



DISAPPEARING AGAIN

**VIOLENCE AND IMPACTS EXPERIENCED
BY WOMEN SEARCHERS IN MEXICO**

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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An embroidered hummingbird in shades of pink and white, facing left, with its beak holding a long, flowing red thread that forms a heart shape. The background is a light-colored fabric with a subtle cross-stitch pattern.

Mexico is undergoing a serious crisis, with more than 128,000 disappeared and missing persons. These disappearances, many of them enforced, not only affect the lives of the disappeared persons, but also of all those close to them, including their families and communities, as they are subjected to persistent and continuous human rights violations that do not cease until they find the whereabouts of the disappeared person and establish the truth of the facts.





1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this crisis situation, women have mostly led and been at the forefront of the search for their loved ones and the demand for truth, justice and reparation. They have established more than 234 collectives [1] throughout the country and have demanded that the authorities guarantee their rights, which has resulted in the creation of specific laws, public policies and institutions. The Mexican authorities bear the responsibility of searching for people who have been subject to disappearance, but given their omissions and lack of effectiveness, it has been the families and mainly the women – mothers, wives, sisters, daughters – who have taken the task into their own hands, venturing into detention centres and onto dangerous streets, areas and wastelands, many of them sites where organized crime operates. Some have even crossed borders and followed migration routes in the hope of finding their loved ones. To do this, they have acquired training in a number of areas, such as law, identification and analysis of remains, excavation of graves and psychosocial support to other women and families.

Searching for a disappeared person in Mexico is a high-risk activity that can be life-threatening. From 2011 to date, at least 30 relatives of disappeared persons (16 women) have been killed. [2] Women searchers carry out their work in a hostile environment of structural discrimination based on their gender, facing hostility for raising their voices, for being human rights defenders and for being victims of disappearance. In addition, these characteristics intersect with others that affect the families of disappeared persons based on their racialization, ethnicity, language, nationality, residence in rural or peripheral areas, sexual orientation, gender identity or situation of impoverishment, among others, to influence and shape their experiences and the risks they face.

This report considers the experiences of more than 600 women who, through quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, generously shared with Amnesty International the main types of violence and impacts they face when carrying out their search. The women searchers who took part in this research did so by responding to a survey prepared by Amnesty International, participating in focus groups, or sharing their personal testimonies, as detailed in the report. On the basis of their participation, Amnesty International has been able to document a pattern of violence and impacts consisting of an accumulation of human rights abuses and violations against women searchers, who suffer such impacts disproportionately due to the structural discrimination against women that is prevalent in Mexico.

[1] Chemonics, “Buscadoras: Women at the forefront of Mexico’s search for victims of enforced disappearances”, 11 March 2024, chemonics.com/blog/buscadoras-women-at-the-forefront-of-mexicos-search-for-victims-of-enforced-disappearances/

[2] Article 19, “Derechos pendientes: informe sexenal sobre libertad de expresión y derecho a la información en México (Pending rights: six-yearly report on freedom of expression and right to information in Mexico)”, July 2024, articulo19.org/derechospendientes/#:~:text=%2D%20La%20organizaci%C3%B3n%20ARTICLE%2019%20present%C3%B3,nacional%20de%20cara%20al%20futuro,pp.92-93.



Chief among these is the hugely dangerous environment in which women searchers carry out their work, and which often results in killings, disappearances, threats, attacks and extortion. Amnesty International has documented cases of women forcibly displaced by threats, and the consequences this has had both for their lives and their search efforts. Amnesty International has also received numerous testimonies of the stigmatization and revictimization experienced by women searchers, whether from the authorities or even their own families and communities.

Indigenous women searchers and those searching for disappeared migrants face other forms of structural and intersectional discrimination that make their access to the authorities and the support they can provide more difficult due to their gender, indigenous identity, nationality and language. The lack of translators and interpreters, together with the distances these women must travel to meet with the authorities and, in the case of migrant women, the need to have a permit to enter Mexico for humanitarian reasons and carry out their search in the country, has a differential impact that exacerbates the violations of their human rights.

Additionally, Amnesty International has documented that the vast majority of women searchers experience impacts on their physical and mental health, in particular depression, insomnia and the onset of other illnesses or the worsening of pre-existing conditions. Moreover, women searchers dedicate their economic and social resources to the search, to the detriment of their own dignified living conditions, especially when they come from a situation of impoverishment, scarce resources and/or precarious employment.

Impacts for the family as a whole were also identified. These are exacerbated by the lack of a care system that would allow women searchers to continue in their caregiver role and also carry out their search work. The lack of support often has an impact on school dropout rates and on children's health. All of these forms of violence and their impacts violate the human rights of women searchers and their families. As these occur in an environment of almost total impunity, trust in the authorities is undermined, resulting in a climate of permissiveness and persistent structural discrimination.

Women searchers rarely approach the authorities to file complaints or request support. This is largely due to their distrust of the authorities, but also because of collusion between public servants and organized crime. [3] The authorities put in place to address the violence and impacts experienced by women searchers have introduced another form of violence – institutional violence – through their negligence and failure to provide the protection these women require.

[3] Information shared by women searchers in focus groups; IACHR, Situation of human rights in Mexico, OEA/Ser.L/V/II, Doc. 44/15, 2015, para. 498.

With regard to search commissions, women searchers emphasize that they are the ones carrying out the bulk of the work and therefore rely more on their own independent searches. As for the risks to their safety, women searchers have requested protection measures from the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists and state protection mechanisms, which have made significant progress towards recognizing women searchers as human rights defenders. However, women searchers who are not leaders or do not have a high profile still face significant challenges for inclusion. Additionally, the measures granted do not apply a comprehensive approach with a gender and children's perspective, nor is the effectiveness of the measures or the monitoring of cases adequately assessed.

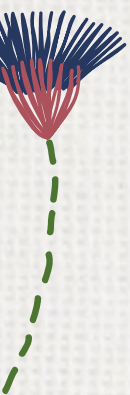
Victims commissions also face important challenges in reaching more women searchers and their families, especially those from rural areas and Indigenous communities, and families of disappeared migrants. Women searchers mentioned the difficulty in getting victim recognition, the argument that there is no causal link between the impact and the criminal offence to deny care, and delayed, inadequate and culturally inappropriate support as key challenges.

With regard to prosecutor's offices, searchers highlight that practices contrary to international standards continue to be applied. These include asking families to wait 72 hours before filing a complaint, conducting investigations and providing care based on stereotypes and revictimization, and substandard investigations. They also draw attention to the lack of rulings or progress in investigations into human rights violations suffered by the women searchers themselves.

Finally, regarding the Mexican Foreign Support Mechanism for Search and Investigation (MAEBI), searchers highlight the obstacles faced by families of disappeared migrants when filing complaints and following up on their cases, difficulties for entering Mexican territory, and lack of support in accordance with the General Law on Victims (LGV).

In the final part of this document, Amnesty International makes a series of recommendations to the Mexican authorities for improving the protection of women searchers. These include recognizing the right to search for disappeared persons without discrimination; recognizing the important work of women searchers and guaranteeing their rights; incorporating a gender and intersectional perspective in all actions related to the search for forcibly disappeared persons; and guaranteeing the human rights of all women searchers, including their economic, social and cultural rights.





2. METHODOLOGY

This report is part of a regional campaign to protect women searchers from the risks, threats and attacks they face in different countries of the Americas and demand changes in state policies to protect their human rights. On 29 August 2024, Amnesty International released the report [Searching without fear: International standards for protecting women searchers in the Americas](#) that sets out the legal framework applicable to the international obligations of states in the Americas for protecting women searchers. It argues that states bear the primary responsibility in the search for forcibly disappeared persons (on the understanding that standards on enforced disappearances apply to disappearances of all kinds); that relatives, loved ones and communities of disappeared persons have the right to search for them, either through their own efforts or by participating in government activities; and that state authorities must protect those who search, without discrimination, from the risks, threats and attacks they face during their search. [4]

The report *Searching without fear* uses the definition of enforced disappearance contemplated in international human rights law, as interpreted by the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) and opts (for methodological reasons) to use the term enforced disappearance to refer to all types of disappearances. The report concludes that the standards applicable to the search for forcibly disappeared persons must be extended to all cases in which there is any indication, however small, that the disappearance falls within any of the definitions provided in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), and that the state's mandatory response must align with the highest possible standards. It should also be noted that legislation and practice in Mexico have retained the use of the term disappearance to cover both disappearances by individuals and enforced disappearances. [5]

For Amnesty International, the CED's interpretation is adequate and international obligations regarding enforced disappearance are applicable to the Mexican context, bearing in mind that issues around classification should not be burdened on victims and their families, loved ones or communities, let alone involve differences in determining the scope of the state's obligation to search for disappeared persons and protect those who search. In this sense, although the term “disappearance” will be used to adapt the report to the Mexican context and legislation, international obligations and standards set out in the *Searching without fear* report regarding the search for truth, justice and reparation in the event of enforced disappearance are applicable to the Mexican state as a whole.

[4] Amnesty International, “Searching without fear: International standards for protecting women searchers in the Americas” (AMR 01/8458/2024).

[5] Disappeared person: one “whose whereabouts are unknown and it is presumed, based on any indication, that their absence is related to the commission of a crime”; disappearance committed by individuals: depriving “a person of their liberty for the purpose of hiding the victim, their fate or their whereabouts”; enforced disappearance is that committed by public servants or individuals who “with the authorization, support or acquiescence of a public servant, deprive a person of their liberty in any way, and subsequently fail or refuse to recognize said deprivation of liberty or to provide information or the disappeared person, their fate, or their whereabouts”. Mexican General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearances Committed by Individuals and the National Search System, Articles 4.XVI, 34 and 27.



This report documents the main types of violence and impacts experienced by women searchers when carrying out their work. In this regard, Amnesty International uses a broad concept of violence that goes beyond physical violence and possible harm to the rights associated with physical integrity. Disappearances and searching have adverse effects that extend far beyond the sphere of personal integrity. This report recognizes such effects as violence in its various forms, including physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence. [6] Similarly, the report recognizes that violence occurs in both the public and private spheres, and focuses on institutional violence, understood as that perpetrated by public officials that adversely affect groups of people. [7] The report also compiles the widely documented impacts of these forms of violence, especially on health.

The methodology of this report focused on ensuring that all women searchers who wished to participate and share their experience could do so. For this, three research tools were used: i) a survey was provided to 661 women searchers – both independent searchers and those included in 134 collectives – between March and December 2024 through members, activists, donors and Amnesty International staff virtually and in person in at least 44 sessions in four countries (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico) and 30 Mexican states (there was no participation from the states of Campeche or Tabasco); ii) seven focus groups conducted between May and November 2024, two in Chihuahua, two in Guerrero, one in Colima, one in Honduras and a virtual meeting with forcibly displaced women searchers; and iii) five personal testimonies of women searchers to provide examples of the violence and impacts they experience.

For the preparation of the report, Amnesty International met with various civil society organizations and international bodies, with the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders (the federal or national mechanism) and with authorities from the states of Guanajuato, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Sinaloa. Various requests for information were also made at the federal and state levels.

Amnesty International would like to thank the women searchers who shared their search experiences through the different research tools. Their testimonies are the heart and inspiration for this report. Thanks are due also to the organizations and authorities that agreed to meet with us. Amnesty International is particularly grateful to the volunteers, members, activists and donors of its Mexican section who provided support with the application of the survey.

[6] IACHR, “Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls: Best Practices and Challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean”, OAS/Ser.LV/II, 14 November 2019, paras. 167 and 195; UN Women, “FAQs: Types of violence against women and girls,” 27 June 2024, [\[1\] IACHR, “Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls: Best Practices and Challenges in Latin America and t](#)

[7] Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Tlaleng Mofokeng, A/HRC/50/28, 14 April 2022. para. 68.



3. DISAPPEARANCES IN MEXICO



3.1. CONTEXT OF DISAPPEARANCES

The National Registry of Missing and Disappeared Persons (RNPDPNO) lists 128,059 disappeared and missing persons as of the end of March 2025. [8] The disappearance crisis brings with it a forensics crisis, with more than 72,100 unidentified bodies [9] and 5,696 clandestine graves discovered in Mexico. [10] According to the RNPDPNO, the states with the highest number of disappearances are Jalisco, Tamaulipas, Mexico and Veracruz, while Baja California, Mexico City, Mexico, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León concentrate 71.3% of all unidentified bodies. [11] Although these figures give us an idea of the scale of the situation, there may be significant underreporting, meaning that numbers may actually be much higher. [12]

The disappearances have occurred mainly over two key moments. The first, between 1965 and 1990, a period known as the “dirty war”, was characterized by the systematic and widespread

[8] RNPDPNO, Statistical Version, [//versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral](https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral). Figures from 31 December 1952 to 6 May 2025.

[9] Efraín Tzuc and Mayela Sánchez, “Cierra sexenio de AMLO con más de 72,100 cuerpos sin identificar (AMLO closes six-year term with more than 72,100 unidentified bodies)”, A dónde van los desaparecidos and Quinto Elemento Lab, 24 September 2024, [//quintoelab.org/project/sexenio-amlo-72-mil-cuerpos-crisis-forense](https://quintoelab.org/project/sexenio-amlo-72-mil-cuerpos-crisis-forense)

[10] Efraín Tzuc, A dónde van los desaparecidos, México rebasa las 5,600 fosas clandestinas, 9 de octubre de 2023, [//adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2023/10/09/mexico-rebasa-las-5600-fosas-clandestinas/](https://adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2023/10/09/mexico-rebasa-las-5600-fosas-clandestinas/)

[11] UN CED, Informe del Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada sobre su visita a México en virtud del artículo 33 de la Convención (Hallazgos) (Report of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances on its visit to Mexico under article 33 of the Convention [Findings]), CED/C/R.9, 12 April 2022, para. 29.



commission of serious human rights violations against broad sectors of the population in a context of counterinsurgency. [13] The RNPdNO has registered 1,072 missing and disappeared persons for that period; [14] according to the Mechanism for Truth and Historical Clarification (MEH), some 517 persons forcibly disappeared during that time. [15]

The second key moment began during the presidency of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) and continues to date. It was triggered during the so-called “war on drugs”, [16] when the main public security strategy was militarization, a policy based on the massive deployment of armed forces to regions with a presence of organized crime, with little coordination and limited subordination to civil authorities. [17] This policy has been strengthened in recent years. In 2019, the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador created the National Guard, comprised essentially by military personnel, [18] as the main state security force, and this was consolidated in 2024 through approval of a constitutional amendment to article 21, placing the National Guard under the Ministry of National Defence and making it a part of the permanent state armed forces. [19]

From 2006 to date, the RNPdNO lists 108,802 persons as missing and disappeared, which represents 88% of total disappearances. [20] These disappearances reflect a wide variety of modalities and victims. In some cases, the perpetrators are public officials from the three levels of government (municipal, state and federal), in others they are individuals involved in organized crime, with various forms of participation, acquiescence or omission by state agents. [21]

According to the RNPdNO, the majority of those disappeared are men (94,196), followed by 28,003 women and 434 unidentified persons. [22] In the report of its visit to Mexico, the CED expressed concern regarding the disappearance of human rights defenders, the more than 30 journalists disappeared between 2013 and 2021, and disappearances in detention facilities (prisons and migrant holding centres) [23]

[13] MEH, “Fue el Estado (1965-1990)”, Volume 1, p. 14.

[14] RNPdNO, Statistical Version, [/versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral](https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral). Figures from 1 January 1965 to 31 December 1990.

[15] MEH, “Fue el Estado (1965-1990)”, Volume 1, p. 95.

[16] University Network for Human Rights and Fundar, “Las desapariciones en México: Impunidad activa y obstáculos en materia de justicia y búsqueda (Disappearances in Mexico: Active impunity and obstacles to justice and searches)”, 2024, p. 8.

[17] Amnesty International, “Cambiano el paradigma: de la militarización de la seguridad pública a la seguridad ciudadana” (Changing the Paradigm: From the Militarization of Public Security to Citizen Security)” (41/8665/2024), p. 8.

[18] Official Gazette of the Federation (DOF), Decree amending, adding and repealing various provisions of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States regarding the National Guard, 26 March 2019, dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5555126&date=03/26/2019#gsc.tab=0

[19] DOF, Decree amending and adding articles 13, 16, 21, 32, 55, 73, 76, 78, 82, 89, 123 and 129 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States regarding the National Guard, 30 September 2024, https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5739985&fecha=30/09/2024#gsc.tab=0

[20] RNPdNO, Statistical Version, [/versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral](https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral)

[21] University Network for Human Rights and Fundar, “Las desapariciones en México” (previously cited), 2024, p. 16

[22] RNPdNO, Statistical Version, [/versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral](https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral)

[23] UN CED, Informe del Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada sobre su visita a México en virtud del artículo 33 de la Convención (Hallazgos) (Report on visit to Mexico), CED/C/R.9, 12 April 2022, paras. 16 to 22.



the disappearance of Indigenous people, mainly as a result of social and territorial conflicts linked to megaprojects or the exploitation of their lands by organized crime or other private actors; [24] and the disappearances of LGBTI people committed by security forces or organized crime, in many cases for the purpose of “sexual cleansing” or sexual exploitation. [25]

situation of extreme concern is the disappearance of migrants in Mexico en route to the United States. [26] This happens for a number of reasons, such as the contexts of violence through which they cross, various forms of discrimination, economic difficulties, obstacles in access to justice and impunity. [27] The situation is further complicated by the restrictive migration policies that Mexico has been implementing, mostly in conjunction with the United States. These policies force migrants and asylum seekers to remain in border cities, which have a strong presence of organized crime and lack adequate security conditions, thereby increasing the risk of kidnapping, extortion, violence, disappearance and murder. [28] The RNPdNO reports **only 267 disappeared migrants in Mexico, the largest number being from Honduras (41), followed by the United States (35), Colombia (34), Venezuela (31), Mexico and Nicaragua (26) and Guatemala (24). These figures are no doubt significantly higher, possibly due to a lack of reporting of these cases.** [29]

Both the CED and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) believe that there is a context of widespread disappearances in a large part of Mexican territory, many of which could be described as enforced disappearances. [30] On 4 April 2025, the CED announced its decision to activate the procedure of article 34 of the ICPED with respect to the situation in Mexico. This means that the CED, having received well-founded indications that enforced disappearance is being practiced in a widespread or systematic manner, has requested information from the Mexican state in this regard, following which it may take the matter urgently to the attention of the UN General Assembly. [31]

[24] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico, 12 April 2022 (previously cited), para. 21.

[25] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico, 12 April 2022 (previously cited), para. 22.

[26] IACHR, Situation of Human Rights in Mexico, OEA/Ser.L/V/II, 31 December 2015, para. 167.

[27] UN WGEID, Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in the Context of Migration, A/HCR/36/39/Add.2, 28 July 2017, para. 46.

[28] See OHCHR, “La desaparición en el contexto de la migración en México y América Central (Disappearance in the Context of Migration in Mexico and Central America),” September 2022, Issue 3.

[29] UN CED, Informe del Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada sobre su visita a México en virtud del artículo 33 de la Convención (Hallazgos) (Report on visit to Mexico), CED/C/R.9, 12 April 2022, para. 36 and RNPdNO, Statistical Version, 11 March 2025, [/versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral](https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral)

[30] UN CED: Concluding observations on the report submitted by Mexico under article 29, paragraph 1, of the Convention, CED/C/MEX/CO/1, 5 March 2015, para. 10; Concluding observations on the additional information submitted by Mexico under Article 29 (4) of the Convention, CED/C/MEX/OAI/2 12 October 2023, para. 5; IACHR, Situation of Human Rights in Mexico (previously cited), December 2015, para. 105.

[31] OHCHR, “UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances clarifies its procedure under Article 34 of the Convention”, 9 April 2025, [/www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/un-committee-enforced-disappearances-clarifies-its-procedure-under-article](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/un-committee-enforced-disappearances-clarifies-its-procedure-under-article)

In response, President Sheinbaum and both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) and the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) rejected the existence of state-sponsored enforced disappearances in the country. [32] The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) denied there being a crisis of disappearances in Mexico, let alone that they are the result of state policy. [33] What is more worrying is that the Senate of the Republic approved a statement requesting that the United Nations sanction the president of the CED for the assertions made regarding the disappearances crisis in Mexico. [34]

Given the real pattern of widespread disappearances, [35], denial of the situation by the Mexican authorities is remarkable, as is the almost total impunity and revictimizations that prevail. [36] This bleak scenario for families, loved ones and communities has pushed them into demanding effective action from the state and even into undertaking their own searches and investigations, thereby facing risks and violations of their human rights.

In this regard, Amnesty International makes two assertions. Firstly, the primary obligation to search for disappeared persons lies with the state. Secondly, victims – primarily family members, loved ones and communities – have the right to search for disappeared persons.

Amnesty International therefore believes that searching, in addition to constituting a combination of the rights to the truth (to know the truth about what happened, including establishing the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person and the circumstances in which the events occurred), to information and to judicial protection, is in itself a right that must be recognized: the right to search. [37]



[32] SRE and SEGOB, Information Card, 5 April 2025, [/www.gob.mx/sre/documentos/interior-foreign-affairs-joint-information-note?idiom=en](https://www.gob.mx/sre/documentos/interior-foreign-affairs-joint-information-note?idiom=en); ABC, "Sheinbaum acusa a Comité de Desaparición de 'mucho desconocimiento' sobre México (Sheinbaum Accuses Disappearance Committee of 'Much Ignorance' regarding Mexico)," 8 April 2025, [/abcnoticias.mx/nacional/2025/4/8/sheinbaum-acusa-comite-de-desaparicion-de-mucho-desconocimiento-sobre-mexico-245530.html](https://abcnoticias.mx/nacional/2025/4/8/sheinbaum-acusa-comite-de-desaparicion-de-mucho-desconocimiento-sobre-mexico-245530.html)

[33] CNDH, "Comunicado DGDDH/070/2025", 6 April 2025, <https://x.com/CNDH/status/1908902957908656406>

[34] Senate of the Republic, "Senado rechaza aseveraciones del presidente del CDI (Senate rejects assertions of the president of the CED)", 8 April 2025, [/comunicacionsocial.senado.gob.mx/informacion/comunicados/11522-senado-rechaza-aseveraciones-del-presidente-del-comite-contra-la-desaparicion-forzada-de-la-onu](https://comunicacionsocial.senado.gob.mx/informacion/comunicados/11522-senado-rechaza-aseveraciones-del-presidente-del-comite-contra-la-desaparicion-forzada-de-la-onu)

[35] UN CED: Concluding observations Mexico (previously cited), 5 March 2015, para. 10; Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 5.; IACHR, Situation of Human Rights in Mexico (previously cited), 2015, para. 105.

[36] UN CED, Report on the visit to Mexico CED/C/MEX/VR/1 (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 24.

[37] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited) (AMR 01/8458/2024), p. 24.



3.2. WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SEARCHING



According to available information, during the dirty war those publicly denouncing enforced disappearances were mainly men who were active in social movements. [38] However, over the years, movements in which women were more active began to emerge. Some examples are the National Committee for the Defence of Prisoners, Persecuted, Disappeared and Political Exiles (Comité Eureka) founded by Rosario Ibarra in 1975, [39] or H.I.J.O.S. Mexico, an organization established in Argentina in 1995 and made up of sons and daughters of persons who have been disappeared, exiled or murdered or have been political prisoners in Latin America. [40]

Subsequently, in the second period of disappearances linked to the war on drugs, groups of relatives, mainly women, began to organize in collectives to carry out searches and create spaces for engaging with the authorities.

According to estimates by civil society, there are currently at least 234 groups of relatives of disappeared persons, [41] made up of more than 90% women. [42]

Of those responding to the Amnesty International survey, 65% are mothers, 21% sisters, 13% partners, 6% daughters and 5% female friends. They are mainly searching for men (84%), while 15% are searching for women.

From a feminist perspective, women's leadership in searching can be explained, to a large extent, by understanding searching as an extension of the roles and caregiving tasks that are usually assigned to women under Latin American and Mexican traditions, culture and customs. Moreover, women searchers have built spaces and forms of resistance that go beyond these prescribed care roles, vindicating their own agency. [43]

Most women search collectively, but there are also those who search on their own. The search tasks they perform vary depending on a number of factors, such as their context, resources and security conditions. The search is carried out in the knowledge that the person may be alive or dead. In the first case, they include visits to places where they could potentially find their loved ones or collect evidence as to their whereabouts, such as detention centres, psychiatric care centres, migrant holding centres, hospitals, addiction centres, public and private shelters, or even the streets, searching among the homeless.

[38] Heinrich Böll Stiftung, "La desaparición de personas en México y el papel de las mujeres en su búsqueda (The disappearance of people in Mexico and the role of women in searching for them)," 3 March 2021, [/mx.boell.org/es/2021/03/03/la-desaparicion-de-personas-en-mexico-y-el-papel-de-las-mujeres-en-su-busqueda#_ftn9](https://mx.boell.org/es/2021/03/03/la-desaparicion-de-personas-en-mexico-y-el-papel-de-las-mujeres-en-su-busqueda#_ftn9)

[39] Heinrich Böll Stiftung, "La desaparición de personas en México y el papel de las mujeres en su búsqueda" (previously cited), 2021.

[40] UNCUIYO, "A 25 años de la creación de la agrupación H.I.J.O.S. (25 years after the creation of H.I.J.O.S.)," 2020, uncuyo.edu.ar/articulacionsocial/a-25-anos-de-la-creacion-de-la-agrupacion-hijos#:~:text=As%C3%AD%20surgió%20el%20nombre%20de,impunity%20y%20los%20posteriores%20indultos.

[41] Chemonics, "Buscadoras: Women at the forefront of Mexico's search for victims of enforced disappearances", 11 March 2024, chemonics.com/blog/buscadoras-women-at-the-forefront-of-mexicos-search-for-victims-of-enforced-disappearances/

[42] Heinrich Böll Stiftung, "La desaparición de personas en México y el papel de las mujeres en su búsqueda" (previously cited), 2021.

[43] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), pp. 5-6.

This type of search includes posting photos on social media and public spaces, as well as activating early warning actions, such as real-time geolocation and review of security cameras. [44] In particular, collectives of relatives of disappeared migrants have been travelling across Mexico in the Caravan of Central American Mothers since 2004, touring Mexican territory in order to find their loved ones. [45] These women search along migration routes, highlighting the link between enforced disappearance and the violence experienced during the migration process. [46] The search for those presumed dead focuses on locating human remains and clandestine graves, usually in coordination with the authorities for their safeguarding and identification. [47]

The search collectives have created national and international networks that have allowed them to effectively lobby authorities and international organizations, while providing a space for accompaniment and mutual understanding. In demanding the right to truth, they have carried out actions of visibility and remembrance through the creation of murals and trees of hope, and the organization of exhibitions, religious services, embroidery in public squares, public talks and protests, among others.[48]

In carrying out their activities, they are not only exercising their right to search, but also attempting to guarantee and protect the human rights of those who have been disappeared, including their right to freedom and personal safety, to be protected by the law, not to be arbitrarily deprived of liberty, to recognition of their legal status, and not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, all of them rights that are violated by the disappearance. [49]



Thus, search work is an exercise in guaranteeing and protecting the human rights of disappeared persons, which means that women searchers are human rights defenders, and their work is exercising the right to defend human rights. [50]

[44] Valeria Fernanda Falletti, Atala del Rocío Chávez y Arredondo, "Searches and knowledge: Forced disappearances in Mexico" (in Spanish), *Andamios*, vol.19, no.50, 29 September 2023, https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-00632022000300223&lng=en&tlng=en

[45] Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, "Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas: 'Sigo tus pasos con la esperanza de encontrarte' (Caravan of Central American Mothers: 'I'm following in your footsteps in the hope of finding you')", 30 October to 14 November 2011.

[46] A dónde van los desaparecidos, "La búsqueda de las madres centroamericanas: una apuesta por la vida en el país de fosas" (Central American mothers who search: a commitment to life in a country of graves)", 21 February 2019, [//adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2019/02/21/la-busqueda-de-las-madres-centroamericanas-una-apuesta-por-la-vida-en-el-pais-de-fosas/](http://adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2019/02/21/la-busqueda-de-las-madres-centroamericanas-una-apuesta-por-la-vida-en-el-pais-de-fosas/)

[47] Valeria Fernanda Falletti, Atala del Rocío Chávez y Arredondo, *Searches and knowledge* (previously cited), 29 September 2023

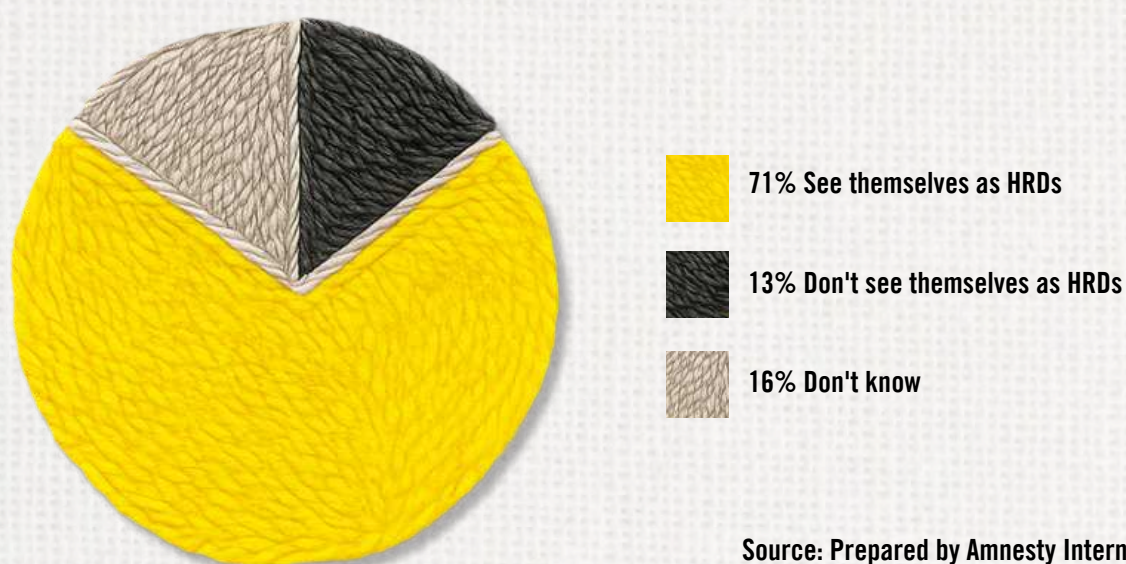
[48] Centro de Colaboración Cívica, "El derecho a la participación de las víctimas de desaparición en México: historia, balance y recomendaciones" (The right to participation of victims of disappearance in Mexico: history, current situation and recommendations)", August 2024, pp. 16 -17.

[49] Tullio Scovazzi and Gabriella Citroni, "The Struggle against Enforced Disappearance and the 2007 United Nations Convention", 2007, p. 1.

[50] UN CED, Report visit Mexico, CED/C/MEX/VR/1 (Recommendations) 16 May 2022 (previously cited), paras. 90-91; Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), p. 25.

Building on this, it is interesting to note that 71% of the women searchers who responded to the survey see themselves as human rights defenders. While self-identification as defenders is illustrative, it is important to remember that the Mexican state has an obligation to protect all of them as human rights defenders, given that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the IACHR have stated that the criterion that determines their condition as such is that they exercise this activity, [51] regardless of whether they themselves identify as human rights defenders. [52]

Perception of women searchers on being human rights defenders (HRDs), 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

3.3 KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN SEARCHERS

One of the key achievements of the families of disappeared persons is the creation of regulatory frameworks and specialized institutions in the field of disappearances under the banner “Not without the families” (¡Sin las familias, no!), referring to their right to participate. [53] This has resulted in the enactment of the General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearances Committed by Individuals and the National Search System (LGMDP) and local laws, and, with them, the creation of the National Search Commission (CNB) and state-level commissions, as well as specialized prosecutors' offices for investigation at the federal and local levels, the National Search System for Missing and Disappeared Persons, the Standardized Protocol for the Search for Missing and Disappeared Persons (Standardized Protocol), and the Extraordinary Forensic Identification Mechanism (MEIF). They have also achieved the right to participate in the appointment of heads of institutions and in the development and implementation of public policies on the issue.

[51] IACHR, Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas, OEA/Ser.LV/II.124, 7 March 2006, paras. 18-19.

[52] Amnesty International, “Searching without fear” (previously cited), p. 26.

[53] MNDM, “¡Sin las familias, no! A seis años de la Ley de Desaparición, la lucha por verdad y justicia para nuestros seres queridos, continúa” (Not without the families! Six years on from the Law on Disappearance, the fight for truth and justice for our loved ones goes on), 16 January 2024, movndmx.org/sin-las-familias-no/



Families placed their right to participation as the central tenet of their approach to disappearances. Both the General Law on Victims (LGV) and the LGMDP recognize the right to direct participation of families, to cover both actual search activities and the design, implementation and evaluation of actions in specific cases, as well as the development of public policies and institutional practices. [54] An important mechanism for guaranteeing their right to participation is the creation of citizen councils at the federal and local levels, as a direct channel for making recommendations to the authorities. [55] Despite these important advances, significant challenges remain in the implementation of these laws. At the local level, for example, nine states still do not have a local law that is aligned with the LGMDP, [56] while 16 lack a citizen council. [57] At the federal level, the National Citizen Council of the National Search System has been vacant since May 2024 because the Senate has not published the call for its renewal. [58]

In addition, when families exercise their right to participate, they often face various obstacles, such as difficulties in accessing case files or the phasing out of spaces for issues that are relevant to them. [59] Participating in searches can be even more complicated when families are in a vulnerable situation. For example, women searchers may suffer from gender bias and stereotypes, which can undermine the credibility of their demands and testimonies. Greater difficulties are also experienced by Indigenous women, caregivers and women in a precarious economic situation. In the case of relatives of disappeared migrants, this is aggravated through various factors, such as the lack of clarity as to the procedures applicable to their particular case, difficulty in obtaining the visas they need to participate in search and investigation processes, and the limited information they receive on progress. [60]

Given the ineffectiveness of the authorities, the families – and mainly female relatives – have continued to lead searches and investigations that are the responsibility of said authorities, [61] in some cases in collaboration with them, in others independently. But when they do this, women searchers face a number of risks, threats and attacks that are detailed in the following section.

[58] Former members of the National Citizen Council of the National Search System 2018-2024, “Comunicado: Por la pronta renovación del Consejo Nacional Ciudadano del Sistema Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas (Statement for the prompt renewal of the National Citizen Council of the National Search System)”, 14 February 2025.

[59] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 15.

[60] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 16 May 2022, para. 40.

[61] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 15.



4. VIOLENCE AND IMPACTS OF WOMEN SEARCHERS IN MEXICO

The disappearance of a loved one has complex effects, including “drawn-out shock, a state of latent and prolonged crisis, in which the anguish and pain caused by the absence of the loved one continues indefinitely”. [62] This situation has been called “ambiguous loss” that can “severely disrupt their lives”. [63]



This anguish and suffering is a violation of the right to mental and moral integrity of the relatives of victims of enforced disappearance [64] and is tantamount to torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. [65]

Additionally, women searchers are at serious risk of suffering various forms of violence and harm. First, they are victims of disappearance, which puts them at risk of institutional violence and further harm. Second, they are human rights defenders, and as such they face specific risks from both state and non-state actors. Third, they are women and may therefore experience gender-based violence and differentiated barriers for exercising their rights. Fourth, other conditions that increase their situation of vulnerability may converge, such as race, migration status, ethnicity, living with a disability or living in peripheral or rural areas, among others. [66] The violence and risks they experience also have a chilling effect on other searchers. [67]

In this scenario, 97% (535) of the women searchers who responded to the survey reported having faced various forms of violence and harm in the context of the search for missing persons.

[62] UN, WGEID, Study on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and ESCR, A/HCR/30/38/Add.5, 9 July 2015, para. 31.

[63] ICRC, “Accompanying the Families of Missing Persons, A Practical Handbook”, 2014, p. 40.

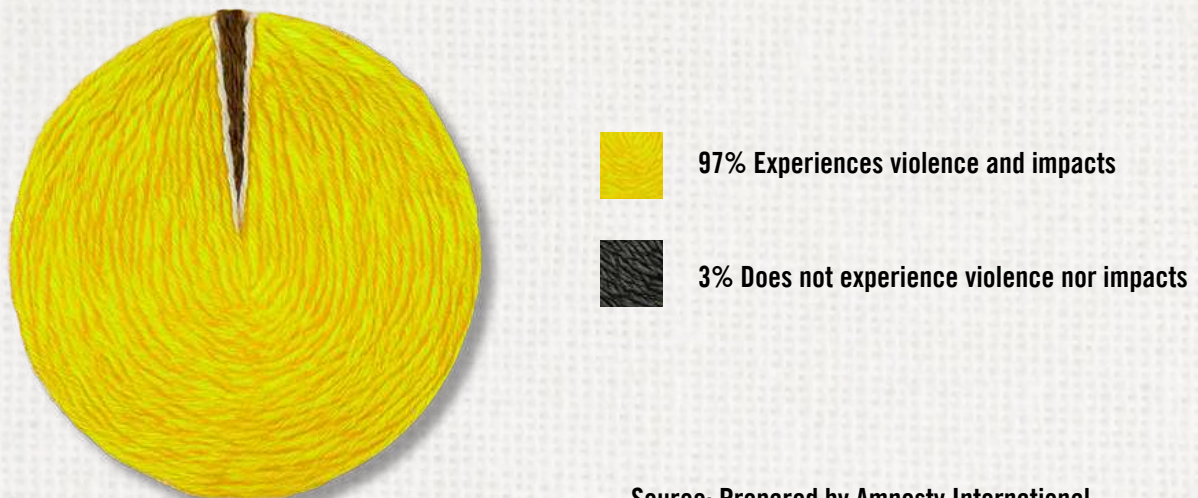
[64] Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case of González Méndez et al. v. Mexico, 22 August 2024, para. 206.

[65] UN. Human Rights Committee. Views adopted by the Committee under article 5 (4) of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication No. 2750/2016, para. 3.5 and 9.7.

[66] Amnesty International, “Searching without fear” (previously cited), p. 30.

[67] Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Cecilia Jiménez-Damary, Visit to Mexico, A/HRC/53/35/Add.2, 27 June 2023, para. 25.

Explicit and implicit violence and impacts against women searchers, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

On a local state level, it is important to note that all of the women searchers from the states of Aguascalientes, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Colima, Durango, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala and Yucatán who responded to the Amnesty International survey stated that they face violence and diverse impacts when carrying out search work.

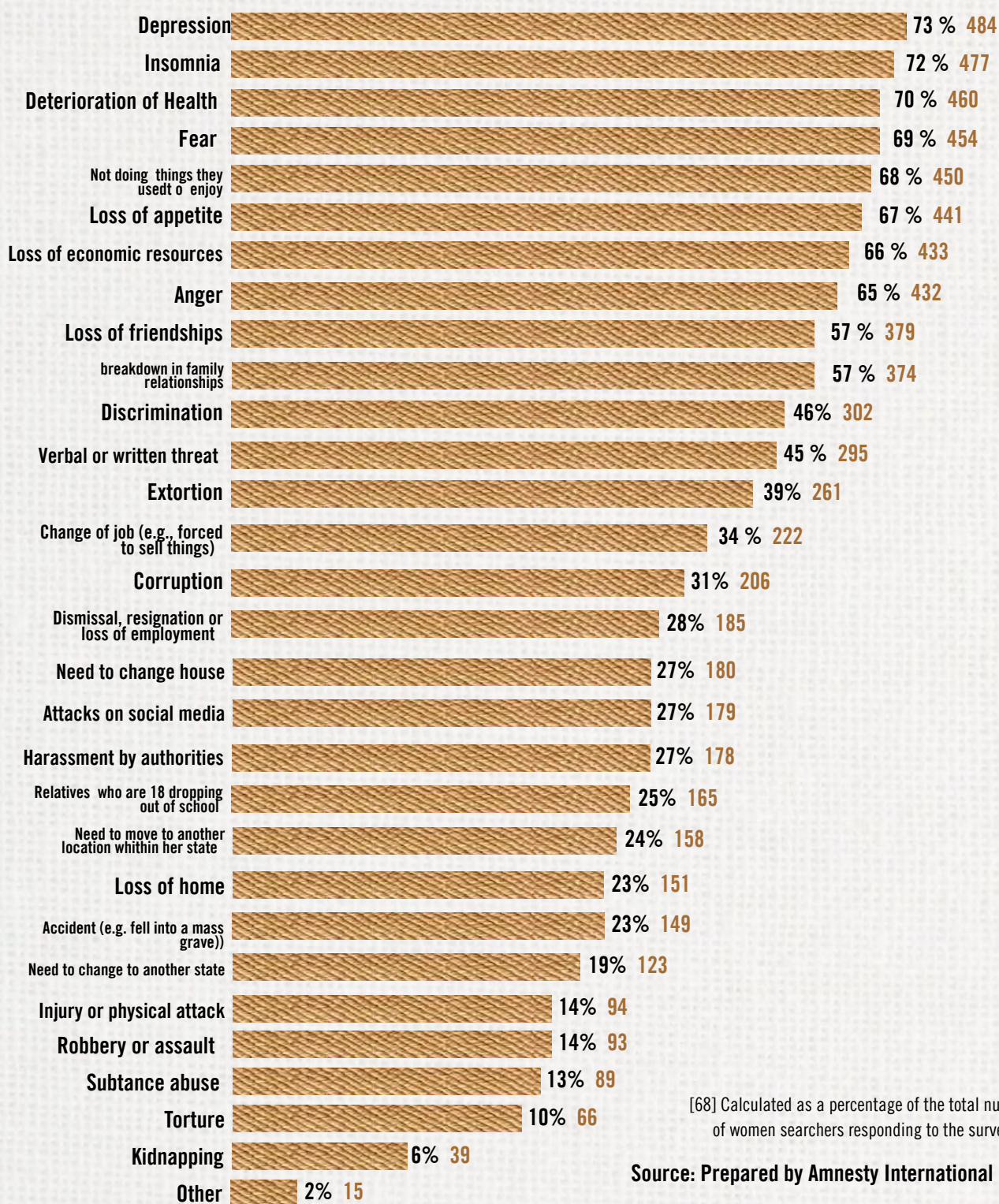
Geographic distribution of explicit and implicit violence against women searchers in Mexico, 2024 (%)



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

Risks to a number of rights are highlighted, including the right to life (threats), to physical integrity (kidnappings, physical attacks), to mobility and residence (internal displacement) and to equality and non-discrimination. Economic, social and cultural rights (health problems and impoverishment) are also affected.

Types of explicit and implicit violence and impacts against women searchers, 2024 [68]



[68] Calculated as a percentage of the total number of women searchers responding to the survey.

Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

This section looks at the main forms of violence and impacts experienced by women searchers while exercising their right to search and to defend human rights from a gender perspective, recognizing that such violence and impacts disproportionately affect women. [69]

4.1 KILLINGS AND DISAPPEARANCES

Publicly available figures document approximately 30 killings of family members and other relatives of disappeared persons from February 2011 to May 2025. [70] Of these, 16 were committed against women (eleven mothers, two sisters, two wives and one activist). The most lethal year for women searchers was 2022, when six killings were recorded. The states where the most killings occurred are Guanajuato (3), Jalisco (2), Sinaloa (2) and Sonora (2). [71] It is important to note that the figures could be higher because some families are afraid to publicly denounce such killings given the situation of risk in which they find themselves. [72]

YEAR	WOMAN SEARCHER KILLED	STATE
2014	Sandra Luz Hernández	Sinaloa
2016	Cornelia Sanjuana Guevara Guerrero	State of Mexico
2017	Miriam Rodríguez Martínez	Tamaulipas
2019	Zenaida Polished Lombero	Michoacán
2020	Rosario Zavala Aguilar	Guanajuato
2021	Gladys Aranza Ramos	Sonora
2022	María del Carmen Vázquez Ramírez	Guanajuato
2022	Bianca Esmeralda Gallardo	Puebla
2022	Rosario Lilián Rodríguez Barraza	Sinaloa
2022	Brenda Jasmine Beltran Jaime	Sonora
2022	Ana Luisa Garduño Juárez	Morelos
2022	Grisell Pérez Rivera	Hidalgo
2023	Teresa Magueyal Ramirez	Guanajuato
2024	Angela Meraz León	Baja California
2025	Teresa González Murillo	Jalisco
2025	María del Carmen Morales	Jalisco

Table prepared by Amnesty International using data from MNDM and the media

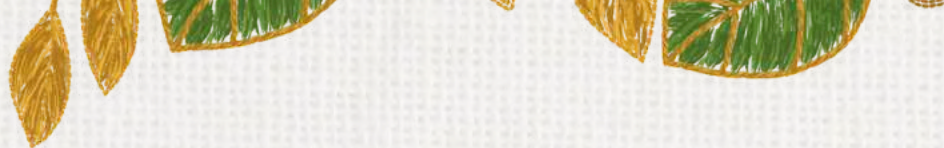
[69] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), p. 30.

[70] Article 19, "Derechos pendientes" (previously cited) 2024, pp. 92-93. The numbers differ from those of the MNDM in respect of two murdered women counted by the organizations and collectives that attended the IACHR hearing: Ana Luisa Garduño and Grisell Pérez Rivera. In addition to these murders, there were five in 2025: Teresa González Murillo, Magdaleno Pérez Santes, María del Carmen Morales, Jaime Daniel Ramírez Morales and Marco Antonio Suástegui Muñoz.

[71] MNM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad (Safety evaluation)" 2024, p.76. movndmx.org/informeriesgos2024/

[72] MNM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 76.

[73] MNM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 76



These murders reportedly occurred in the context of search activities, after reporting threats received, either publicly or to the authorities, following the discovery of mass graves, the identification or arrest of potential perpetrators or public complaints of institutional omissions regarding the search. [74] For example, Rosario Zavala's killers left a note next to her body saying that she had been attacked for “talking too much”, while Rosario Lilian Rodríguez Barraza was killed while leaving a religious service she had organized for her disappeared son. [75]

As for the disappearance of women searchers, a notable case is that of Lorenza Cano, who disappeared in Salamanca (Guanajuato) in 2024, after an armed commando entered her home and murdered her husband and son. The MNDM also reports three cases of women searchers who were disappeared and subsequently found alive: Lucero Berenice Romo, who was disappeared for 24 hours in Jalisco in 2024, Yesenia Guadalupe Durazo Costa, disappeared in Sonora in 2023 and located four days later, and Catalina Vargas, disappeared for a week in León (Guanajuato) in 2023 after receiving various threats. [76]

4.2 THREATS, ATTACKS, HARASSMENT AND EXTORTION

Women searchers told Amnesty International on numerous occasions that the search for their loved ones is highly dangerous and often puts their safety at risk. Forty-five percent (295) stated having received verbal or written threats, while 27% (179) mentioned attacks on social media and a further 27% (178) mentioned harassment by the authorities. During the focus groups they said that these threats sometimes take the form of surveillance, with the presence of unidentified armed men and members of organized criminal bands in peaceful demonstrations they have organized to demand their rights having been documented. [77]

While threats vary in form and content, the message is clear: stop searching or your life and that of your loved ones will be at risk. The CED expressed concern regarding allegations received about threats, surveillance and reprisals against both family members and persons who accompany them for having reported a disappearance or for carrying out search and investigation activities. [78] In some cases, these threats include derogatory comments related to their gender and identity.

[74] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p. 77.

[75] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p. 79.

[76] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, pp. 83-84.

[77] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p. 51.

[78] CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 35 and UN CED, Report visit Mexico, 12 April 2022 (previously cited), para. 77.

“ **My house was shot at, at least 100 bullets. I was with my daughters, it was awful... we threw ourselves on the ground, we had to leave the house for a while. I'm scared witless, it's not easy to get over this. From the moment this situation happens, you are no longer free. You lose everything: peace, a sense of safety, sleep.** ”⁷⁹

Women searchers have also stated that searching in the field is highly dangerous and puts them in a vulnerable situation. Some of them have come up against members of criminal groups who have threatened them, and others have found themselves in the middle of a gun battle or have been shot at directly. On many occasions they have requested support from the government so that they may be protected while searching but have not obtained a favourable response.

Similarly, 14% (94 women) reported having been victims of injuries or physical attacks, 10% (66) reported having suffered torture and 6% (39) kidnapping. The MNDM reported attacks with sharp weapons such as knives, as well as the case of three families who suffered gunshot wounds and two cases of attempted femicide at the hands of an intimate partner who reproached the women for their search work. [80]

Another form of prevalent violence (39% or 261) is extortion. The women mentioned that unidentified persons call them up demanding money for the release of their disappeared relatives. These calls are particularly painful because they give them false hope. At least three women said they deposited the money they were asked for, incurring debts without finding their sons. [81] Shockingly, 206 women searchers (31%) mentioned having identified corruption practices.



[79] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[80] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), pp. 72-74.

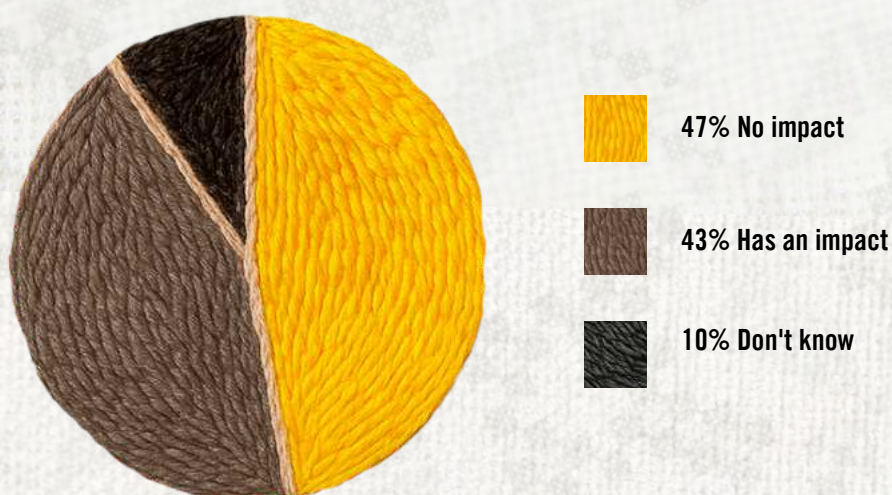
[81] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, 20 July 2024 and interview with members of Hasta Encontrarte, Irapuato, 6 June 2024.

4.3 DISCRIMINATION

Women searchers face structural barriers that hinder their work, such as racism, patriarchy and discrimination. Discrimination against women is linked to factors such as race, nationality, colour, socioeconomic status, language, gender, migration status or being a human rights defender, among many others. These forms of discrimination result in gender-based violence affecting them in different ways and generating differentiated impacts. [82] Of the women searchers surveyed, 46% (302) indicated that they had experienced discrimination. [83]

In relation to gender-based discrimination, when responding to the Amnesty International survey women searchers stated that they are in a greater situation of vulnerability than men and that they face greater risks because of the prevalent machismo in the country and the structural discrimination against women. They claimed that they are not listened to or taken seriously and that their situation tends to be downplayed because they are women. They are often told that they are unable to perform certain tasks and are treated differently based on gender stereotypes, something they described as condescending. They also said that it is the country's insecurity that affects them most, since this creates the potential for experiencing gender violence.

Perception of women searchers on the impact of being a woman on search work, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

[82] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), p. 16.

[83] Survey prepared by Amnesty International.



Women searchers also consistently reported discrimination based on economic status, where public officials tend to act quickly when dealing with those who are better off or have celebrity status. [84] Economic status and lack of resources also prevent or make it difficult for families to dedicate their time solely to searching. This is a clear example of the differentiated impact on non-white racialized women, who face structural inequalities that manifest as a disproportionate incidence of poverty within their communities, subsequently exacerbated by the impact of disappearance. [85] In this respect, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern regarding the persistent discrimination faced by individuals with brown and black skin, who experience greater challenges in exercising their rights and accessing public services. [86]



It's not the same being rich or poor. A rich person disappeared, and they were found because they were a priority for the prosecutor's office, while I don't even get an appointment to search for my son. If you don't have influence, nobody's going to search for you. So I ask myself if that disappeared person is worth more than my son just because they have money.⁸⁷



The CERD also expressed concern regarding the structural discrimination that Indigenous peoples face, as reflected in high levels of poverty and the negative impact on the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). [88] When in addition to this they have to deal with a disappearance, Indigenous women face discriminatory barriers for reasons of geography, economic resources and language, as well as the fact that institutions do not usually have a presence in rural areas or Indigenous territories, which means that most people are unaware of their existence or their functions. Moreover, access to such institutions involves travel to distant urban areas, which results in costs for travel, food and, in some cases, accommodation. And when they get there, the attention they receive is not of sufficient quality, nor is it culturally adequate or relevant. The lack of translators and interpreters, and the absence of tools and processes adapted for Indigenous peoples, directly impacts their access to rights, since in many cases they cannot communicate properly, and writs and requests must be submitted in Spanish. Similarly, support such as psychological care is only provided in Spanish, which bars access for them. To this is added discriminatory and unsympathetic treatment, [89] due, for example, to a lack of knowledge of community authorities regarding the search efforts in their territory. [90]

[84] Information obtained through focus groups.

[85] UN, Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, A/68/333, 19 August 2013, paras. 20-25.

[86] CERD, Concluding observations on the combined twenty-second to twenty-fourth periodic reports of Mexico, CERD/C/MEX/CO/22.24, 25 April 2024, para. 30.

[87] Focus group with women searchers in Colima, Colima, 20 July 2024.

[88] CERD, Concluding Observations Mexico (previously cited), 25 April 2024, para. 16.

[89] Interview with Beatriz Zapoteco Neri, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 17 January 2025.

[90] MNMD, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 23.

Women searching for disappeared migrants stated that they received discriminatory comments from the authorities, who downplay what they are going through

“ In Tapachula, some health [authorities] came to take samples. They said things like ‘maybe your son is dead’, ‘migrants only create violence’, ‘maybe they have remarried’... they wouldn’t stop saying things. It was especially painful for me to hear all these things from someone who is supposed to be there to help. We went there in the hope of finding a relative, so having to hear things like that made me feel very bad, it was awful.”⁹¹

BEATRIZ ZAPOTECO NERI

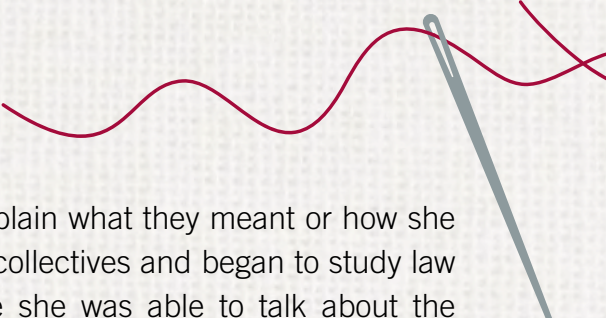
INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN SEARCHERS⁹²



Beatriz, who is from the Nahuatl community in Zitlala, Guerrero, is searching for her husband, Santiago Tixteco Cosme, who was taken from their home on 6 January 2016 by a group of masked armed men. Following his disappearance, she sent their three children to Acapulco, Guerrero, but they lost that school year. Initially, Beatriz asked the local police for help in searching for her husband, but they questioned her about his “activities”. She was afraid to file the complaint in case of possible reprisals, and also because the collusion between the authorities and organized crime was well known. She eventually filed a complaint in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero, where she had to wait for hours to get an appointment.

[91] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[92] Interview with Beatriz Zapoteco Neri, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 17 January 2025.



They gave her a piece of paper listing her rights, but did not explain what they meant or how she could exercise these rights. Beatriz started to get to know other collectives and began to study law in order to be able to defend herself. It took six years before she was able to talk about the disappearance, as the trauma and psychological torture caused her to freeze every time she tried to do so. So far, she has received little response from the authorities, no regular psychological support, and has not managed to get scholarships for her children to study at university, despite being entitled to them.

Beatriz has formed her own collective *Buscando Justicia por los Nuestros* (Seeking justice for our own) with 25 other Indigenous women who are relatives of victims of homicide and disappearance. Together, they are fighting institutional violence and the difficulties they face as Indigenous women when searching for relatives. These difficulties include physical distance from the authorities, the lack of translators into Indigenous languages, the challenges of organizing searches for their disappeared, and discriminatory treatment when they do manage to access the authorities. According to Beatriz, “as victims, we are on a different and disproportionate level. Now think of the villages, [where everything is] much more disproportionate. I think the government should know how many we are and support those who need more support, in a more sympathetic manner.”

4.4 STIGMATIZATION AND REVICTIMIZATION

Women searchers told Amnesty International that the authorities tend to stigmatize and revictimize them from the moment they decide to file a complaint for the disappearance, and throughout the search process. The authorities often blame the victims themselves, suggesting that the disappearances are no doubt linked to activities the disappeared persons were involved in, such as connections with organized crime. On other occasions, they downplay the situation by telling families that “there's nothing to worry about.” These comments are often based on racial and gender stereotypes, with statements like “[he] just went partying” or, in the case of women, “she walked off with her boyfriend” or “we have to wait a bit longer to see if this is a real emergency”. [93] In the case of disappeared migrants, blame is attached through comments such as “they chose to migrate” or “this happened because they crossed irregularly”. [94]



In the case of women who have disappeared, in a way it's all based on a bad reputation: they had tattoos, they were provocative, they walked off with their boyfriend. There is both social and government discrimination. [The authorities] say they are going to do something, but nothing happens.⁹⁵



[93] Information obtained through focus groups.

[94] Reyna Krystal Blakeman, “Desapariciones de Migrantes en la Frontera: un análisis de factores influyentes (Disappearances of Migrants at the Border: An analysis of influencing factors)”, 2023, p. 25.

[95] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

Stigmatization is not only directed at the actual disappeared persons, but also at the families filing complaints. Comments such as “you didn't take proper care of him”, “you lived with him, you know what he was up to”, or “they didn't take him for being a good person” are commonly directed at mothers or wives of disappeared individuals. These expressions not only stigmatize the family by blaming it for the disappearance, but they are also permeated by gender bias and other discriminatory stereotypes, the same biases and stereotypes that assign care work exclusively or mainly to women. [96]

A common complaint among women searchers is the lack of sensitivity and empathy of the authorities in situations of disappearance, together with a lack of technical training of public officials for doing the jobs they are hired to do. They stated that the authorities only take them seriously if they are accompanied by civil society organizations, by a legal representative or by other women from their collective who are already known to the authorities.

In addition, 55% (362) of the women surveyed claimed to have suffered revictimization by the authorities, who usually ask them repeatedly and at different times to provide an account of the disappearance. For example, constant changes in the staff overseeing cases means that women are forced to constantly repeat information already provided to the authorities. [97]



It is painful for me as a mother to go to a meeting. You think they are going to give you information and all they do is ask you the same thing again: where did your son disappear, what's his name. I mean, listen, let's be serious here. We would like this to change... because the case is then taken over by someone else and they ask you the same questions again. As mothers, we go [to the meeting] in the hope that we will get answers, but in the end we just go there and cry.⁹⁸



Stigmatization can also come from the family itself and society in general, as they often associate disappearances with criminal activities that can put them at risk. [99] In this regard, 57.3% (379) of the women searchers mentioned loss of friendships and 56.6% (374) a breakdown in family relationships.



My neighbour came and told me not to let my son go to her house, that it was better if they didn't play together anymore, because if I was killed, she didn't want that to affect her son.¹⁰⁰



[96] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p.15.

[97] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p.132 and Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[98] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[99] Information obtained through focus groups.

[100] Interview with members of Hasta Encontrarte, Irapuato, 6 June 2024.

4.5. FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Some women searchers have been forced to flee their home or place of habitual residence due to the violence and threats they receive because of reporting the disappearance, carrying out search activities and defending human rights. In this regard, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons acknowledged that they experience the “double pain of losing their relatives and having to move, all of which is very damaging to their mental health”. [101] Of the women searchers responding to the survey, 27% (180) mentioned the need to move house; 24% (158) the need to move to another location within their state; and 19% (123) the need to move to another state altogether.



The experience of displacement in women searchers varies greatly. Some women move with their family, while others decide to go alone, living far from their loved ones for fear of reprisals against them. [102]

Displacement can also be a security measure used by protection mechanisms and prosecutors' offices, both at the federal and state levels.



I had to leave the village because I had been with a [female] colleague who had just been killed minutes earlier. The threats began: if I stayed, I would not live to tell the story. I had to leave, on my own, only taking what I had on me, and without telling anyone.¹⁰³

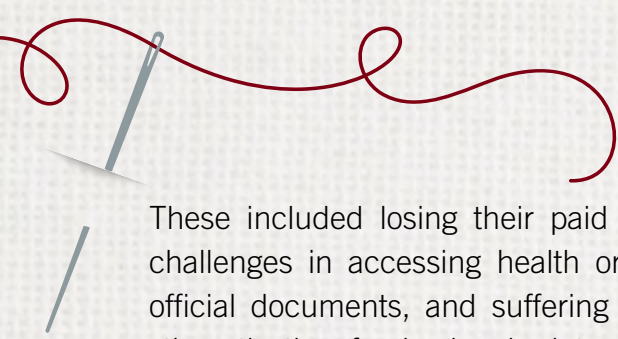


Displaced women searchers told Amnesty International of the adverse impacts caused by displacement.

[101] Special Rapporteur on internally displaced persons, Visit to Mexico, (previously cited), 2023, para. 33.

[102] Special Rapporteur on internally displaced persons, Visit to Mexico, (previously cited), 2023, para. 32.

[103] Focus group with displaced women searchers, Mexico City (CDMX), 20 November 2024.



These included losing their paid employment and having difficulty finding a new one, facing challenges in accessing health or education services for their children, mainly due to lack of official documents, and suffering a deterioration in both their physical and mental health and stigmatization for having had to leave their place of origin. They also mentioned the loss or separation from their support networks.

“ I think we'll all agree that when you get to another place, your life changes completely because you leave everything behind. You're on your own, you leave your roots, your source of employment, you leave your support networks... we end up in an unknown environment where we are silenced, singled out...”¹⁰⁴

When displacement is part of the relocation measures provided by protection mechanisms or prosecutors' offices, women searchers point to the lack of comprehensive support in the measures granted. These measures focus on the provision of a safe place for themselves and their closest relatives, but do not provide referrals to other authorities that could offer alternative types of support to mitigate the adverse impacts of displacement. The women also spoke of a lack of awareness on the part of public officials and lack of a gender and children perspective, thus making the experience of displacement even more complex. [105]

“ Children are singled out at school for having disappeared relatives, and this is more evident in a situation of displacement. School for them is very tedious and complicated. Unfortunately, there is no discussion about the support they may need. I have also faced questions and veiled accusations from teachers.”¹⁰⁶

Moreover, displacement has a direct impact on search efforts, for at least two reasons. First, where relocation happens as a security measure, the protection mechanisms prohibit them from conducting searches in their own states because their protection cannot be guaranteed during search activities. Second, displacement makes participation in searches more difficult due to the lack of support networks and their caregiving roles for other children who cannot be left on their own. [107]

[104] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[105] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[106] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[107] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.



The mechanism tells us that it will support us, but it won't let us go to our own state. We're going there to fight, not to a party. I need to go to Tamaulipas because that's where my son disappeared... following the lines of investigation and searching in the state is vital.¹⁰⁸



4.6 SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Women searchers, as victims of disappearance, are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence. [109] However, they do not always report such violence for various reasons, such as fear of possible reprisals, feelings of guilt or shame, the normalization of violence, or the complexity of going through a reporting process without adequate psychological and emotional support. [110]

In this regard, the MNDM recorded the case of a woman searcher who was threatened with sexual assault by public officials if she did not stop reporting on the situation of disappearance in the state. [111] Another woman made the following statement to Amnesty International:



They broke into my house, so I went on my own to the MP [prosecutor's office] to file the complaint. The public official started to kiss me forcibly and I didn't know what to do, I was trembling all over. He sat me down and then started to grope me and said: wait for me. When I got up he grabbed my hands, pulled them back and kissed me. I felt a hole in my stomach, I didn't know what to do. I was raped some time back and I felt the same trauma again, I couldn't move at all.¹¹²



The threats received by women searchers, whether directly or through social media, are usually highly misogynistic, with comments about their bodies or their sex life. [113] In some cases, they have received direct intimidatory threats that refer to possible rape or other acts of sexual violence against them. [114]

4.7 CRIMINALIZATION

In Mexico, women searchers are often also victims of criminalization, understood as the manipulation of the state's punitive power by state and non-state actors to hinder, impede or punish the exercise of the right to defend human rights. [115].

[108] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[109] CEDAW, Views adopted by the Committee under article 7 (3) of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication No. 153/2020, 22 November 2022, para. 7.4, and CED, Concluding observations on the additional information submitted by Mexico under article 29 (4) of the Convention, CED/C/MEX/OAI/2, 12 October 2023, para. 52.

[110] Alejandra Barahona-Bayer, Areli Benítez-Monroy, "¿Qué hay detrás del silencio de una mujer, víctima de violencia sexual?: Argumentación de factores sistémicos que llevan al silencio de mujeres jóvenes de la Ciudad de México (What is behind the silence of women victims of sexual violence?: Discussion of systemic factors that lead young women in Mexico City to stay silent)", 2022.

[111] MNDM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 47.

[112] Focus group with women searchers in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 29 July 2024.

[113] MNDM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 101.

[114] Focus group with women searchers in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[115] IACHR, Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders, OAS/Ser.L/V/II, doc. 49/15, 31 December 2015, p. 11.

The MNMD has documented cases where these women are accused in the case files on the disappearance of their family member of being likely responsible for such disappearance or falsely accused of crimes such as carrying weapons and selling drugs. This prevents them from requesting search actions or being recognized as victims, which has a direct impact on their search work. [116]

Women searchers have also reported cases of undue restrictions and criminalization when exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly [117] – one of their most important means for making demands on the authorities – during events that hold a special significance for them. Key examples of such events include the annual Mother's Day march, as well as demonstrations with specific demands at the federal and state levels, such as requesting meetings with the authorities. Similarly, women searchers have reported arrests and criminal proceedings against them, [118] as well as cases where the authorities have threatened criminalization to intimidate them, including threats of arrest. [119]

COLECTIVO HASTA ENCONTRARTE

CRIMINALIZATION OF PROTEST



At 8 a.m. on 10 July 2020, around 50 members and supporters of the Hasta Encontrarte collective staged a protest against the appointment of the head of the Guanajuato state search commission, as they considered he did not have the required experience to hold this position. They were demanding that the governor of Guanajuato meet with them and listen to their arguments. In response, the Public Safety Secretariat of the state of Guanajuato (FSPE) sent 141 police officers to contain them. [120] The protesters were turned back, some of them were beaten and three women searchers (Karla Verónica Martínez, Olimpia Montoya Juárez and Verónica Durán Lara), a woman activist (María del Carmen Ramírez) and a male representative from the CNDH were arrested. [121]

[116] MNMD, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 65.

[117] See text box on the Hasta Encontrarte case.

[118] See text box on the Hasta Encontrarte case.

[119] Focus group with women searchers in Colima, Colima, 20 July 2024.

[120] PRODHEG, Recommendation 72/2020-A, 29 June 2021, p. 41.

[121] Interview with members of Hasta Encontrarte, Irapuato, 6 Jun 2024

They were taken to the local police facilities where the CNDH representative was released after 45 minutes; four hours later, the women were placed at the disposal of the public prosecutor's office. [122] At no time were their rights read to them, nor were they informed that criminal proceedings had been opened against them, on charges of attacks against public roads and bodily injury. With the help of the extensive pressure brought to bear on the case, on 28 October 2020 the public prosecutor's office issued a non-trial resolution (non-exercise of criminal action or NEAP) in favour of the women searchers and the activist, recognizing that, contrary to police declarations, [123] they had not committed any crime during the protest [124] The human rights ombudsperson's office of the state of Guanajuato (PRODHEG) issued a recommendation on the case recognizing violations of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, to legal security and personal freedom, and to the right to physical integrity in the form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. [125]

Seeking justice for their case, Veronica, Karla and Carmen filed criminal charges against the police officers. [126] However, a NEAP was issued in favour of the police officers, ruling that they had not committed the crimes of abuse of authority and giving false statement before the authorities. [127] The women searchers filed a complaint against the recommendation issued by PRODHEG, as it failed to mention that they had a right to investigate and establish those responsible for the events that had taken place, and also failed to mention that they had a right to full reparation for the harm caused. However, the CNDH decided to terminate the appeal as it considered PRODHEG's recommendation to be adequate. [128] PRODHEG then notified the closure of the complaint on the grounds that the authorities had already complied with the recommendations. Veronica, Karla and Carmen were unhappy with these decisions; at the very least, they had expected a public apology for what they had had to live through. In this regard, Veronica said: "When we were arrested, I felt a sense of helplessness, of courage and fear, but also a great deal of pain, because a policeman took my son's photo and trampled on it. I don't know where it went. But it was really painful, because, well, it wasn't fair. I think we weren't hurting anyone. All we wanted was justice in some way, someone to help us find our relatives." [129]

4.8 NEGATIVE HEALTH IMPACTS

Health impacts, both physical and mental, are among the most common consequences faced by women searchers.

[123] PRODHEG, Recommendation 72/2020-A, 29 June 2021, pp. 5- 6.

[124] Public prosecutor's office II for the municipality of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Research Unit UTC II GTO, investigation file nbr. 65249/2020, 28 October 2020.

[125] PRODHEG, Recommendation 72/2020-A, 29 June 2021, p. 46.

[126] Public Prosecutor's Office II, for the municipality of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Research Unit UTC II GTO, investigation file nbr. 65249/2020, 16 July 2020.

[127] Public prosecutor's office for the regional prosecutor's office "D", NEAP of 28 October 2020; Untitled appeal of 28 October 2020 resolved on 1 December 2020 within criminal register Z1420-29, revoking NEAP for the police officers. However, on 29 April 2022, the NEAP was re-issued and an untitled appeal filed again. On 17 June 2022, the reviewing judge revoked the NEAP and requested specific investigation actions. Finally, on 17 March 2023, the NEAP was re-determined.

[128] CNDH, conclusion notified, file CNDH/2/2022/265/RI, 29 August 2022.

[129] Interview with members of Hasta Encontrarte, Irapuato, 6 June 2024.

. In this regard, it has been widely recognized that disappearance may result in a violation of the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. [130] Added to this are the negative health impacts resulting from searches, the results of these searches, impunity and institutional violence. Thus, 521 women searchers (79%) who responded to the survey suffered from at least one health problem.

HEALTH CONDITION	# WOMEN SEARCHERS	% ANSWER
– <i>Depression</i>	– 484	– 73%
– <i>Insomnia</i>	– 477	– 72%
– <i>Deterioration of health</i>	– 466	– 70%
– <i>Fear</i>	– 454	– 69%
– <i>Not doing things they used to enjoy (apathy)</i>	– 450	– 68%
– <i>Loss of appetite</i>	– 441	– 67%
– <i>Anger</i>	– 432	– 65%
– <i>Accidents during search activities</i>	– 149	– 23%
– <i>Substance abuse</i>	– 89	– 13%

Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

Women searchers mentioned the appearance of new illnesses and the worsening of previous conditions. Among the physical illnesses reported were colitis, gastritis, diabetes, blood pressure problems, thyroid problems including hyperthyroidism, tumours, cancer, heart problems, degenerative diseases, dry skin, infections, dental problems such as bruxism, bone problems, and facial paralysis. One women even mentioned having a detached retina caused by constant crying. [131] Some women searchers have also suffered health problems during the search activities, as being exposed to difficult meteorological and geographical conditions puts them at risk of developing new diseases or making those they may already have worse, such as exposure to the sun, fungal infections, or the risk of falling or slipping while physically carrying out the search. [132]

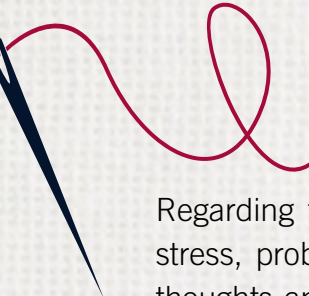
“Illness takes you over and won't let go... you say, ‘go away, because I have to search and be healthy’, but your body brings out all that is bad, all the pain, and doesn't know how to get rid of it.”¹³³

[130] UN, WGEID, Study on Enforced Disappearances and ESCR (previously cited), para. 31; IACHR-Court, Blake v. Guatemala, judgment of January 24, 1998, para. 114.

[131] Focus group with women searchers, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, 17 May 2023.

[132] Information obtained through focus groups.

[133] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, Colima, 20 July 2024.



Regarding the effects on mental health, women searchers mainly reported depression (73%), stress, problems of nervousness and anxiety, sadness, apathy (68%), feelings of guilt, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. Additionally, changes in sleep patterns, insomnia (72%), weight fluctuations (both weight gain and weight loss), tremors and memory problems were reported. In the case of children, speech problems were mentioned. [134]

“ **Our homes are like pharmacies, we buy thousands of things because our brain can't cope. Most of us rely [on drugs] to be able to sleep.**”¹³⁵

Another health problem mentioned by 13% of women (89) was substance abuse following the disappearance. While the negative health impacts of the disappearance of a loved one are significant, these are not usually a priority for many women searchers, who prefer to devote time and resources to what is most important to them – finding their loved one – while putting to one side other considerations such as rest, food, physical activity and medical check-ups. [136] In addition, the state does not always guarantee their right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. [137]

Finally, some elderly women searchers told Amnesty International that their worst fears were dying without having found their family member. This feeling is a source of severe stress when suffering from other health problems, and a very real scenario for several women searchers who have died without having found their loved one and accessed their right to the truth. [138]

4.9 IMPOVERISHMENT

Many women searchers were already in a situation of poverty before the disappearance. For example, most of the women who responded to the survey completed up to secondary school; a low level of education often makes it difficult for them to access higher-paying jobs. In addition, some women searchers did not have paid employment before the disappearance, being dedicated exclusively to care work.

[134] Information obtained through focus groups

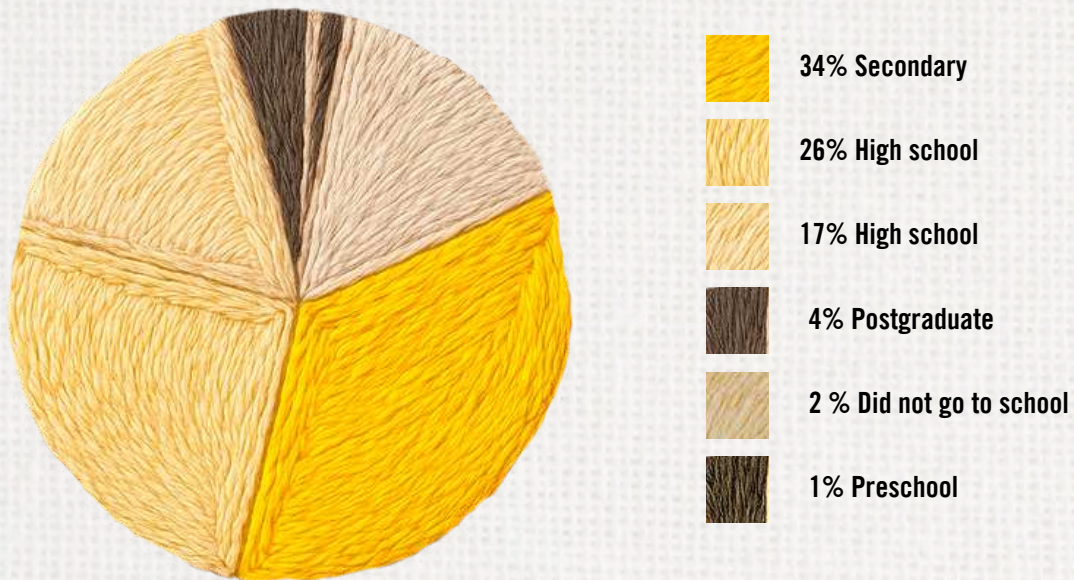
[135] Focus group with women searchers, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, 17 May 2023

[136] IDHEAS, “Report on the effects on the health of relatives of disappeared persons, and the institutional response”, 2023, p. 10.

[137] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 12; Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 10.

[138] ICRC, “Mexico: A regional exhibition honours the family members of missing people who died searching for their loved ones”, 9 August 2024, [icrc.org/en/news-release/mexico-regional-exhibition-honours-family-members-missing-people-who-died-searching](https://www.icrc.org/en/news-release/mexico-regional-exhibition-honours-family-members-missing-people-who-died-searching)

Level of education of women searchers, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

However, women searchers often experience a significant deterioration in their situation of poverty derived from the disappearance of their loved one, with 66% (433) mentioning having lost economic resources. This can occur for a number of reasons, including the disappearance of the main or sole economic provider of the home or family and the loss of a job or business after the disappearance. Following a disappearance, many women are left with caregiving roles that they must carry out on their own, which can make it difficult for them to find sources of income. Thus, many women searchers must take on three roles simultaneously: providers, caregivers and searchers. [139]

Added to this is the need to use their own resources on the searches they must undertake due to the inefficiency of state searches. Searching involves significant expenditure of economic resources, as well as important implications in terms of time and health. Appropriate clothing and materials are required, such as shovels, t-shirts or drones; money is required for transport and travel, for paying fuel, having private vehicles, paying for tickets for public transport, for meals and sometimes accommodation as well. [140]

[139] Amnesty International, Transforming Pain into Rights: Risks, Threats and Attacks on Women Searchers in Colombia (Index: AMR 23/8752/2024), p. 43.

[140] Information obtained through focus groups; MNDM, "Diagnóstico de Seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, pp. 14-15.



One woman searcher stated that she waits for her pension payment each month, all of which goes into the search, and then she waits to do the same in the following month. [141]

Some women stated that the very stigma of having a disappeared family member has led them to lose their paid jobs, since employers consider it a dangerous situation which can affect their image or are unwilling to provide the necessary support so that the women can continue with the search. Of the women who responded to the Amnesty survey, 185 (28%) indicated that they had lost their paid employment after the disappearance. For example, one woman mentioned that she was fired from her job as a domestic worker because her employers assumed that her son was probably heading down the wrong path, and they did not want any trouble because of her. [142]

Most of the women searchers who responded to the survey (79%) have paid employment, most of them through self-employment or flexible work options, such as trade (35%), cooking in restaurants or food stalls (8%) and cleaning work (6%). The situation they find themselves in often results in the loss of employment opportunities, being forced to give up stable jobs, or having to look for flexible employment options, such as self-employment. [143] Additionally, 18 women (3%) mentioned that they had two or more jobs, a situation that represents a huge burden for them, since they are also carrying out search work on top of doing these jobs.

Finally, some women searchers stated that they had to sell assets such as furniture, a car or household appliances in order to cover expenses. Their right to find or continue to have decent housing was also affected. In this case, 151 searchers (23%) said that they had lost their home after the disappearance. And it must be noted that recovering these economic resources is much more difficult for women searchers following a disappearance.



I got thrown out by my landlord because he'd seen me on the news and thought that what I was doing attracted bad people. I moved to Mexico City with my nine-year-old son. I was practically living on the streets for three months. As a result, my son went through periods where he was extremely depressed. ¹⁴⁴



[141] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, Colima, 20 July 2024.

[142] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, Colima, 20 July 2024.

[143] Information obtained through focus groups; MNDM, "Diagnóstico de Seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 14-15.

[144] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.



HASTA ENCONTRARTE – VERÓNICA DURÁN

Veronica lost her job after being arrested for participating in a peaceful protest. “I had been working in that company for five years. The boss spoke to me and said he didn't want me to get involved in those things, that I should either stop looking for my son or leave my job. I replied that I would never stop looking for my son. He only waited 10 days and then told me that he didn't really need me anymore and, well, a lot of things collapsed around me. There was no more fuel for me to go out to search for my son. I was almost a year and a half without electricity, without water, sometimes without eating. That year was very, very difficult. I didn't like having to tell people ‘I don't have [money], I'm hungry, I don't have fuel.’” [145]

COLECTIVA 10 DE OCTUBRE – SELF-EMPLOYMENT

The women from the 10 October collective, in Chihuahua, believe that the authorities should support them to build the skills that would allow them to get paid employment that aligns with search needs. They have requested various workshops, such as sewing and carpentry, as well as support for equipment such as sewing machines and tortilla presses. They also believe that they could benefit from being included in federal government work programmes, such as the “Sowing Life Programme”, [146] since this would allow them to perform paid work and implement remembrance activities, such as naming trees after their loved ones. [147]

4.10 IMPUNITY

Women searchers mentioned the lack of progress in their cases, both in terms of the investigation and of the actual search by the authorities, and claimed that, if they themselves do not push the cases, they would be closed and archived. Impunity is one of the main challenges around disappearance. Women searchers experience it as a form of double violence: on the one hand, impunity in cases of disappearance is, in itself, a violence that causes or worsens various aspects of searchers' lives, such as physical and mental health. On the other, prevailing impunity for the human rights violations experienced by women searchers, as narrated in this report, is also a type of persistent violence that perpetuates the structural discrimination that women searchers face. [148] There is almost total impunity in these cases. [149]



I have received threats over the phone. When I go to the prosecutor's office to report the numbers, their reply is: ‘listen, why don't you just change your [phone] number?’ But I can't change my number because it's the only one my disappeared son knows.



[147] Personal interview with Bertha Isabel Ramírez, Parral, Chihuahua, 25 November 2024.

[148] Amnesty International, “Searching without fear” (previously cited) p. 52.

[149] UN CED, Report on the visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 25. For further details, see section on prosecutors' offices.

[150] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, 20 July 2024.

5. INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE



Amnesty International has argued that states have, among others, the obligation to protect searchers from risks, threats and attacks arising from their search activity without discrimination. [151] Despite the creation of specific institutions and legislation to address the disappearance crisis facing the country, as well as existing international standards on how to address this situation from a human rights perspective, significant challenges remain in the implementation of these laws and standards with a gender and intersectional perspective in the Mexican context.

Women searchers rarely approach the authorities to report the risks and impacts they face, as detailed previously. Only 55% of the women searchers who responded to the survey made at least one report of violence or risk to the authorities, with most acts of violence and harm experienced going unreported (only 17% of such acts were reported). This is due to multiple reasons, including a lack of trust in the authorities, collusion between public officials and organized crime, a lack of awareness of rights and the functions of the authorities, and discriminatory stereotypes and revictimization when reporting an act of violence or harm. [152]

[151] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), p. 16.

[152] Information obtained through focus groups.

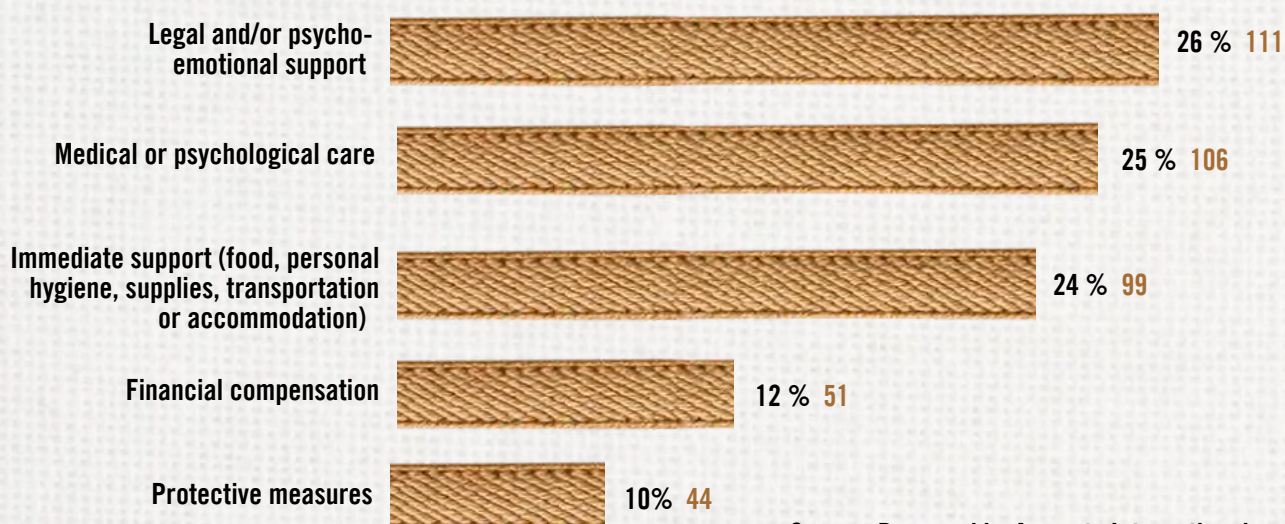
Women searchers receiving support from the authorities, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

Of the women searchers who responded to the survey, 54% reported having received some support from the state to deal with the risks and problems they face. This means that approximately one in two searchers has received no support from the authorities to address the adverse consequences of the disappearance. The support received, as indicated by the women searchers, includes:

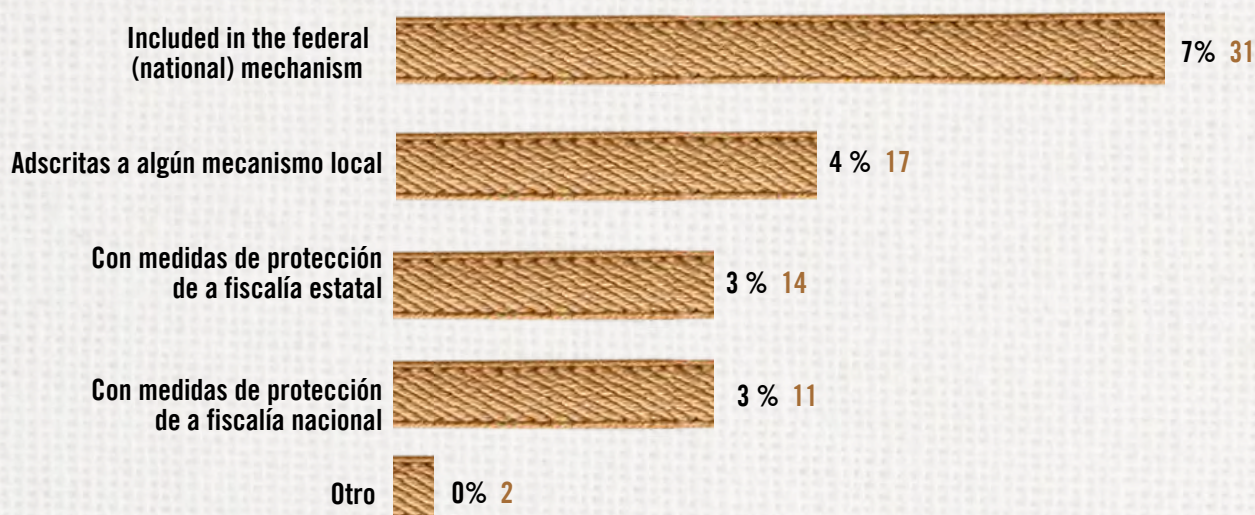
Support received by women searchers from the authorities, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

Regarding protection measures, 60 (15%) women who responded to the survey stated that they had protection measures from prosecutors' offices or were included in a protection mechanism.

Women searchers included in a protection mechanism or receiving protection support from an institution, 2024



Fuente: elaborado por Amnistía Internacional

Structural or institutional violence has been understood to mean institutional practices, laws or procedures that adversely affect groups or individuals psychologically, mentally, culturally, economically, spiritually or physically [153] Among the various responses that the state has provided to the women searchers are a number of acts and omissions that delay, obstruct or prevent the enjoyment and exercise of their human rights. [154] This is a situation that disproportionately affects women and therefore constitutes a form of structural discrimination that promotes impunity and obstructs the implementation of a gender and intersectional perspective. [155]

This section considers institutional violence through an analysis of the main challenges identified by the women searchers with regard to the authorities responsible for responding to violations of their human rights.

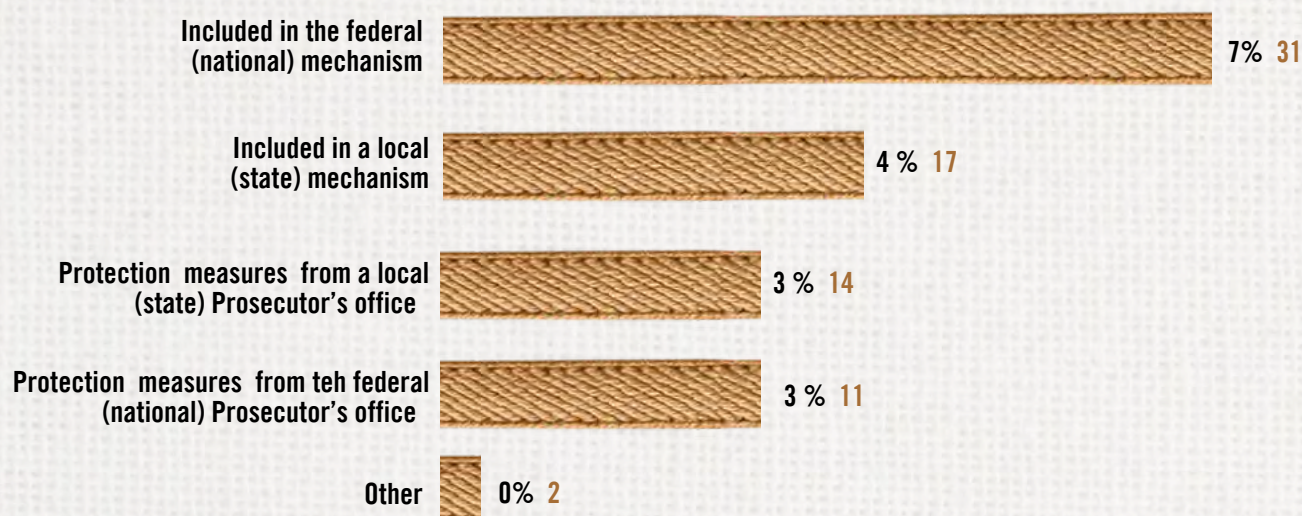
[153] Special Rapporteur on the right to health (previously cited), 14 April 2022, para. 68.

[154] General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, Article 18: Acts or omissions of public servants at any level of government that discriminate, use gender stereotypes or aim to delay, obstruct or prevent the enjoyment and exercise of women's human rights and their access to the enjoyment of public policies aimed at preventing, addressing, investigating, punishing and eradicating different types of violence.

[155] IACHR, Northern Central America, Impact of Organized Crime on Women and Girls, OEA/Ser.L/V/II, 17 February 2023, paragraph 2.

Regarding protection measures, 60 (15%) women who responded to the survey stated that they had protection measures from prosecutors' offices or were included in a protection mechanism.

Women searchers included in a protection mechanism or receiving protection support from an institution, 2024



Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

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[155] IACHR, Northern Central America, Impact of Organized Crime on Women and Girls, OEA/Ser.LV/II, 17 February 2023, paragraph 2.



It is important to clarify here that Mexico has a federal system, which means that political power is divided between the three levels of government – federal, state and municipal –, with the roles and responsibilities of each being established in the Constitution. [156] In relation to disappearance, protection of victims and human rights defenders, legislative responsibility lies with both the federal (national) and the state governments, which means that there are general laws (establishing the minimum standards for regulations on the issue) and local laws, and federal and state authorities. [157] This report does not provide an exhaustive analysis, nor does it contain data disaggregated by the different federal and local authorities. Thus, the main challenges are presented in a general manner, in the knowledge that these may vary from one state to another.

5.1. SEARCH COMMISSIONS

The CNB and state search commissions [158] are the main authorities responsible for guaranteeing the right of women searchers to participate in searches and have the obligation to conduct and follow up on actions to search for missing and disappeared persons. They must also coordinate the search actions in which other authorities participate, and act as liaison and mediation between all authorities and the families of disappeared persons. [159]

Regarding the work of the search commissions, the women searchers stated that when they ask for support, the search commissions usually provide transportation, food, fuel and security. However, they pointed out that it is usually the families who have to propose search locations and that, once in such locations, they are also the ones who carry out the search work. Amnesty International received numerous testimonies from women searchers who have preferred to carry out searches independently, despite the risks this involves, because of the shortcomings of the work carried out by the authorities.



Get the search commission to start searching... that name is far too fancy for it. It searches, but it doesn't really search.¹⁶⁰



The women searchers also mentioned the lack of sensitivity and empathy of the authorities during the search. One woman, for example, said that while working in a mass grave the public officials played narcocorrido music. [161]

[156] CPEUM (Political Constitution of the United Mexican States), Article 40.

[157] CPEUM, Article 73.

[158] There are state search commissions in the 32 states.

[159] The federal authority at national level, and state authorities at the state level. DOF (Official Federal Gazette), Standardized Protocol, Agreement SNBP/002/2020, 6 October 2020, paras. 93 to 98.

[160] Online interview with María Isabel Cruz Bernal, 26 January 2025.

[161] Focus group with women searchers, Colima, 20 July 2024. A narcocorrido is a subgenre of the Mexican corrido or narrative ballad, in this case about figures in the drug world.

Another woman talked of gender stereotypes and prejudice, claiming that she had been mocked for “being chubby” and not being able walk a kilometre uphill; [162] yet another said that a public official from the search commission got angry with her for having spent a large amount of resources going to a location where they found nothing. [163] Additionally, they pointed out the lack of consultation and participation of families in the appointment of the current head of the CNB. [164]

For its part, in 2022 the CED highlighted among its main concerns the insufficient budget of the institutions responsible for conducting searches, the understaffing of such institutions, their limited operational capacity and technical and security resources, and the delay in getting the search commission acting as the first responder to launch the search promptly. [165]

5.2. PROSECUTORS' OFFICES

The LGMDP classifies the enforced disappearance of persons and disappearance committed by individuals as crimes that must be prosecuted ex officio on a permanent and continuous basis, until the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared person have been determined or their remains have been found and fully identified. [166] Additionally, it establishes that the investigation, prosecution and punishment of these crimes falls under the responsibility of federal or local authorities, pursuant to the requirements set out in the law. [167]



The Standardized Protocol establishes that the prosecutor's offices and the ombudsperson's offices must search for disappeared persons in coordination with other authorities, such as the search commissions. [168] The prosecutor's offices are also responsible for investigating the facts and, together with technical and specialized authorities and the search commissions, for identifying bodies and human remains. [169] This overlapping of responsibilities between the search commissions and the prosecutors' offices has often generated confusion in the allocation of duties and a lack of coordination between them. [170]

The women searchers stated that prosecutor's offices still apply practices aimed at discouraging the reporting of a disappearance, such as wrongly claiming that they must wait 72 hours to file a report, [171] or minimizing the situation and the urgency of a response by stigmatizing the disappeared persons and their families. The women further stated that, when they go to file the complaint, their rights are not adequately explained to them and they are merely given a form to sign.

[162] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[163] Personal interview with Beatriz Zapoteco Neri, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 17 January 2025.

[164] Amnesty International, “The State of the World’s Human Rights”, (POL 10/7200/2024), p. 325.

[165] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 21.

[166] LGMDP, article 13.

[167] LGMDP, articles 24, 25 and 26.

[168] Standardized Protocol (previously cited), paras. 85–95.

[169] Standardized Protocol (previously cited) paras. 394–403.

[170] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 21.

[171] LGMDP, articles 5.I and 5.II.

In addition, they said that the cases do not progress unless they themselves present evidence and constantly pressure the authorities, and shared concerns regarding the lack of staff and rate of staff turnover, which hinders the timely monitoring of their cases and causes revictimization by having to start afresh with a new public official.. [172]

“ They didn't want me to file the complaint, saying I had to wait 72 hours because, according to them, she was having a good time with her boyfriend and that's why we weren't hearing from her. Then they kept changing the official from the prosecutor's office that we spoke with... which is victimization because we had to keep going back to the beginning. The files are filled with the same forms over and over again. I think they should have found my daughter a long time ago, unfortunately we have nothing.”¹⁷³

In this regard, the CED has welcomed the existence of special prosecutor's offices or units responsible for investigating enforced disappearances in all states. However, it pointed to a number of key concerns, including the lack of prioritization of the investigation and criminal prosecution of disappearances; the inadequate investigation of the facts of a disappearance, which results in the imposition of only a small number of sentences; the shortcomings in the prosecution of the crime of enforced disappearance, despite strong evidence of the involvement of authorities; limited progress in investigations and criminal prosecution; the limited capacity to investigate as a result of applying hypotheses based on prejudice and stereotypes; and the insufficient budget allocated at the federal and state levels for the performance of their work. [174]

Furthermore, the prosecutor's offices are responsible for investigating criminal complaints and establishing the facts and therefore play an essential role in the response to crimes committed against the women searchers. The women searchers, however, stated that they filed complaints with various prosecutors' offices regarding crimes and human rights violations committed against them, but that no progress had been made so far in any of the cases. For example, 108 women searchers who responded to Amnesty International's survey reported receiving threats but said that those responsible for the threats were only identified in nine of the cases.

“ I was threatened over the phone and told that in 10 days someone was going to come and pick up the list of relatives of disappeared persons that we support through the collective, including their contact numbers. This is very serious, because what they wanted was to extort money from the families. I immediately reported this to the prosecutor's office, but they didn't want to open a case because 'there was no way of knowing who had made the threat'. They ignored me and I had to give up the information... they endangered not only my life, but the rights of all the women searchers we support.”¹⁷⁵

[172] Focus groups conducted by Amnesty International.

[173] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

[174] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 11.

[175] Online interview with María Isabel Cruz Bernal, 26 January 2025



Impunity is one of the main concerns regarding the justice system, in investigations related both to disappearances and to crimes committed against women searchers. In cases of disappearances, almost absolute impunity prevails. [176] The CED reported that, as at 26 November 2021, only between 2% and 6% of the cases of disappearance had been brought before the courts and only 36 judgments had been issued in cases of disappearance at the national level. [177] In addition, it expressed concern regarding the often passive attitude of the judicial authorities on the issue, which has an impact on the lack of trust in the authorities and the high number of cases that are not reported. [178]

An investigation by the organization Impunidad Cero found that total cumulative impunity for crimes of disappearance sits at 99% for the period 2019 to 2022. [179] The states with the highest number of convictions have an impunity rate of around 95 to 98%, [180] while there are seven states with 100% impunity, with not a single conviction. [181] At the federal judiciary level, there are only 22 convictions for the crime of enforced disappearance of persons, and none for the crime of disappearance by individuals. [182]

This type of impunity has been classified by academics as “active impunity”, which means that it is the result not only of a lack of capacity of the authorities, but also of a series of deliberate actions that seek to undermine or sabotage existing investigations or bring them to an end before they generate results. [183]

According to the CED, impunity in Mexico is a structural feature that favours the recurrence and concealment of enforced disappearances. In addition, it endangers and causes anxiety to victims, public officials involved in searching and investigating cases, and society as a whole, as well as being a factor of revictimization. [184] Given this situation, the academic community and civil society have proposed the creation of a hybrid mechanism of justice on the issue of disappearances, comprised by national and international actors, to carry out independent and impartial investigations and focus on dismantling the patterns in the actions of organized crime and the networks of corruption impunity. [185]

[176] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 24.

[177] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 25.

[178] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 26.

[179] Impunidad Cero, “Impunidad en delitos de desaparición en México (Impunity for crimes of disappearance in Mexico)”, December 2023, p. 54.

[180] Campeche (95.2%), Colima (97.5%) and Guanajuato (97.8%) in: Impunidad Cero, “Impunidad en delitos de desaparición en México”, December 2023, p. 51.

[181] Aguascalientes, Chiapas, CDMX, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Yucatan in: Impunidad Cero, “Impunidad en delitos de desaparición en México”, December 2023, p. 51.

[182] Impunidad Cero, “Impunidad en delitos de desaparición en México”, December 2023, p. 54.

[183] Anaya Muñoz, A., Cavallaro, J. and Cruz Marín, “La impunidad activa en México: cómo entender y enfrentar las violaciones masivas a los derechos humanos (Active impunity in Mexico: how to understand and confront massive human rights violations)”, 2021, ITESO, p. 59. <https://rei.iteso.mx/items/17542451-8929-4b13-bd9b-fbc3ea1f63d5>

[184] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 27.

[185] University Network for Human Rights and Fundar, “Las desapariciones en México” (previously cited) 2024, p. 43.

ARACELI MAGDALENA RODRÍGUEZ NAVA

RETALIATION, THREATS AND IMPUNITY



Araceli is searching for her son Luis Ángel León Rodríguez, who disappeared on 16 November 2009 along with six other police officers and a civilian while travelling from Mexico City to Ciudad Hidalgo, in Michoacán, where they had been deployed to work by the Federal Police. The families involved formed the Colibrí collective, of which Araceli is the founder and representative. Motivated by the urgency of being able to carry out an effective search for her son, she completed her middle and high school studies through the open education system. She then studied for a law degree from 2017 to 2022 and completed a master's degree in criminal science in 2024.

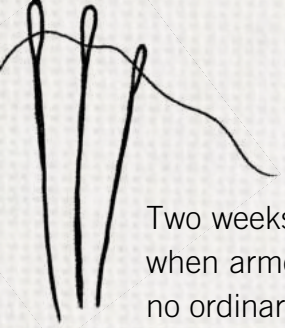
Since 2014, she has been included in the federal mechanism and receives the highest protection measures. Her children also receive protection measures, having been threatened and even attacked. She has been receiving threats for 16 years, including from officials at the highest level, from alleged members of organized crime and from unidentified persons. Among them, Genaro García Luna, then head of the Ministry of Public Security, who told her that she should reflect on “how she would like to die” when, in a meeting with victims and authorities, Araceli questioned why the authorities were not looking for her son.

In 2017, the CNDH issued a recommendation recognizing links between the municipal and federal police forces and members of organized crime operating in the area. However, it did not define Luis Ángel's disappearance as an enforced disappearance. [186] More than a decade after the events, no Mexican state official has been brought to justice for the disappearance, with only one public official being sanctioned for the crime of obstruction of justice. [187] For omissions and irregularities in guaranteeing the right to memory, truth, justice and reparation, Araceli took the Mexican state before the United Nations Human Rights Committee in February 2023, a procedure that is pending resolution. [188]

[186] CNDH, Recommendation 66/2017, December 4, 2017, www.cndh.org.mx/documento/recomendacion-662017

[187] Personal interview with Araceli Rodríguez Nava, CDMX, 29 January 2025.

[188] Aristegui Noticias, “Demandan a México ante ONU por desaparición de policía (Mexico sued at UN for police disappearance)”, 16 February 2023, aristeguinoticias.com/1602/mexico/demandan-a-mexico-ante-onu-por-desaparicion-de-policia/



Two weeks later, on 4 March 2023, Araceli was attacked on the Acapulco-Chilpancingo highway, when armed men stopped her vehicle and disarmed her bodyguards. Araceli stressed that it was no ordinary attack: she was the only one beaten, and she was forced to shout out the name of her son Luis Ángel three times; the attackers also mentioned several times that they were investigating her. They threatened to kill her but ultimately left her and her bodyguards bound hand and foot and lying face down on the ground. Araceli stated: “This episode really scared me, and I felt that the terror was never going to go away. I washed myself, scrubbed myself and I thought ‘please, let this smell go away, get those hands off me...’ It’s really horrible, someone touching your body without your consent, and the sound of the bullet when they are priming the gun... They succeeded in intimidating me for 15 days, [during which] I did not go out, I felt guilty.” The prosecutor’s office of Chilpancingo issued a NEAP, as it found no potential perpetrators, and ruled that the attack was not related to her work as a searcher but was simply attempted vehicle theft.

5.3. PROTECTION MECHANISMS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND JOURNALISTS

In this context of security risks, some women searchers decide to approach both the National Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists and local state mechanisms for protection. The purpose of such mechanisms is to protect human rights defenders and journalists who suffer attacks as a result of their work. [189]

The federal mechanism has taken on 330 persons who are searching for disappeared persons; 27% (88) men and 73% (242) women. [190] Asimismo, ha incorporado a 134 colectivos de personas buscadoras de diversas entidades federativas, destacando Michoacán (15), Guanajuato (14), Veracruz (12), Baja California (11), Tamaulipas (11), Jalisco (10), Sonora (9), Estado de México (9) y Guerrero (9). [191] It has also taken on 134 searcher collectives from various states, including Michoacán (15), Guanajuato (14), Veracruz (12), Baja California (11), Tamaulipas (11), Jalisco (10), Sonora (9), State of Mexico (9) and Guerrero (9). [192] The perpetrators of 80% of these assaults have not been identified, while 9% are attributed to state authorities, 7% to organized crime, 2% to the National Guard and the Secretariat of National Defence (Sedena) and 2% to municipal authorities. [193]

Despite some important advances in the incorporation of women searchers as human rights defenders, there are a number of important challenges in ensuring their safety, as described below.

a) Lack of recognition of women searchers as human rights defenders

[189] Government of Mexico, federal mechanism, gob.mx/defensorasyperiodistas

[190] Request for information: federal mechanism, “Women searchers protected by the mechanism”, October 2024.

[191] Request for information: federal mechanism (previously cited), 2024.

[192] Request for information: federal mechanism (previously cited), 2024, p. 3.

[193] Request for information: federal mechanism (previously cited), 2024, p. 4.





The work carried out by women searchers is not always recognized by the protection mechanisms within the spectrum of the defence of human rights. This situation has been reported by the women searchers themselves before the IACHR [194] and by the CED as one of the main challenges to guaranteeing their protection. [195] The argument for denying them access to protection mechanisms is that, although they are at risk, this derives from their status as victims and not as defenders of human rights. [196]

But this is not correct, since women searchers are victims, but they are also human rights defenders, and therefore the attacks they experience are a result of the two characteristics. [197] In this regard, the CED recommended that the Mexican state effectively recognize searchers as human rights defenders and thus grant them access to state protection. [198] Protection measures should allow women to carry out their human rights work and continue their search as far as possible.

Some women searchers told Amnesty International that the only persons receiving such support are the leaders of the collectives, or those with a very high public profile. This challenge has been identified by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico (OHCHR) [199] and the CED, [200] with both highlighting the need for the risks faced by all persons belonging to the collectives to be assessed and for protection to be individually targeted.

They also pointed out that some women are rejected by the mechanism because they have not filed a complaint, despite the fact that this is a right rather than a requirement established in the applicable legislation. [201] Additionally, they have been denied protection because they have little evidence or because of situations that are difficult to prove, such as subtle harassment, inability to explain who is following them, or because the risk analyses carried out do not reflect the security situation that the searchers experience. [202]



By searching you are already a defender of other people's rights, talking about rights makes you a human rights defender. This is not understood by the mechanism, everyone wants to evade responsibility... until when? until they kill us? If you're not in the spotlight, the mechanism won't stand up for you²⁰³



[194] IACHR, Hearing: Mexico: Protection of Women Searchers, 28 February 2024.

[195] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 35.

[196] Article 19, "Pending rights" (previously cited), p. 93.

[197] Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), p. 25.

[198] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 36b)

[199] OHCHR, "Diagnóstico sobre el funcionamiento del mecanismo (Evaluation of the functioning of the mechanism)", June 2019, pp. 49-50, hchr.org.mx/diagnostico-sobre-el-funcionamiento-del-mecanismo-de-proteccion-para-personas-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-y-periodistas/

[200] UN CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, para. 35.

[201] Law for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists and its Regulations, articles 19.VIII and 77, respectively.

[202] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 29 July 2024.

[203] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

b) Lack of a prevention approach

The role of prevention in ensuring the safety of women searchers is essential, especially in a context with such a high rate of impunity. Impunity and lack of accountability have been identified as structural conditions that create or accentuate the risks faced by human rights defenders. [204] According to the OHCHR, “without a prevention approach combined with actions aimed at eliminating the causes of risk, the need for individual protection will not be reduced and the mechanism will ultimately become ineffective and unsustainable.” [205]



What the mechanism does is turn our life into a cage, but nothing more. There is no measure aimed at addressing the structural violence we experience every day from another place. Violence is addressed with more violence. There is no prevention approach. It is something that causes harm and generates more victims every day.²⁰⁶



In this regard, the federal mechanism has provided training to women searchers on risk prevention and self-protection tools. [207] Although this measure is positive, it is not enough to have an effective prevention approach aimed at eliminating the structural causes that generate risk. [208] Many women searchers stated that they were not aware of the mechanism or its functions, despite experiencing serious safety problems, and it is therefore important to ensure increased communication within women searcher collectives. [209] Likewise, regular generation and publication of data related to attacks and patterns of risk experienced by these women would help in the development of public policies. [210] Finally, other types of prevention actions could be considered, for example, unequivocally condemning stigmatizing speech against women searchers and disseminating their work by publicly recognizing them as human rights defenders.

c) Lack of a comprehensive vision with a gender, intersectional and children perspective

Based on information received by women searchers, **Amnesty International considers that protection mechanisms lack a comprehensive protection approach.** Although they address the security situation, they do not adequately coordinate with other authorities to guarantee other types of rights, such as economic, social and cultural rights, especially when relocation is ordered as a protection measure.

[204] Declaration on Human Rights Defenders +25, 2024, Article 7, p.17, (c)

[205] OHCHR, “Diagnóstico sobre el funcionamiento del mecanismo” (previously cited), June 2019, p. 10.

[206] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[207] Segob, “Brinda Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas capacitación a colectivos en Guanajuato (Protection mechanism for human rights defenders and journalists provides training to collectives in Guanajuato)”, 22 July 2021, gob.mx/segob/prensa/brinda-mecanismo-de-proteccion-para-personas-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-y-periodistas-capacitacion-a-colectivos-en-guanajuato

[208] OHCHR, “Diagnóstico sobre el funcionamiento del mecanismo” (previously cited), June 2019, pp. 10-11.

[209] Regulations on the Law for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists, article 45.III.

[210] Regulations on the Law for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists, article 45. II.

Women searchers experience violence that has a differentiated impact on them due to their gender and other situations and characteristics that may place them in a vulnerable situation. It is therefore essential that a risk analysis is carried out taking these specific conditions into account. In addition, the protection measures provided must be agreed with the women searchers themselves and result from appropriate consultation with them; while considering the adverse impacts they may generate in order to mitigate them and effectively avoid human rights violations.

Thus, when carrying out risk analysis and implementing protection and preventive measures, it is essential to apply a gender and intersectional approach, taking into account whether the women searchers also have children and adolescents under their care, whether they are the economic provider in the home, and other characteristics such as Indigenous identity or migration status that exacerbate the risks faced. This approach requires the mechanism to coordinate with other authorities to ensure that women searchers and their families are able to continue with their life projects. This implies that, wherever possible, families should not be separated and children and adolescents should have their best interests guaranteed as well as the necessary protections for the situation they are living, which in turn requires understanding care as a multidimensional concept, linked to other social rights such as education, health, work, social security and housing, among others.

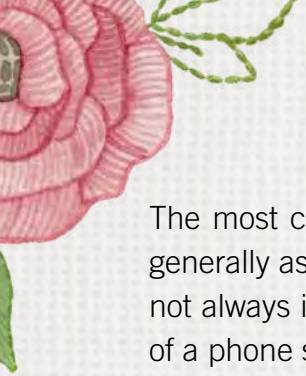
“It has no childhood or gender perspective. Being a mother is a role that we play, [a role] that we have and want to have, but that is made more difficult by the violence we experience. There are no comprehensive solutions.”²¹¹

When responding to the Amnesty International survey, 44 women searchers stated that they are part of either the federal or a local state mechanism. Their perception of the measures received is as follows:

PERCEPTION	# SEARCHERS UNDER THE FEDERAL OR A LOCAL STATE MECHANISM	% OF TOTAL WOMEN SEARCHERS UNDER THE FEDERAL OR A LOCAL STATE MECHANISM
<i>Adequate</i>	7	17%
<i>Average</i>	11	27%
<i>Inadequate</i>	8	20%
<i>Totally inadequate</i>	15	37%

Source: Prepared by Amnesty International

[211] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.



The most common measure granted by the federal mechanism is an emergency button (known generally as a panic button), but this is not always effective as the response from the authorities is not always immediate. Nor is it operational under many search activity situations, because of lack of a phone signal. [212]

Another issue that women searchers mentioned is the assignment of local agents to protect them, despite the fact that they do not trust these people. This may be due to having received threats from local level authorities or because there are indications of collusion between local authorities and organized crime. [213]

The MNDM evaluation highlighted the fact that, although the measures are free, the costs deriving from such measures place a burden on the beneficiaries, with the increased electricity costs due to the installation of surveillance cameras, for example, being borne by women. It also documented a tendency to withdraw protection measures for women searchers on grounds of a supposed decrease in risk that is not consistent with the security situation of women searchers. [214]

Other challenges identified by the OHCHR include failing to communicate with all women searchers involved when monitoring group cases, failing to adapt action plans in response to substantial changes in risk conditions, and failing to take action when the perpetrators are public officials or to send “zero tolerance” messages in response to such behaviours. [215]

e) Internal coordination challenges and insufficient resources

Ensuring the availability of sufficient human and material resources is essential for protection mechanisms to be effective. [216] Asimismo, deben mejorar la coordinación, tanto al interior de la institución como con otras autoridades, para garantizar una protección integral a las personas beneficiarias. [217]



The mechanism revictimizes us, it doesn't really [care]. An hour ago I spoke to the lawyer who has my case file to tell him about a risk situation I just experienced from one of my son's aggressors. He replied that they are responsible for protecting us as defenders, but not on matters relating to disappearance, that investigation case files are the responsibility of the FGR [Office of the Attorney General].²¹⁸



[212] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 29 July 2024.

[213] Interview with members of Hasta Encontrarte, Irapuato, 6 June 2024.

[214] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, pp. 126-127.

[215] OHCHR, “Diagnóstico sobre el funcionamiento del mecanismo” (previously cited), June 2019, pp. 49-50.

[216] Observations Mexico (previously cited), 29 September 2023, para. 35.

[217] OHCHR, “Diagnóstico sobre el funcionamiento del mecanismo” (previously cited), June 2019, pp. 10-11.

[218] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

f) Lack of empathy from public officials

The women searchers who participated in focus groups and interviews agreed that there is a lack of empathy and understanding of the issues they face, both in connection with the disappearance of a loved one and when carrying out search work. Empathy and understanding are essential, not only to ensure that women searchers receive dignified treatment, but also to provide effective protection measures that are consistent with their needs.



The treatment by staff of the federal mechanism is inhuman... they saw that I was on the verge of a panic attack, and they asked me: what is your life project? I don't even know what I'm going to do tomorrow, whether I'll be able to get out of bed. It is a dehumanization of public officials.²¹⁹



MARÍA ISABEL CRUZ BERNAL

INSUFFICIENT SECURITY MEASURES IN THE FACE OF THREATS



Isabel is looking for her son, Yosimar García Cruz, who disappeared on 26 January 2017. She founded the collective Sabuesos Guerreras (Warrior Hounds), which currently brings together more than 2,500 families and has located 700 bodies. Isabel says: “Maybe I will never find Yosimar, but for each body I find and bring home, for every mother who blesses me, a little piece of him makes the difference. That's how I put Yosimar together again, piece by piece.” [220]

Isabel has been the victim of numerous threats, including having a gun pointed at her head while in her van outside her home, seeing armed men standing in front of her house

[219] Focus group with displaced women searchers, CDMX, 20 November 2024.

[220] Online interview with María Isabel Cruz Bernal, 6 January 2025



and threats over the phone demanding that she stop her search activities and support for other cases. She has also witnessed a shooting during a search and been attacked while out putting up search posters. The wave of violence that began in Sinaloa in September 2024 has intensified the threats, as her collective carried out a campaign to protect families from groups that extort money from women searchers (people who get in touch with families and ask for money under the false promise of releasing their loved one). Isabel has filed 13 complaints with prosecutor's offices for various threats, but they have not had a significant impact on the investigation.

She has also been the victim of corruption by the authorities. She says that, on one occasion, “the prosecutor’s office called me and sat me down at a round table. They suddenly took out a check book and the prosecutor says, ‘write down as many zeroes as you want, I’m going to solve your life financially’”. Isabel left the meeting feeling angry and frustrated. Two days later, she received another threat.


Isabel has been receiving protection measures for her work as a human rights defender since 2017. She says she has received pepper spray, a bulletproof vest for searching, and surveillance services by the security forces from the local mechanism, and an alert button from the federal mechanism that stopped working a year ago. These measures have not been enough to protect her: the threats have not only continued but intensified. In response, the local mechanism requested bodyguards for her from the government of the state of Sinaloa, but it failed to comply on grounds that it does not have enough staff. The federal mechanism has said it will provide protection if she moves home and has even considered relocating her to another state. These measures do not take a comprehensive view of her situation, as they fail to provide the logistical and other support that Isabel needs in order to care for the health of another of her sons whose advanced diabetes has worsened since the disappearance.

5.4 VICTIM CARE COMMISSIONS

The Executive Commission for Assistance to Victims (CEAV) and the victims commissions at the local state level [221](victims commissions) are an essential pillar for guaranteeing the rights of the searchers as victims, having been created for the purpose of “guaranteeing, promoting and protecting the rights of victims of crime and human rights violations, in particular the rights to assistance, protection, care, truth, justice, comprehensive reparation and due diligence”. [222]

[221] All states have a state victims commission, except for Campeche. Red lupa, imdhd.org/redlupa/.

[222] LGV, Article 84.



According to the National Registry of Victims (RENAVI), at the federal and state levels there are 3,938 people registered as victims of crime, 1,026 as victims of human rights violations and 314 as victims of crimes and human rights violations, resulting in a total of 5,278 victims registered as of the third quarter of 2024. [223] This is a very low number, considering that it includes disappeared persons, compared to the more than 125,000 disappeared persons reported to the RNPDO in the same period. It is therefore safe to assume that the vast majority of victims of the crime of disappearance do not receive the support measures to which they are entitled according to the LGV.

The CEAV has reported that in the last five years it has provided social work support (legal advice and assistance for food, accommodation and transfers) to 1,083 men and 3,296 women searchers, psychological support to 419 men and 1,091 women, and health support for 158 men and 379 women. [224]

In this regard, 261 women who responded to the survey requested support from the CEAV and 515 requested support from the local state commissions, mostly for worsening physical and mental health issues. In the focus groups, some women mentioned that they receive support regularly from victims commissions, while others stated that they had tried in the past to get support but had been disappointed and do not currently receive support. Still others said that they had not approached the commissions to request support. [225]

The main concerns expressed by women searchers in relation to victims commissions are detailed below.

--Difficulty in being recognized as victims

Few families of missing persons are formally recognized as victims, [226] which is critical to accessing the resources and comprehensive reparation established in the LGV. [227] This may be due to various factors, such as lack of awareness and failure by the authorities to provide information on their rights, or geographical and economic barriers for women living in rural areas, Indigenous women and women from outside Mexico whose relatives disappeared along the migration route. For these women, accessing the rights established in the LGV is complicated because it requires knowledge of the institutions and their functions, travelling long distances and having the financial resources to carry out the necessary procedures. Added to this is the lack of translators and interpreters for Indigenous language speakers.

[223] CEAV, "Estadística de Transparencia Focalizada del Registro Nacional de Víctimas (Focused Transparency Statistics of the National Registry of Victims)", third quarter of 2024, p. 8.

[224] CEAV, Request for information No. 330007624000543, 10 January 2025.

[225] It is important to note that the support received and the perception of women searchers differed depending on the victims commission granting the support. This report does not make a detailed comparative analysis between the different commissions but only provides an overview of general concerns.

[226] MNDM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 131.

[227] LGV, articles 106 and 110.



Some women searchers warned that registration can take a long time, even years, and that they receive no protection measures during this time, with many eventually deciding not to request support. [228] One woman even mentioned that the CEAV services tried to convince her to stop searching for her family. [229]

-Difficulty in proving the causal link between the victimizing event and the impact on rights

Despite the fact that the link between disappearance and health impacts has been widely recognized, [230] women searchers told Amnesty International that the authorities often deny them support, arguing that there is no causal link between the victimizing event and the health impacts. [231]



The health issue never has anything to do with the victimizing event. There has not been a single case where this has been found to be so. If it's diabetes, they say you probably already had it before, for example. You've been careless, they say.²³²



While the causal link is evident in some cases of illness, such as those contracted during actual search activities, there are others where proving the causes of illness is very complicated, such as cancer. The same is true for pre-existing diseases which are considerably aggravated after the disappearance.

According to IDHEAS, the concept of causal link is used without providing the best possible protection to the victims, which often leaves them without the medical care to which they are entitled. [233]

Additionally, it warned that this leaves the decision at the discretion of public officials, which poses an increased risk of discrimination, since some people may not access support due to preconceived perceptions of public officials. The IDHEAS research found that those analysing the link between the health condition and the victimizing event are not specialized health professionals. [234]

The lack of a causal link has also been used to justify denying legal assistance, on grounds that the events are a result of the security context. [235]

[228] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

[229] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[230] IDHEAS, "Health effects report" (previously cited), 2023, p. 34; Amnesty International, "Searching without fear" (previously cited), pp. 47-48.

[231] "Victims will receive provisional, timely and prompt assistance from the Assistance Resources of the Executive Commission or the local state Victims Commissions as appropriate, according to the immediate needs that are directly related to the victimizing event." LGV, article 8.

[232] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

[233] IDHEAS, "Health effects report" (previously cited), 2023, pp. 33-34.

[234] IDHEAS, "Health effects report" (previously cited), 2023, p. 34.

[235] MNDM, "Diagnóstico de seguridad" (previously cited), 2024, p. 132.

-Delayed, insufficient and culturally inappropriate support

According to the women searchers, the support provided by the victims commissions is neither sufficient nor appropriate to the needs created by the disappearance. In relation to psychological support, the MNDM has noted that the support sessions they can attend are often limited [236] and that there is no formal monitoring of their situation or a clear personal plan tailored to their individual needs, so that it usually depends more on the goodwill of the public officials who deal with their case. Additionally, the women searchers mentioned that there are no translators and interpreters to ensure that those who do not speak Spanish (Indigenous or migrant persons) can access this service.

“ I needed psychological support, and I went for three and a half months. I would go every month, until suddenly the psychologist wrote to me and told me that I had to pay. I didn't like the way she told me, and I stopped going. I no longer trust the psychologist and she doesn't trust me either because I reported her. They gave me no other alternative.”²³⁷

Regarding legal assistance, it has already been said that getting timely and comprehensive monitoring of their cases is difficult. To this must be added that there is a continuous turnover of staff, which makes monitoring even more difficult and generates revictimization. [238] Other collectives have stated that economic support is often delayed with, in some cases, more than five months going by without receiving the minimum required to cover their basic needs.

“ We are surviving, I'm not sure how. It is difficult and very tiring. I'm desperate, sometimes I can't even sleep thinking that someone may get sick and not have money for medication, or that two days may go by without feeding the children, because they haven't received their payment. It's very unfair. You have to go to the CEAV and pester them, it's the only way to get them to pay us. It's very hard to be dealing with the authorities while seeing how vulnerable the families are.”²³⁹

One woman pointed out the difficulties in accessing grants so that their children can continue to study. [240] Finally, the women searchers said that the CEAV does not always listen to their needs and that the support provided fails to take into account other options or is culturally inappropriate. One example they mentioned was being able to receive alternative treatments, such as aromatherapy or a temazcal (a traditional cleansing ritual using heat and sweating).

[236] There are usually 10 sessions that can be extended. MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p. 132.

[237] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[238] MNDM, “Diagnóstico de seguridad” (previously cited), 2024, p. 132.

[239] Focus group with women searchers, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 28 July 2024.

[240] Personal interview with Beatriz Zapoteco Neri, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 17 January 2025

“Government support (especially from the CEAV) should include emotional treatments to help provide some release [from anxiety], but the reality is that there are not even enough of the drugs they use the most (clonazepam), let alone alternative therapies.”²⁴¹

-Lack of sensitivity and empathy

The CED has noted that staff of the victims commissions do not always have the necessary knowledge to properly advise the victims of disappearance, [242] and that there are few legal staff available, which prevents them from providing appropriate assistance. [243] The women searchers agreed with this and added the lack of sensitivity and empathy required when dealing with victims of disappearance to avoid revictimization. The women often felt that “it's like begging for support” [244] and that “they think we just want money and we're inventing things”. [245] The women also said that the format for requesting support is revictimizing, because they are asked to give the date of death of the person they are searching for and other sensitive details without apparent justification. For example, one woman who was asked to write down on paper what she felt on losing her daughter said: “having to explain that by writing it down to receive support... that really hurts”. [246]

“What we ask is that the person who is in that place is qualified, that they have the necessary requirements, sensitivity, humility... that they put themselves in our shoes, realize who they are giving support to.”²⁴⁷

- Lack of comprehensive reparation of the damage caused

The integral reparation of the damage caused in the case of relatives of disappeared persons includes measures of material reparation, to take into account the expenses for the relatives as a result of search activities and the potential income that the disappeared person would have received; of immaterial reparation for the harm caused to the victims as a result of rights violations; of satisfaction and guarantees of non-recurrence; the provision of medical care to relatives; the performance of acts of memory to remember the victims; and the obligation to search for the disappeared person and investigate the disappearance, among others. [248]

[241] Personal interview with Bertha Isabel Ramírez Lazos, Parral, Chihuahua, 25 November 2024.

[242] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 16 May 2022, para. 86

[243] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 18 May 2022, para. 84.

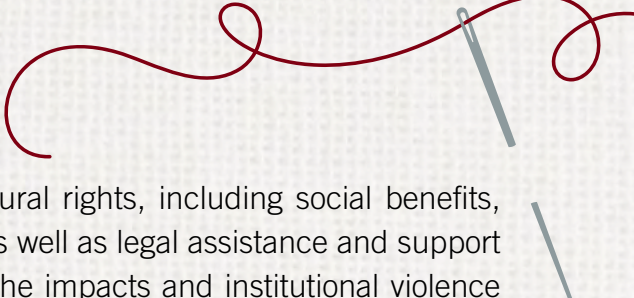
[244] Online interview with María Isabel Cruz Bernal, 26 January 2025.

[245] Focus group with women searchers, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, 17 May 17, 2023.

[246] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

[247] Focus group with women searchers, Ciudad Juárez, 18 May 2024.

[248] Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Cuadernillo de Jurisprudencia N°6: desaparición forzada (Case-Law Manual 6: enforced disappearance), p. 133.



It should have a strong focus on economic, social and cultural rights, including social benefits, health care, education and psychological assistance, [249] as well as legal assistance and support for the search. [250] In addition, it must take into account the impacts and institutional violence the relatives have experienced as a result of their work.

In Mexico there are no statistics on the number of reparations provided to women searchers or what they have consisted of. None of the women mentioned to Amnesty International having received any reparation for the damage caused, whether as victims of disappearance or for other crimes committed against them. In this regard, the CED noted that the reparations policy in the country is understood only as compensation, being too narrowly focused on cash payments. [251]

Araceli Magdalena Rodríguez Nava – Lack of comprehensive reparation of the damage caused

Araceli has not received from the CEAV comprehensive reparation in accordance with international standards for the damage caused in relation to the disappearance of her son. Despite the fact that the 2017 recommendation of the CNDH [252] establishes comprehensive reparation measures, including rehabilitation, satisfaction, non-recurrence and compensation, she has only received an amount of money as “subsidiary compensation”. A working group was also created, comprised by authorities, victims and their respective legal representatives, with the aim of providing a memorial, unveiling a plaque and offering a public apology. For more than seven years, Araceli and other relatives have been demanding that these measures be carried out.

5.5 MEXICAN FOREIGN SUPPORT MECHANISM FOR SEARCH AND INVESTIGATION (MAEBI)

MAEBI was created through Agreement A/117/15 [253] and brings together all the actions and measures aimed at facilitating access to justice for migrants and their families who are in a different country and have been victims of crimes and human rights violations in Mexico. [254] In 2022, specific guidelines were approved for searching for disappeared persons in the context of people on the move and investigating such disappearances (Guidelines). [255]

[250] UN WGEID, Study on Enforced Disappearances and ESCR (previously cited), 9 July 2015, para. 69.

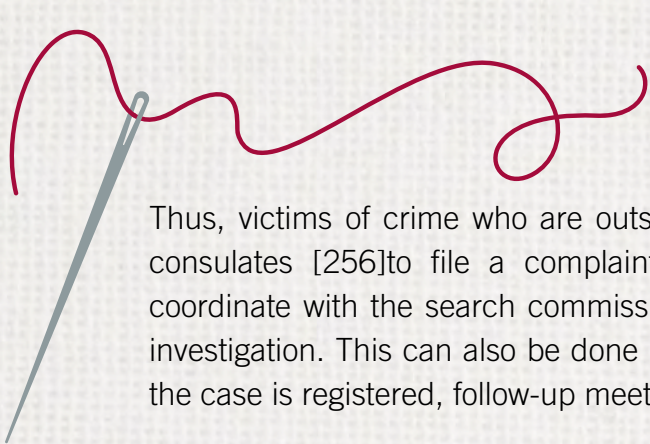
[251] UN CED, Report on visit to Mexico (previously cited), 16 May 2022, para. 82.

[252] CNDH, Recommendation 66/2017 (previously cited), 2017.

[253] DOF, Agreement A/117/15 establishing the Migrant Crimes Investigation Unit and the MAEBI and setting out its powers and organizational structure, 18 December 2015, dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5420681&fecha=18/12/2015#gsc.tab=0

[254] DOF, Agreement A/117/15 (previously cited), 18 December 2015, second to last recital.

[255] DOF, Agreement SNBP/001/2022 through which the National System for the Search for Persons approves the MAEBI Guidelines, 14 December 2022, dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5674289&fecha=14/12/2022#gsc.tab=0



Thus, victims of crime who are outside the national territory can go to Mexican embassies and consulates [256] to file a complaint and/or request a search, and these bodies must then coordinate with the search commissions and prosecutors' offices to ensure effective search and investigation. This can also be done remotely by emailing the appropriate authorities. [257] Once the case is registered, follow-up meetings are held online.

There is no official public data on the number of cases of migrant disappearances that have been coordinated through MAEBI. In this regard, the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law (FJEDD), in coordination with family committees in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, has filed 124 complaints through MAEBI. [258]

MAEBI has been recognized as good practice at the international level, as it facilitates access to justice for migrants and the relatives of migrants who have been the victims of crimes in Mexico, acknowledging the complexity of human mobility dynamics. [259] However, there are several challenges to its correct implementation, including:

--Difficulty in accessing MAEBI

The FJEDD has had cases where MAEBI officials have denied access to relatives, in particular when they do not have the support of committees of relatives of disappeared persons. In another instance, relatives attempted to file the complaint remotely and have to date not received a response or acknowledgement of receipt, three years after filing the complaint. [260]

Other obstacles identified are the situation of social and economic vulnerability of the victims, including level of education, lack of translators in the case of Indigenous peoples, geographical and economic barriers for travelling to embassies or consulates to file complaints and follow up on meetings, lack of internet or phone cover from their homes, and health problems that prevent them from attending meetings. [261]

Honduran women searchers told Amnesty International that only a few cases have been registered and followed up through MAEBI.

[256] A best practice example was in 2016, when officials from the Public Prosecutor's Office travelled to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras so that people could file complaints in person. FJEDD, "Estudio de análisis del MAEBI (MAEBI Assessment Study)", June 2024, fundacionjusticia.org/informe-maebi/, p. 45.

[257] DOF, Agreement A/117/15 (previously cited), 18 December 2015, section IV.

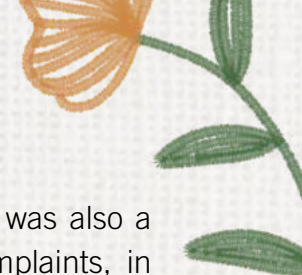
[258] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 35.

[259] IACHR, IACHR Welcomes the Creation of Institutions for the Protection of the Rights of Migrants in Mexico, 8 February 2016, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2016/008.asp; OHCHR, La desaparición en el contexto de la migración en México y América Central (Disappearance in the Context of Migration in Mexico and Central America), September 2022, number 3, p. 12.

[260] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 45.

[261] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 46.





They can point to only seven cases that have been supported by the FJEDD. There was also a virtual workshop organized by MAEBI officials to inform relatives of how to file complaints, in which nine people participated and hope to be subsequently registered. They believe it is essential for all cases to be registered so that a search for their relatives can be carried out and the facts investigated, and also in order for them to be able to enter Mexico. [262]

-Difficulty entering Mexican territory

According to the Law on Migration, women searchers are entitled to a Humanitarian Visitor Card (TVRH) as victims of a crime committed in Mexican territory. This document authorizes them to remain in the country until the criminal proceedings are concluded and allows them to enter and leave the country as many times as they wish. [263] To facilitate this process, the Guidelines specify that the authorities must provide all the information required for obtaining the TVRH with the utmost diligence. [264] However, despite having expressed their intention to participate in the searches in Mexico, the Mexican authorities have not provided the women searchers with the documents required for entering the country.

“A mother sometimes comes to the [Amor y Fe] Committee, wanting to travel to Mexico. First, she doesn't have a visa, she cannot travel on her own. Mexico is big, it's huge. How is a mother on her own going to go, it's obviously not easy. Here, to get a visa, you need to have a lot of money, and money we don't have here. We are also at risk of being kidnapped and disappeared when we go to Mexico; we are vulnerable.”²⁶⁵

Relatives have only been able to enter Mexico to participate in the search for their disappeared loved ones thanks to organizations such as the FJEDD or the Mesoamerican Movement, through the support they provide by organizing caravans of searching mothers. [266] For example, only two out of 13 women who participated in the focus group conducted by Amnesty International in Honduras had obtained a TVRH through MAEBI. [267]

“For 16 years, we women have entered Mexico thanks to the caravans, and there hasn't been one now for three years [since 2022]. It's difficult to get support from the authorities, you need a permit to enter Mexico.”²⁶⁸

[262] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[2623] Law on Migration, Article 52.V.


[264] DOF, Agreement SNBP/001/2022 (previously cited), paras. 36-41.

[265] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[266] FJEDD, “Estudio MAEBI” (previously cited), 2024, p. 50.

[267] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

[268] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.



In this regard, the CED recommended that the victims commissions should provide support to assist relatives in obtaining free humanitarian visas and that the competent authorities should receive training on the issuance of visas in the context of the disappearance of migrants. [269]

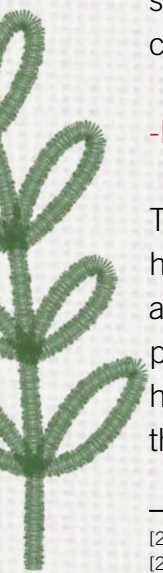
-Lack of support as provided in the LGV

Victims outside the national territory are also entitled to all of the rights afforded to victims by the LGV. The Guidelines therefore provide that the CEAV may be asked to cover travel expenses to participate in search and investigation activities. This is so for both travel to Mexican embassies or consulates in their own country, and travel for entering Mexico. [270] The Guidelines also establish the support required between embassies and consulates and victims' commissions to carry out evaluation of social work and other studies to determine the measures of support, assistance and comprehensive reparation due to families outside Mexico. [271]

However, the CEAV has admitted logistical, legal and administrative difficulties in granting the support measures established in the LGV to victims living outside Mexican territory. [272] There is no public data on the number of MAEBI cases legally represented by the CEAV, but concerns have been raised regarding the limited number of legal advisors assigned to such work, and their qualifications and training for this type of cases. For example, the FJEDD found that the CEAV had only one [female] lawyer specialized in this area at the end of 2022. [273]

Regarding assistance for travel and food expenses to migrant women searchers, the FJEDD has warned that no payments have been made, [274] making it difficult for women searchers to participate in searches and investigations. Likewise, once in Mexico, the victims receive no support to enable them to stay for as long as is necessary for the activities in Mexico to be concluded. [275] They have also received no healthcare assistance from the CEAV. [276]

-Lack of progress in cases



The proper implementation of MAEBI has been hindered by the use of online meetings and the high turnover of public officials responsible for the cases. [277] This results in a lack of progress and requires the women searchers to repeatedly provide information that has already been given previously. Some women who have been able to visit the prosecutor's offices in Mexico in person have found that their cases have not been opened, their complaints have not been registered, or the information on file is incorrect. [278]

[269] CED, Observations Mexico (previously cited), 12 October 2023, paras. 32 (b) and (c).

[270] DOF, Agreement SNBP/001/2022 (previously cited), 14 December 2022, para. 37.

[271] DOF, Agreement SNBP/001/2022 (previously cited), 14 December 2022, para. 50.

[272] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 46.

[273] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, pp. 43-44.

[274] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 45.

[275] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 50.

[276] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 46.

[277] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, p. 51.

[278] Focus group with women searchers, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 3 December 2024.

-Insufficient public awareness-raising about MAEBI and lack of coordination with authorities

There is a lack of information on the existence and operation of MAEBI, making it inaccessible to most of the families of disappeared migrants. Added to this is the lack of coordination between Mexican authorities and their counterparts in countries of origin, and also a lack of involvement of the authorities of countries of origin in the actions carried out through MAEBI. [279] In this regard, the CED recommended that the Mexican state should carry out information campaigns on MAEBI through their consulates, and promote cooperation and judicial assistance between the states concerned. [280]

MARY MARTÍNEZ

"I WISH I COULD FLY TO FIND HIM"
HONDURAN SON DISAPPEARED ALONG MIGRATION ROUTE



Twelve years ago, on 11 March 2013, Mary spoke with her son, Marco Antonio Amador Martínez, for the last time. He told her that he was in Reynosa and would be going to Nuevo Laredo to work. He undertook the journey to the United States fleeing extortion from gangs and with the hope of working and providing for his family.

Mary went to the Mexican embassy in Honduras to file the complaint. For a year she kept going to the embassy office, but the answers she was given were always the same. Only once was she shown the photograph of a person with the same name as her son, but it was not Marco Antonio.

Their case was registered with MAEBI when officials visited the embassy. Of the seven cases they registered, only three or four are still active. She found comfort and solidarity when she attended a meeting of the Amor y Fe (Love and Faith) Committee, where she met many other women in the same situation. In 2014, with the support of the organizations that obtained her TVRH, she was able to go to Mexico with a migrant caravan for the first time to search for her son. Mary says that without the caravans there is no way of going to Mexico.

[279] FJEDD, "Estudio MAEBI" (previously cited), 2024, pp. 52-56.

[280] CED, Report on visit to Mexico, 12 April 2022 (previously cited), para. 53.

They are not taken into account or given documents unless they are with others. She says that the first time she was in Mexico she knocked on many doors, but no one listened. She now goes to Mexico whenever she has the chance, “always with the hope of finding him, to my last breath I will keep searching for him.”

When she arrived at the prosecutor's office, she realized that her son's case file was incomplete and had several errors, even her son's name was wrong. Regarding her experience in Mexico, Mary stated: “In Mexico there's something really ugly, in that the prosecutor changes and we have to start all over again, it is revictimization, having to tell the story again. There are many backlogs with all the changes. They also discriminate against you, more so when you go alone, they look down on you, they use words that you don't understand, they make you feel bad. Crossing Mexico is not easy either, it is dangerous because of the cartels.”

Following her son's disappearance, she experienced a number of symptoms, including shaking hands, anxiety, feelings of helplessness, crying and body aches. She says she feels exhausted. She stressed that they receive no support whatsoever from the Mexican or the Honduran governments.

IF I WERE A BIRD, MY SON – POEM BY MARY MARTINEZ²⁸¹

I wish I were a bird so I could fly
fly over borders without having to register
so I could search for my beloved son,
I miss you so much.

You are a piece of my heart
- and I miss you so If only I could find you... I would
run to you embrace you and shower you with kisses
- all the embraces and kisses I've been saving up
I wouldn't let go for a long time

I wish I were a bird so I could fly
fly from city to city, from one place to the next,
over hills and valleys, trails and roads,
over land and sea, never faltering until I found you
to see your smile experience your infectious joy
know that you're listening to the music you love.
These are the memories that will not let me forget
you.

Because you, my son,
are always in my thoughts,
in my mind,
in my soul and in my heart.

And I – your mother –
have never stopped thinking of you
every day, every hour, every minute, every second.
Wherever I go - you are in my thoughts.

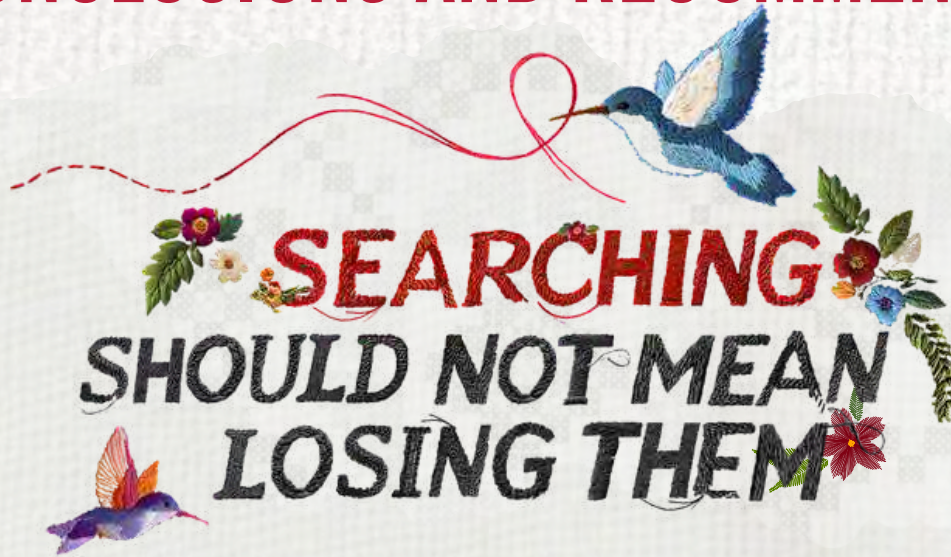
I live in permanent fear and helplessness
- because I do not know how you are
do you have a bed to sleep in? where are you?
are you healthy? are you eating?
I have many questions
- that have no answers

Because I have searched for you
but I haven't been able to find you.

[281] Translation into English provided by Amnesty International.



6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Faced with the alarming figure of more than 128,000 disappeared persons, women searchers are at the forefront not only of the search for their loved ones, but also of the demand for truth, justice and memory. Thanks to their tireless work defending human rights, Mexico has a specific legal framework covering enforced disappearance and disappearance by individuals, as well as specific institutions for addressing this scourge. These laws, public policies and institutions are constantly evaluated to identify shortcomings and propose improvements.

In conducting a search, women searchers face human rights abuses and violations that disproportionately affect them, evidencing prevalent structural discrimination. Among the statements of violence and impacts gathered by Amnesty International, the significant impacts to economic, social and cultural rights stand out, in particular impacts on physical and mental health and impoverishment. A chief concern is the hugely dangerous environment in which they exercise their right to search and to defend human rights, which often results in killings, disappearances, threats, attacks, extortion and forced displacement. Moreover, they are stigmatized and revictimized during the search processes, both by the authorities and by their own families and communities. Women searchers also face structural discrimination based on their gender, and this is further exacerbated by factors such as economic status, nationality, racialization or ethnicity, among others, all of which negatively affect the exercise and guarantee of their human rights.

Additionally, some women searchers suffer sexual violence and criminalization. This occurs in an environment of almost total impunity, undermining trust in the authorities and contributing to a climate of permissiveness for violations of the human rights of women searchers.

Despite the above, very few of these instances of violence and impacts are reported to the authorities. This is due to various factors, such as lack of awareness of their rights, physical distance from the authorities, bureaucracy and lack of trust. The authorities that have been put in place to address the violence and impacts experienced by women searchers have been negligent and have failed to provide the protection that women searchers require, thereby introducing institutional violence. Among the main challenges documented by Amnesty International from women searchers are difficulties in accessing the services provided by the authorities, late and inadequate responses, lack of empathy and sensitivity of the public officials they must deal with, lack of a gender and intersectional perspective in the assistance provided and insufficient financial and human resources within institutions.

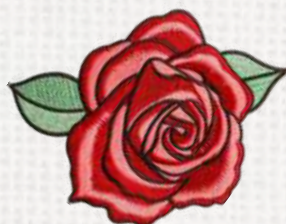
This would all seem to be aimed at discouraging the search for disappeared persons. But women searchers in Mexico and the region are a beacon of resilience and have managed to continue their work despite the constant attacks against them. In order to guarantee their rights to search, to truth, memory and justice and to defend human rights without fear of reprisals, abuses and human rights violations, Amnesty International makes the following recommendations to the Mexican state.



-To all the relevant authorities:

1. Recognize, at the highest level, the serious and ongoing crisis of enforced disappearances and disappearances committed by individuals in the country, and initiate a dialogue with families, civil society and international organizations to address the situation. The Mexican state must cooperate, among others, with the mechanism set up by the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, acknowledge the findings of the Committee and take into account the inputs and recommendations made by it to address the serious crisis of disappearances.
2. Recognize the important work carried out by women in their roles as searchers and human rights defenders.
3. Incorporate a gender and intersectional perspective in all measures relating to the search for disappeared persons and the protection of women searchers, and adopt measures to eliminate any discriminatory barriers.
4. Refrain from stigmatizing both disappeared persons and those who search for them. Address existing stereotypes through training of public officials and society in general, with differentiated approaches.
5. Ensure that searchers can carry out their human rights activities freely, safely and without fear of reprisals or discrimination, including their right to search and their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.


6. Provide sufficient material and human resources to the authorities responsible for searching and providing assistance to women searchers, and ensure that public officials have the resources, training and professional qualifications required to carry out their job.
7. Provide training and develop awareness-raising campaigns for the authorities on the situation of disappearances in the country and the processes that women searchers must go through, including a gender and intersectional perspective.
8. Develop a comprehensive programme for assisting children affected by disappearances. The programme must include a multidimensional perspective and cover rights such as education, health, social security and housing. Conduct participatory studies to identify the needs of caregivers, children and their communities and environments, both for persons in their own settings and those who may have arrived as a result of displacement.
9. Take specific actions to improve the trust of women searchers in the authorities, in order to encourage them to report and request support for the violence and impacts they experience without fear of reprisals or further violence and revictimization.
10. Strengthen coordination between the authorities involved in providing assistance to women searchers at the national, state and local levels to ensure that their rights are protected..
11. Eliminate discriminatory barriers to enable women searchers to access state support. This includes providing information on existing authorities and their roles, as well as on their rights as victims and human rights defenders. Any measures taken must be culturally appropriate for Indigenous women searchers, including access to translators and interpreters. Similarly, women's right to search must be guaranteed when in other countries, and this requires ensuring accessibility and transparency of migration processes for entering Mexican territory.
12. Guarantee the right to the participation of families, loved ones and communities in all activities relating to disappearances, including the development and amendment of laws and public policies, the nomination of those responsible for the institutions providing services, and the creation of citizen search councils in the country's 32 states.





-To local congresses:

1. Approve local laws on disappearance and special declaration of absence that are missing at state level. Ensure the meaningful participation of the families of disappeared persons and civil society organizations in such processes.



-To the Senate of the Republic:

1. Issue as soon as possible the call for renewing the National Citizen Council of the National Search System.



- To the search commissions:

1. Recognize and guarantee the right of women searchers and their families to search, whether independently or by participating in institutional actions, while at the same time acknowledging their own obligation to search for disappeared persons.
2. Ensure that forcibly displaced families can participate in the search processes and that a lasting solution to their cases is reached in collaboration with them.



- To the victims commissions:

1. Facilitate the registration of relatives of disappeared persons as victims. Implement a campaign on the rights of victims in accordance with international human rights law and the General Law on Victims. Additionally, adopt measures to eliminate structural discriminatory barriers to enable people living in rural areas, Indigenous communities or those living in other countries to access their rights.
2. Guarantee the availability of translators and interpreters for women searchers who do not speak Spanish, such as Indigenous or migrant women.
3. Interpret the General Law on Victims through the pro persona principle, ensuring that access to rights, such as health and legal assistance, is not denied due to the difficulty or impossibility of proving the causal link between the victimization act and the harm experienced.
4. Adopt measures to ensure continued access to resources for the maintenance of decent living conditions for searchers. Guarantee financial support and the highest level of physical and mental health. Develop a specific plan on access to health for victims of disappearance in coordination with victims, civil society organizations and collectives.
5. Provide comprehensive reparations to victims of disappearances and people who suffer human rights violations while searching.

- To the mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists:

1. Publicly and institutionally recognize women searchers as human rights defenders and include those who require protection in federal or state protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and journalists, as appropriate.
2. Guarantee risk analysis and adoption of measures with a gender and intersectional approach, as well as access to state protection and the effectiveness of these measures, ensuring, among other things, that emergency measures are immediate and that the tools provided work and are culturally and contextually appropriate. Any measures adopted must be agreed through adequate consultation with the beneficiary women searchers.
3. Coordinate appropriately with other authorities to ensure compliance with protection measures has the least possible impact on the quality of life of women searchers and allows them to continue with their search and human rights work as far as possible. For example, coordinating with the victims commissions regarding support for the potential increase in electricity costs for security systems, or for resettlement costs where relocation is the protection measure adopted.
4. Respond to the particular needs of collectives requiring protection measures, recognizing their different vulnerabilities and adopting appropriate monitoring mechanisms.
5. Carry out a comprehensive review of the functioning of emergency or panic buttons, including response times, performance of the company responsible for monitoring alerts, and effectiveness in the coordination between the company and the security forces.
6. Consult with women searchers regarding the protection service staff to be assigned to them, and perform background checks on such staff to rule out any risk factors and ensure that they do not pose a threat to the women searchers.
7. Adopt effective preventive and protective measures tailored to each case and based on the results of an early risk analysis, in consultation with women searchers.
8. Create greater awareness of protection mechanisms and their functions, and prepare statistics and context documents on patterns of violence against women searchers.
9. Continue to strengthen protection mechanisms by complying with the recommendations made by OHCHR and the Working Group for Strengthening the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists of the CSO Space for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists. This group was created to monitor and follow up on OHCHR recommendations.



-To the prosecutors' offices:

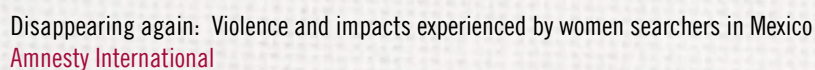
1. Take specific measures against impunity, both for issues relating to disappearances and for violence against women and other threats and attacks faced by women searchers. Investigate human rights violations without delay in an effective, independent and impartial manner and with a gender and differentiated perspective, and bring those responsible to justice.
2. Strengthen anti-corruption mechanisms and hold relevant public officials accountable through investigations and, where appropriate, administrative, disciplinary or criminal sanctions.




- To the Mexican Foreign Support Mechanism for Search and Investigation (MAEBI):

1. Strengthen cooperation with states in the region for searching and investigating cases of disappeared migrants in Mexico.
2. Increase awareness of MAEBI through Mexican embassies and consulates abroad.
3. Coordinate with authorities such as the Executive Commission for Assistance to Victims (CEAV) and the Prosecutor's Offices so that families of disappeared migrants, and in particular migrant women searchers, can fully access their rights. Provide financial support to women searchers to cover travel expenses, enabling them to review files and monitor their cases in a timely manner.
4. Develop and promote a clear, expedited and accessible process for the issuance of humanitarian visitor cards to enable women searchers to conduct searches in Mexican territory.
5. Ensure that women searchers arriving in Mexico through caravans are treated with dignity and without discrimination by the Mexican authorities, and that they are allowed to review their files and participate in the search processes safely.

The word cloud below illustrates the aspects that were mentioned most frequently regarding their perceptions of what should be improved to guarantee their rights.





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VIOLENCE AND IMPACTS EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN SEARCHERS IN MEXICO

In the context of a crisis with more than 128,000 disappeared and missing persons in Mexico, women have mostly led and been at the forefront of the search for their loved ones and the demand for truth, justice and reparation. Searching, whether independently or as part of state efforts, is a high-risk activity. Women searchers face killings, threats, attacks, forced displacement and sexual violence, stigmatization and revictimization, discrimination, criminalization, physical and mental health impacts and impoverishment. All of which takes place in an environment of almost total impunity.

Women searchers rarely approach the authorities to file complaints or request support, largely because of their distrust in them. The authorities put in place to address the violence and impacts experienced by women searchers have responded with another form of violence – institutional violence – through their negligence and omissions in providing the protection these women require.

This report recognizes the tireless and dignified work carried out by women searchers in Mexico. It is also a demand for the authorities to fulfil their international obligations, both in terms of searching for disappeared persons and protecting women searchers.

