the care of relatives of missing persons in Mexico. First, they highlight the importance of strengthening comprehensive and multidisciplinary approaches that address the psychosocial, family, and community dimensions of victims' needs. This requires collaboration among government institutions, civil society organizations, and local communities to provide holistic and sustained support.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of ensuring the safety and protection of family members during search processes, as well as guaranteeing dignified and respectful treatment by institutions. Training public officials in do no harm approaches and human rights-based perspectives is essential to preventing revictimization and fostering trust in authorities.

Finally, the study emphasizes the relevance of community participation and empathy in the regeneration of the social fabric and the construction of peace. We contend that society plays a crucial role in validating and supporting victims, as well as in demanding truth and justice. Promoting empathy and community solidarity is key to transforming the social and political environment and to ensuring that victims are not forgotten.

Lastly, we identify at least four important limitations of this study: (1) Because the study is based exclusively on interviews with seven women leaders of collectives, it does not represent the full diversity of experiences and needs of all relatives of missing persons in Mexico. (2) The analysis focuses on the immediate psychosocial needs of family members, without delving into how other structural and systemic factors affect these needs. (3) The data collected reflect needs and experiences at a specific point in time, without considering their possible evolution in the future. (4) Although a gender perspective is implicit in this study, it does not examine in depth how gender dynamics differentially affect the experiences of women and men who are relatives of missing persons.

Nevertheless, we believe that these limitations—although important and significant—do not overshadow the main findings of this study.

Author contributions

Liliana Márquez García (Principal Investigator): fieldwork, data collection, theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis, and writing.

Rogelio Flores Morales (Co-Investigator): theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis, writing, and final review of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The author and the co-author declare that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

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