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**The Wound is Always Raw: Searching, Uncertainty, and Collective
Support in the Lives of Mothers of Disappeared People in
Contemporary Mexico**

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Support in the Lives of Mothers of Disappeared People in
Contemporary Mexico**

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Moravia de la O

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the mothers of disappeared people who generously shared their stories with me. It is also dedicated to all the relatives of disappeared people who have been killed while searching for their loved ones including Míriam Rodríguez Martínez, Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, Nepomuceno Moreno Núñez, Sandra Luz Hernández, Bernardo Carreto, Cornelia San Juan Guevara Guerrero, José Jesús Jiménez Gaona, Heriberto López Gastélum, Emma Gabriela Molina Canto, Gerardo Corona Piceno, Norma Angélica Bruno, Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco, Luis Abraham Cabada Hernández, and Josefina Reyes Salazar.

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Abstract

The Wound is Always Raw: Searching, Uncertainty, and Collective Support in the Lives of Mothers of Disappeared People in Contemporary Mexico

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Mothers of disappeared people are caught at the intersection of two very difficult experiences: actively searching for their daughters and sons and facing the tremendous pain that comes from having a disappeared loved one. Drawing from ten in-depth interviews with mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico, this thesis explores the impacts of both of these challenges and the ways that these mothers navigate them. In particular, uncertainty, the search for their daughters and sons, social isolation, and collective support emerged as key components of the experiences of this group of women. Their experiences highlight the traumatic nature of the uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of their daughters and sons and the emotional and cognitive flexibility that allows them to simultaneously hold seemingly contradictory beliefs that go beyond the dichotomy of life and death. The State maintains and reproduces uncertainty through the legal-administrative stage of disappearance, rooted in a historically flawed, corrupt, and inefficient bureaucracy. In this way, the uncertainty that characterizes disappearance

is *not only* an individually traumatizing event, but also becomes part of a complex and multidimensional expression of State violence. For many mothers, actively engaging in the search for their disappeared loved one is an important coping mechanism and a source of personal empowerment, but it also creates important challenges in their lives. Although many mothers experience social isolation in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons, the various forms of legal-administrative, emotional, and material support that they access through involvement in collectives of relatives of disappeared people are important sources of strength and resilience.

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Introduction

Entonces son fortalezas positivas, de aprender a como sobrevivir a través del dolor, de como sobrevivir a través de un dolor congelado porque llegar a tener un duelo, nunca. Mientras que una persona tiene a un ser desaparecido, jamás vas a encontrar cerrar un duelo. El círculo no se puede cerrar porque siempre está inerte, siempre está viva la herida. Entonces, ¿cómo aprendes a tener esa herida abierta aún doliéndote? ¿Cómo aprendes a sonreír a través de esa herida abierta?

So, these are positive strengths, learning how to survive through pain, how to survive through a frozen pain because you will never be able to mourn. As long as a person has a disappeared relative they will never be able to have closure. The circle cannot be closed because it is always inert, the wound is always raw. So, how do you learn to have this open, still-painful wound? How do you learn to smile through this open wound?

—Alicia

Living with an “open wound” has been a daily reality for Alicia and the other mothers of the over 40,000 people who have been disappeared in Mexico since 2006.¹ One of Alicia’s sons, Felipe, was disappeared when he was 23 years old along with six other Federal Police officers and another man while traveling to start a new post in Michoacán in November 2009. Since then, Alicia has led a tireless search for Felipe, provided support to other relatives of disappeared people, and demanded government action to address disappearance in Mexico—becoming a leader in the movement for the disappeared in the process. Like Alicia, mothers of disappeared people are caught at the intersection of two very difficult experiences: actively searching for their daughters and

¹ Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas, 2019; Secretaría de Gobernación, 2019.

sons² and facing the tremendous pain that comes from having a disappeared loved one. How they face both of these challenges is the question at the center of this thesis.

Using senior scholar and clinician Pauline Boss' theoretical explorations of ambiguous loss, the research presented in this thesis will unpack the different ways in which mothers like Alicia live with the "open wound" that is the disappearance of their daughters and sons. In particular, I will focus on the coping mechanisms, support systems, and resilience of these women. This intervention is based on ten in-depth interviews with mothers of disappeared people actively engaged in seven different collectives of relatives of disappeared people throughout Mexico that I conducted between June 2017 and April 2018.

In keeping with the rich tradition of Latin American studies, this research project is multidisciplinary—drawing primarily from anthropology, sociology, psychology, geography, and women's and gender studies. Furthermore, the analysis that I present in this thesis is informed by my experience working in human rights issues in Mexico since 2010 and my professional training as a clinical social worker. My research seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge about disappearance and mothers of disappeared people across the world by emphasizing the emotional and social challenges that these mothers face and the complex ways in which they face them. Furthermore, I hope this thesis will contribute to the emerging research on the experiences of mothers of

² Throughout the text I use "daughters and sons" because that is how the women that I interviewed referred to their disappeared children. Nevertheless, I am aware that this does not capture the full diversity of gender identities in Mexican society. Non-binary, queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming people are especially vulnerable to violence in the country. In a 2016 report, the UN highlighted "the alarming pattern of grotesque homicides of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals and the broad impunity for these crimes" (United Nations, General Assembly, 2016).

disappeared people organized in collectives in contemporary Mexico, a field of literature that is offering important and useful analysis to support the work of these collectives.

The thesis that I present in the following pages is not intended to be the definitive authority on the subjective experiences of mothers of disappeared people in Mexico. That would be an unrealistic undertaking and would gloss over the diverse experiences that mothers have in the aftermath of their disappeared daughters and sons. Instead, this is a first attempt at making sense of the stories that a group of mothers actively involved in collectives of relatives of disappeared people shared with me. As such, I recognize that the analysis I present is inherently incomplete and influenced by my own perspective as a mestiza, bilingual, Mexican immigrant. This is not to diminish the importance of the analysis that I present, but rather to place it within a broader conversation about the impacts of disappearance on the relatives of disappeared people while acknowledging the limitations that an outsider has to truly understanding the experience of having a disappeared relative. Nevertheless, I present the following findings in the hopes that they may be of use to the mothers of disappeared people who shared their stories with me and to the movements of relatives of disappeared people more generally, and that they may support their critical work.

The introduction to this thesis seeks to contextualize the experiences of mothers of disappeared people, which are presented in subsequent chapters. The first section of the introduction explores the definitions of disappearance that inform this thesis and provides the historical context for disappearance in Latin America and Mexico. The second section offers an overview of the study, including the purpose, research questions,

and methodology that guide my analysis. The third section reviews the previous research and literature that informs the subsequent analysis. Finally, the fourth section provides an overview of the thesis.

SECTION 1. DISAPPEARANCE IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

A. Definition of disappearance

For the purpose of this thesis, I will use *disappearance*, a more general term than *enforced disappearance*, in recognition of the way in which the mothers of disappeared people used this term while sharing their stories with me. Although legal definitions can be a very useful tool in the search for justice and in holding perpetrators accountable, ultimately mothers of disappeared people are impacted by the disappearance of their daughters and sons regardless of the legal category of disappearance that it may fall into.³ Nevertheless, the definition of enforced disappearance, especially in its acknowledgement of the role of the State, informs my understanding of disappearance.

The United Nations' International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2006, provides a useful definition of enforced disappearance.⁴ The Convention defines enforced disappearance as

the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or

³ Paley, 2018.

⁴ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010.

whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.⁵

Mexico ratified the Convention in March 2008, which mandated it to ensure that all people within its borders are protected from enforced disappearance. Unfortunately, the Mexican State has largely failed to do so. In its most recent report on Mexico published in 2015, the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the body tasked with monitoring the enforcement and implementation of the Convention, found “a situation of widespread disappearances in much of the State party’s territory, many of which may be classified as enforced disappearances.”⁶ In Mexico, impunity and the lack of thorough investigations into disappearances make it difficult to ascertain the identity of the perpetrators of a disappearance. However, although the role of the State in the direct disappearance of people in contemporary Mexico is not always clear, the authorities’ lack of investigation into these disappearances can be understood as a form of acquiescence. In other words, at best, the Mexican state has chosen to ignore the widespread crisis of disappearance, and at worst, it directly participates in perpetrating them.

My use of the term “disappearance” is further informed by sociologist Dawn Paley’s concept of “neoliberal disappearance.”⁷ Paley defines neoliberal disappearance as

un pilar de la contrainsurgencia ampliada, y aparece en la mayoría de los casos como un crimen llevado a cabo por grupos armados (estatal o no estatal) contra jóvenes, la mayoría de ellos hombres, seleccionados a raíz de su edad, su clase social, y el lugar geográfico donde se encuentren al momento de desaparecer.

⁵ International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, n.d., art. 2.

⁶ United Nations, Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2015. Although Mexico has ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, it has not ratified Article 31 of the Convention, which would recognize the Committee on Enforced Disappearances’ competence to investigate individual cases of victims of enforced disappearance.

⁷ Paley, 2018.

Además, el ser migrante o estar transitando en carretera aumenta el riesgo de ser desaparecido.

a pillar of expanded counterinsurgency, and in the majority of cases it appears as a crime perpetrated by armed groups (state and non-state) against young people, the majority of them men, selected based on their age, their social class, and their geographic location at the moment of their disappearance. Furthermore, being a migrant or traveling by highway increases the risk of being disappeared.⁸

This definition of disappearance moves away from a legalistic framework and recognizes the role that age, social class, geographic location, and immigration status plays in disappearances in contemporary Mexico. Furthermore, although it does not distinguish between State or non-State perpetrators, it acknowledging the political role that disappearance plays in what Paley calls expanded counterinsurgency, a concept that refers to the mechanisms through which the Mexican State wages a war against its citizens in the context of the deepening of neoliberalism.⁹ I will engage with the concepts of neoliberal disappearance and expanded counterinsurgency more fully in subsequent chapters.

B. A brief history of disappearance in Latin America and Mexico

An understanding of the historical use of disappearance in Mexico is important, as the country's present bears visible traces of the past as layers of violent histories are relived and re-created today. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Mexican state engaged in an organized effort to repress social movements that it perceived as a threat to its authoritarian rule. The focus of much of the repression was the state of Guerrero, where revolutionary groups—including the National Revolutionary Civic Association,

⁸ Ibid, p. 61-62.

⁹ Ibid.

headed by Genaro Vásquez, and the Party of the Poor, led by Lucio Cabañas—took up arms against the Mexican state in the mountains of Guerrero, with a whole range of demands for social, economic, and racial justice.¹⁰ During this time, the state responded with an extremely repressive military campaign that terrorized indigenous communities—suspected of supporting guerrillas—and brutally repressed members of armed groups. Known throughout Mexico as the Dirty War, the State’s despotic response has been well documented by human rights groups, including the disappearance of hundreds of people.¹¹ During this time, the municipality of Atoyac de Alvarez in Guerrero was the region where most enforced disappearances took place.¹²

One such case was the disappearance of Rosendo Radilla in 1974. Rosendo was involved in local efforts to organize and advocate for coffee growers and small-scale farmers in Atoyac de Alvarez.¹³ As a local indigenous leader, he had a close relationship with some of the armed revolutionary groups. He was also a musician and composed many *corridos*, traditional Mexican folk songs, about social justice and the indigenous-led struggles in his municipality.¹⁴ He was detained at a military checkpoint in August of 1974 for signing *corridos*, songs that often deal with social issues. He was last seen, visibly beaten, at the military barracks in town.¹⁵ In 2009, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Mexican State guilty of forcibly disappearing him.¹⁶

¹⁰ Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010.

¹¹ Karl, 2014; Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010, 21; Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2015.

¹² Karl, 2014.

¹³ Radilla Pacheco v. Mexico, 2009.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, Rosendo's family continues to search for him and demand justice from the Mexican State.

Similarly, disappearance was also a strategy that the Mexican state deployed to repress political organizing in major cities and urban centers during the country's Dirty War. A paradigmatic example of this repression was the 1968 Massacre of Tlatelolco, during which approximately 300 student activists, journalists, children, and other bystanders were killed by members of Mexico's security forces.¹⁷ Members of urban guerrilla groups were another target of political repression and disappearance during this period—in particular members of the September 23rd Communist League¹⁸—in cities throughout Mexico.¹⁹ Like in Guerrero, the State's repressive strategy against these urban activists included the use of clandestine detention and disappearance—in some cases temporary, but not in all.²⁰ The *Comité ¡Eureka!*—a collective of relatives of disappeared people that was founded in 1977 by Rosario Ibarra de Piedra after the disappearance of her son in Nuevo León—has documented over 700 cases of disappearances carried out by Mexican security forces during the Dirty War.²¹ Of these, 561 people remain disappeared.²²

Disappearance in Mexico has also been greatly impacted and facilitated by gender inequality. As feminist scholars have highlighted, the murder and disappearance of women in contemporary Mexico—particularly along the U.S.-Mexico border—has been

¹⁷ Rosen, 2008.

¹⁸ Name in Spanish: Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre.

¹⁹ Mendoza García, 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Becerril, 2009.

²² H.I.J.O.S. Mexico, n.d.

closely tied to women's subordinate status within a patriarchal system.²³ In other words, unlike the disappearance and murder of men, women are disappeared and murder precisely because they are women—often “subjected to gender-specific forms of degradation and violation, such as rape and sexual torture, prior to their murder” and/or disappearance.²⁴ Maricela Lagarde y de los Ríos, a preeminent Mexican feminist scholar, calls this type of violence *feminicidio*—femicide—and argues that it is “genocide against women, and it occurs when the historical conditions generate social practices that allow for violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women.”²⁵ As such, femicide is a type of State violence that is particularly prevalent in situations where impunity and oppression based on gender are the norm—which is very much the case in Mexico.²⁶ Importantly, scholars also describe femicide as the most extreme form of gendered violence, one that emerges within a continuum that includes everyday forms of violence, such as sexual harassment.²⁷

Since the early 1990s, feminist scholars and activists have documented a crisis of violence against women in Mexico that resulted in the murder of over five hundred and the disappearance of more than a thousand women and girls between 1993 and 2010 in the state of Chihuahua.²⁸ The center of this violence—and also of organized efforts to end it—has been the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, where many women and girls

²³ Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2005, 2006; Fregoso & Bejarano (Eds.), 2010.

²⁴ Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010, p. 7.

²⁵ Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2010, p. xv-xvi.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Monárrez Fregoso, 2003.

²⁸ Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010.

have been viciously murdered and disappeared.²⁹ However, femicidal violence also takes place well beyond Chihuahua, as demonstrated by figures that documented the murder of at least 1,200 women and girls throughout Mexico in 2004 alone.³⁰ Although femicidal violence impacts women of all ages and social classes, many of the women and girls who have been disappeared and murdered in Mexico in the last three decades are working class, which has led scholars to highlight the connections between economic precarity and gender.³¹

One of the most visible cases of *femicidio* in Ciudad Juárez was the discovery of the bodies of eight women—who were disappeared and brutally murdered—near a cotton field in November 2001.³² Known as *Campo Algodonero*—cotton field—the case of the disappearance and murder of eight women shocked longtime activists working on femicide and galvanized national and international solidarity with the families of the victims and others advocating on the issue.³³ Nevertheless, the Mexican State’s response—as with most cases of femicidal violence—has been ineffective and insufficient. In response to the lack of investigation of the case, the families of three of the victims succeeded in taking the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which in 2009 “found Mexico guilty of failure to comply with its obligations to guarantee

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2010.

³¹ Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2010; Monárrez Fregoso, 2003.

³² Bejarano, 2013.

³³ Ibid.

human rights, of gender stereotyping and discrimination, and of negligence to investigate these crimes including broad sweeping impunity.”³⁴

Disappearance has also characterized repressive regimes all over the Americas, particularly during the second half of the 20th century.³⁵ One of the most well-known examples of the widespread use of disappearance as a repressive tool is Argentina during the rule of the military junta of the 1970s and 1980s. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons investigated human rights abuses committed by the military junta during this period and documented 8,960 cases of disappearance.³⁶ However, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Association,³⁷ a collective made up of mothers of disappeared people in Argentina, argues that at least 30,000 people were disappeared during the so-called Dirty War in Argentina.³⁸ As was the case in Mexico, many of the people disappeared were political dissidents who organized against the repressive regime in Argentina.³⁹ The use of disappearance was a way in which the military junta sought to avoid international attention for its repressive tactics.⁴⁰ Other repressive governments across Latin America have also relied on enforced disappearance as a tactic to quell dissent⁴¹—in the past and currently—including Guatemala,⁴² El Salvador,⁴³ Chile,⁴⁴ Peru⁴⁵, and Paraguay.⁴⁶

³⁴ Bejarano, 2013, p. 199.

³⁵ Paley, 2018.

³⁶ Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1986.

³⁷ Known in Spanish as Asociación Madres de la Plaza de Mayo.

³⁸ Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, n.d.

³⁹ Paley, 2018.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For a more extensive discussion about disappearance in the context of the Cold War, see Paley 2018 and Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

C. The militarization of the Drug War: 2006-Present

Since 2006, the Mexican State has waged a militarized Drug War that now extends to nearly every corner of the country. In this context, violence—including homicide and disappearance—has escalated across the country over the last 12 years at rates much higher than in previous decades.⁴⁷ This thesis focuses on the consequences of two important dynamics that have emerged in Mexico since the militarization of the so-called Drug War: the dramatic increase in the number of people who have been disappeared and the extraordinary political organizing led by mothers to demand justice for the disappeared.

For nearly thirteen years, the Mexican State has designed, implemented, and executed a militarized national security strategy that has had disastrous consequences for human rights in the country. In December 2006, President Felipe Calderón, the then-newly elected president of Mexico, announced that he would launch an all-out assault on organized crime in his home state of Michoacán with the stated goal of stemming drug trafficking in the country. However, scholars and researchers have argued that, in large part, President Calderón's actions responded less to national security concerns and more to the crisis of legitimacy that he faced as allegations of election fraud plagued him in the aftermath of the 2006 Mexican presidential election.⁴⁸ President Calderón was also

⁴² Nelson, 2009.

⁴³ Stephen, 2001.

⁴⁴ Stern, 2004, 2010.

⁴⁵ Theidon, 2004.

⁴⁶ Comisión de Verdad y Justicia, 2008.

⁴⁷ Open Society Foundations, 2016.

⁴⁸ Gibler, 2011; Paley, 2014, 2015, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

responding to pressure from the United States to continue and build up the militarized response to organized crime in the country, much in the way that Colombia had done in the context of Plan Colombia.⁴⁹ Since then, practically all of Mexico has become militarized under the guise of the so-called Drug War—with the country’s military and navy taking on public security responsibilities throughout the country.⁵⁰ The government of the United States has been an enthusiastic partner in this endeavor, providing financial and political support to the Mexican State by allocating about \$3.0 billion dollars of funding through the Merida Initiative.⁵¹

In this context, the use of security forces—including the army, navy, and a militarized municipal, state, and federal police force—have been key to the implementation of the Drug War in Mexico.⁵² According to Human Rights Watch, the militarization of the country’s public security policy “has not succeeded in reducing violence. Instead, it has resulted in a dramatic increase in grave human rights violations, virtually none of which appear to be adequately investigated.”⁵³ According to official figures, at least 232,000 people have been murdered,⁵⁴ 40,000 people have disappeared,⁵⁵ and nearly 330,000 people have been forcefully displaced since 2006.⁵⁶ As mentioned

⁴⁹ Gibler, 2011; Open Society Foundations, 2016; Paley, 2014, 2015.

⁵⁰ Open Society Foundations, 2016.

⁵¹ Ribando Seelke, 2019.

⁵² Gibler, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2013; Open Society Foundations, 2016, 2018; Paley, 2014, 2015, 2018.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, 2011, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2018.

⁵⁵ Animal Politico, 2019; Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas, 2019; Secretaría de Gobernación, 2019.

⁵⁶ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2018. See the next section for a discussion about official figures.

earlier, national and international human rights organizations have documented increasing and widespread abuses perpetrated by Mexican security forces in the last thirteen years—the vast majority of which remain in impunity.⁵⁷ Far from addressing drug trafficking, this militarization of the country has created the conditions for widespread violence and disappearance.⁵⁸

In particular, disappearance has become an irrefutable and widespread crisis. There is a lack of clear and accurate data documenting the number of disappearances, and many relatives of disappeared people, human rights organizations, and scholars dispute the official figure.⁵⁹ In some cases, relatives of disappeared people have argued that the number of disappeared people in Mexico could number as high as ten times the figure officially reported.⁶⁰ In 2014, the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College gained international visibility as large-scale protests demanding their return were organized around the world. Despite all of this mobilization and significant pressure from international organizations to address the issue, the increase in the number of disappearances continues unabated. Many thousands of Central American migrants traveling through Mexico have also disappeared in that time period.⁶¹ Unfortunately, the Mexican State's response has been ineffective and, at times, non-existent, as it appears unwilling and unable to acknowledge the crisis of disappearance in particular, and human

⁵⁷ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2018; Comité Cerezo México, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2013; Open Society Foundations, 2016.

⁵⁸ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2018; Comité Cerezo México, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2013; Open Society Foundations, 2016; Paley, 2015, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2015.

⁵⁹ United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2015.

⁶⁰ Paley, 2018.

⁶¹ Izcarra-Palacios, 2012, 2015.

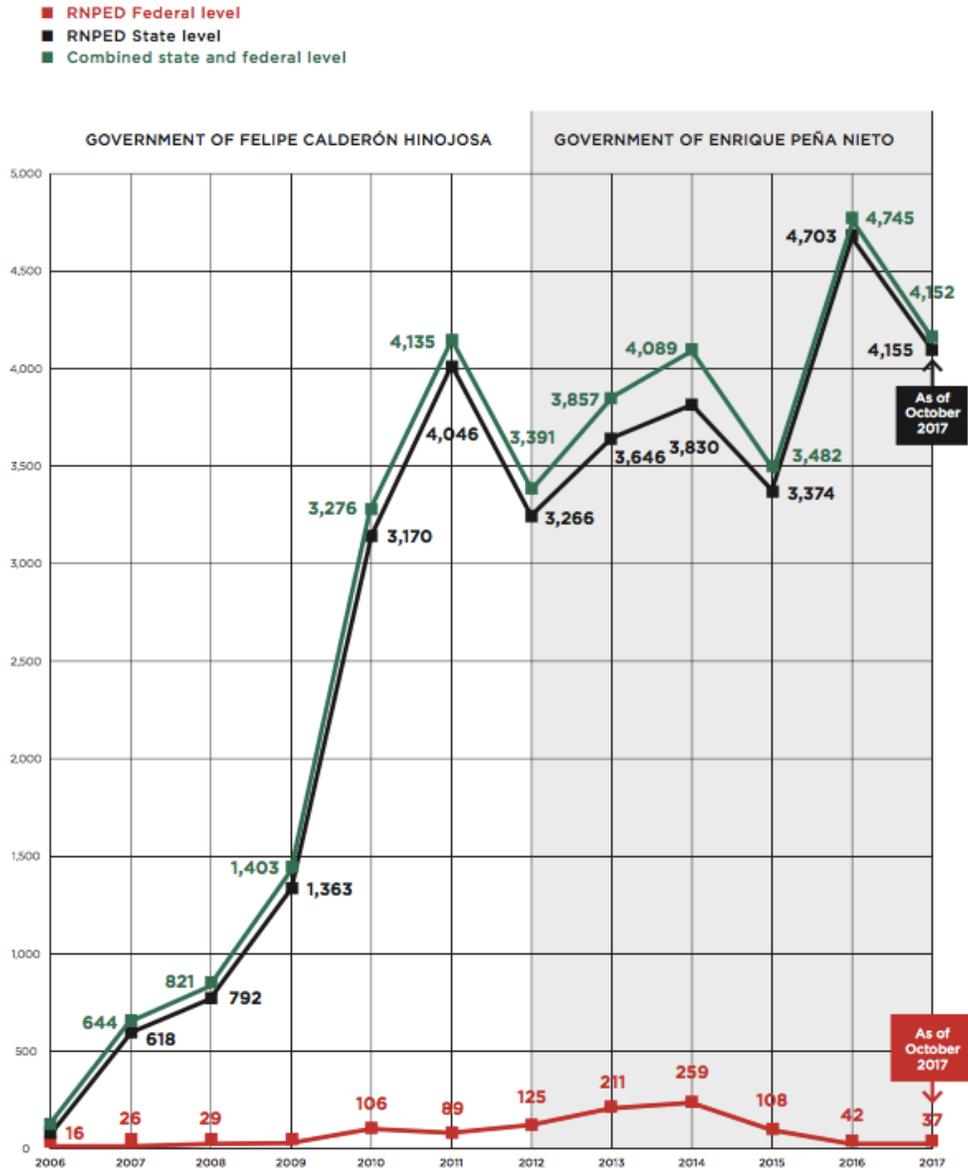
rights abuses more generally. Widespread and systemic impunity—documented through the experiences of mothers in this thesis and by a number of local, national and international organizations—continues, further facilitating this violence.⁶² The following graph illustrates this dramatic increase in the number of disappeared people since 2006 in Mexico.⁶³

⁶² Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2013; Open Society Foundations, 2016.

⁶³ Open Society Foundations, 2018.

NATIONAL REGISTRY OF DATA OF MISSING OR DISAPPEARED PERSONS

State and Federal level 2006 - 2017



Source: National Registry of Data of Missing or Disappeared Persons.³⁷

Figure 1: Graph of Disappearances in Mexico since 2006.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This graph was taken from the 2018 Open Society Foundations report *Corruption That Kills: Why Mexico needs an international mechanism to combat impunity* and is based on figures from the National Registry of Data of Missing or Disappeared People. Ibid, p. 21.

Official figures and those documented by non-profit organizations and collectives of relatives of disappeared people highlight the gendered aspects of disappearance since 2006.⁶⁵ As with the cases documented in this thesis, the overwhelming majority of victims of disappearance in contemporary Mexico are men.⁶⁶ For example, in Coahuila men make up “84.3 percent of the 370 disappearances documented” by the Fray Juan de Larios Human Rights Center.⁶⁷ Similarly, sociologist Carolina Robledo Silvestre found that 87 percent of the cases of disappearance documented through 2012 by the Citizen Association Against Impunity⁶⁸ in Tijuana, Baja California were those of men.⁶⁹ This trend does not only apply to disappearances, but also extends to homicides.⁷⁰ Shockingly, the drastic increase in the number of violent homicides of men in Mexico has resulted in a decrease in life expectancy among men since 2005, particularly for men between 20 and 40 years of age.⁷¹

Different scholars have provided important insights to understand the complex reasons behind the disproportionate numbers of homicides and disappearances of men in the context of a militarized Drug War in Mexico. In their work exploring this question, anthropologist Jennie Gamlin and public health researcher Sarah Hawkes point to the connections between structural inequality and gender as an important root cause of the

⁶⁵ Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas, 2019; Open Society Foundations, 2016; Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Open Society Foundations, 2016, p. 42.

⁶⁸ Name in Spanish: Asociación Ciudadana contra la Impunidad.

⁶⁹ Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁷⁰ Aburto, Beltrán-Sánchez, García-Guerrero, & Canudas-Romo, 2016; Canudas-Romo, Aburto, García-Guerrero, & Beltrán-Sánchez, 2017; Gamlin & Hawkes, 2018; González-Pérez & Vega-López, 2019.

⁷¹ Aburto et al, 2016.

crisis of homicides of men in Mexico.⁷² Gamlin and Hawkes focus their analysis specifically on the men who become involved in organized crime, arguing that for these young men structural inequality has limited their capacity to access other forms of masculinity that rely on material and social resources. Because of this, involvement in organized crime becomes one of the only avenues for acting out gender norms, as “violence itself has become a resource for masculinity, rewarding the possession and use of weapons and powerful vehicles with admiration, social esteem, power, and wealth as well as the sense of belonging that is central to gang culture.”⁷³ Nevertheless, it is also important to stress that many of the victims of disappearance in Mexico have no ties to organized crime and, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, the State often relies on the criminalization of the disappeared as a strategy for not carrying out a thorough investigation. Furthermore, in many cases it is difficult to ascertain the identity of the perpetrators and to distinguish between State and non-State actors. Thus, although helpful in understanding young men’s involvement in organized crime and the role that violence plays in contemporary forms of masculinity in Mexico, Gamlin and Hawkes’ analysis only partially explores the disproportionate increase in the number of disappearances of men.

Similarly, sociologist Dawn Paley also explores the connections between the gendered dynamics of disappearance, neoliberalism, and structural inequality in Mexico. Paley argues that the homicide and disappearance of men in contemporary Mexico are

⁷² Gamlin & Hawkes, 2018.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 66.

strategies of social control—what she calls “expanded counterinsurgency”—implemented by the State to maintain the neoliberal status quo.⁷⁴ According to Paley, the category of who is considered an “insurgent” has expanded to encompass young men who are not political dissidents or activists, but who are seen as potential threats to the current economic system.⁷⁵ Paley argues that as a result, “in Mexico we are experiencing an expanded system of extermination and disappearance” of men with the goal of controlling and limiting widespread resentment against the economic system.⁷⁶ The work of Paley and Gamlin and Hawkes points to structural inequality and the neoliberal economic system as important components that drive the high numbers of disappearance of men in contemporary Mexico. Further research should continue to query the root causes of this phenomenon.

Although the majority of victims of disappearance are men, the disappearance of women and girls in Mexico has also increased within the context of the so-called Drug War.⁷⁷ This is perhaps unsurprising, as feminist scholars have discussed how increases in *feminicidio* and feminicidal violence in Latin America tend to accompany overall increases in violence.⁷⁸ In Mexico, feminist researchers and activists have documented growing numbers of cases of *feminicidio* and women victims of sex trafficking in the country since 2007.⁷⁹ This has given rise to *alertas de género*⁸⁰—a declaration of the

⁷⁴ Paley, 2018.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Original quote in Spanish: “en México estamos experimentando un sistema ampliado de exterminio y desaparición.” Ibid, p. 60.

⁷⁷ Hincapié, 2017.

⁷⁸ Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010.

⁷⁹ Hincapié, 2017.

crisis of gendered violence that establishes specific protocols and measures to address it—in 13 of the 32 states in Mexico.⁸¹ In particular, the disappearance of women has been most often tied to sex trafficking, which has become a crisis in several states in Mexico, such as Nuevo León, where women are often disappeared in large numbers over a short period of time and then transported to other cities across the country.⁸²

The Drug War has a rich and complex history in the Americas.⁸³ Scholars have critically analyzed the roots of the Drug War throughout the continent, paying special attention to the role of the United States in exporting the model of militarization throughout the region.⁸⁴ In particular, scholars understand the Drug War in Mexico as the continuation of a model that was first implemented in communities of color in the United States under President Nixon and later carried out in Colombia with American support and funding.⁸⁵ One writer whose work has been influential in shaping my understanding of this phenomenon is Dawn Paley, who has written extensively about the Drug War with a specific focus on the “interaction between capitalism, militarization, and resource extraction,” instead of focusing on the dynamics between drug cartels.⁸⁶ Paley frames her analysis through the concept of *Drug War capitalism*. According to her, Drug War capitalism is a framework that highlights how the Drug War

isn't about prohibition or drug policy. Instead, [she] looks into how this war is one in which terror is used against the population at large in cities and rural areas, and

⁸⁰ English translation: Gender violence alert.

⁸¹ Ferri, 2019.

⁸² Martinez, 2011.

⁸³ See Paley, 2014 for a comprehensive analysis of the historical origins of the Drug War in the Americas.

⁸⁴ Gibler, 2011; Paley, 2014, 2015, 2018.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Paley, 2014, p. 22.

how parallel to this terror and the panic it generates, policy changes are implemented which facilitate foreign direct investment and economic growth.⁸⁷

In other words, Paley argues that the Drug War represents a strategy to shift the forms of governance while deepening neoliberalism.⁸⁸

According to her, disappearance and other forms of violence are key strategies for sowing terror against communities in an effort to limit organizing against capitalist investment and the dispossession that results from it.⁸⁹ Paley contends that the Drug War can be understood as a neoliberal war, a war that “is useful to the global capitalist system and to maintaining the power of transnational capital.”⁹⁰ Paley proposes three key aspects of this neoliberal war:

1) la confusión de los perpetradores en medio de una narrativa de conflicto entre “narcos” reiteradamente producida y amplificada, 2) la ampliación de la categoría insurgente y 3) el uso de un complejo de violencia que va desde la muerte espectacular hasta la desaparición forzada de forma masiva.

1) the confusion of perpetrators in the midst of a narrative of a conflict between “narcos” repeatedly produced and amplified, 2) the expansion of the category of insurgent and 3) the use of an array of forms of violence that range from spectacular death to massive enforced disappearance.⁹¹

In this context, the State uses disappearances as part of a strategy of expanded counterinsurgency, through which it seeks to control resistance to the deepening of neoliberalism and the dispossession that accompanies this process.⁹² In analyzing the Drug War and the role of disappearance within this context, a clear political analysis is

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 14.

⁸⁸ Paley, 2018.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “...le es útil al sistema capitalista global y al mantenimiento del poder del capital transnacional” Paley, 2018, p. 8.

⁹¹ Paley, 2018, p. 50.

⁹² Paley, 2018.

important as it allows us to challenge simplistic perspectives that define it as a struggle between good (the State) and evil (organized crime). In the case of Mexico and as mothers of disappeared people shared with me, such narratives serve to obfuscate the role of the State in perpetrating and maintaining the disappearance of tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people. Thus, Paley's framework for understanding the Drug War and disappearance is key to the analysis I present in the following chapters.

D. Mothers organized in response to disappearance in Latin America and Mexico

Historically, mothers have been at the forefront of movements for justice for the disappeared throughout Latin America. *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* from Argentina are a famous example, their visible white headscarves continue to symbolize the struggle to find victims of enforced disappearance by the State between 1976 and 1983.⁹³ Other mothers have also gained visibility for seeking justice for victims of State violence, including CO-MADRES—searching for people disappeared between the mid 1970s and 1992 during the civil war in El Salvador⁹⁴—and *Mães de Maio* in Brazil—demanding justice for their daughters and sons killed and disappeared during police repression in May 2006 in São Paulo.⁹⁵ In Mexico, there is also a rich history of mother-led movements for the disappeared. One of the most prominent organizations is the *Comité ¡Eureka!*, which was founded in 1977 by Rosario Ibarra, mother of an activist who was disappeared by the Mexican army in Nuevo León during the country's Dirty War. To this

⁹³ Bosco, 2004, 2006; Guzman Bouvard, 1994.

⁹⁴ Stephen, 2001.

⁹⁵ Amparo Alves, 2012; de Oliveira Rocha, 2012; Vianna & Farias, 2011.

day, the *Comité ¡Eureka!* continues to demand justice for victims of State disappearance from that period.⁹⁶

Another important example is the activism of mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Ciudad Juárez during the last 30 years. Mothers and other relatives of slain and disappeared women have come together in a number of collectives including *Voces Sin Echo*⁹⁷—an organization co-founded by Paula Flores Bonilla, the mother of 17-year-old Maria Sagrario Gonzalez Flores who was disappeared and murdered in April 1998 in Ciudad Juárez.⁹⁸ Another important organization led by mothers of disappeared and murdered women in the city is *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*⁹⁹—co-founded by Norma Andrade, the mother of Lilia Alejandra García Andrade who was disappeared and murdered in February 2001.¹⁰⁰ These collectives and others like them have demanded justice for victims of femicide and feminicidal violence on the U.S.-Mexico border by sharing their stories, organizing marches and protests, painting pink crosses in public spaces, and also organizing *rastreos*—searches for human remains in abandoned lots and other remote locations in Ciudad Juárez.¹⁰¹ Their advocacy on the issue was successful in bringing the crisis of femicide to the forefront of the political agenda in Mexico, which resulted in the implementation of the General Law of Women’s Access to a Life Free from Violence¹⁰² and national and local mechanisms to issue gender violence alerts.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Becerril, 2009; Karl, 2014; Mendoza García, 2016.

⁹⁷ English translation: Voices Without Echo.

⁹⁸ Bejarano, 2002.

⁹⁹ English translation: May Our Daughters Return Home.

¹⁰⁰ Hincapié, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Bejarano, 2002.

¹⁰² Name in Spanish: Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia.

The current dramatic increase in disappearances since 2006 has also been met by extraordinary political organizing led by mothers to demand justice for their disappeared daughters and sons. As was the case during Mexico's Dirty War and in Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s, collectives of relatives of disappeared people, mostly made up of and led by mothers, have demanded State action to find the disappeared through public protests, marches, hunger strikes in front of government agencies, and legislative advocacy efforts.¹⁰⁴ Like the mother-led collectives in Ciudad Juárez, more recent collectives of relatives of disappeared people have organized search brigades to physically look for the bodies of the disappeared.¹⁰⁵ Collectives in several states throughout the country regularly organize searches—often to very remote parts of the desert or the mountainside. These search efforts have led to the discovery of hundreds of clandestine graves, including one of the largest clandestine gravesites in the country at Colinas de Santa Fe in the capital city of Veracruz in 2016.¹⁰⁶

As they have done in the face of widespread disappearance in previous moments in history, mothers of people disappeared in Mexico in recent years continue to lead demands for justice for the disappeared. The stories and experiences of mothers presented in the following chapters shed light on the ways in which they are able to continue this important work despite the emotional and social challenges of having a disappeared daughter or son.

¹⁰³ Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Romero Ventura, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012; Romero Ventura, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Lorena.

SECTION 2. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

A. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to document and examine some of the ways in which mothers of disappeared people are emotionally and socially impacted by disappearance in Mexico—a topic that continues to be under researched in scholarship on contemporary Mexico. In this study, I also seek to identify coping strategies that mothers have developed to be able to continue their work in the face of the ongoing trauma of disappearance. I chose to focus on the experiences of mothers in particular as they make up the overwhelming majority of the leadership and membership of collectives of disappeared people.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, as stated earlier, they have historically led efforts to find disappeared people and demand justice for them in Mexico and across Latin America. My hope is that these insights will be useful to human rights advocates and allies when developing appropriate resources and strategies to support mothers and other relatives of disappeared people. The findings from my research may also contribute to developing specific policies for the protection of mothers of disappeared people and other human rights defenders who face threats and violence. These findings may also be helpful to mental health professionals exploring more appropriate and effective interventions to work with these populations. It is my hope that research outcomes will inform the psychosocial accompaniment of mothers of disappeared people specifically, and other relatives of disappeared people as well as human rights defenders more generally, as they continue to demand justice in Mexico.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Lorena; Paley, 2018; Romero Ventura, 2018.

The research presented in the following chapters looks at the ways in which the disappearance of a daughter or son impacts the lives of mothers involved in grassroots organizing to find their disappeared family members and the manifestations of resilience within collectives led by these women in Mexico. In particular, I analyze: 1) how mothers cope with the pain of having a disappeared daughter or son; 2) how mothers of disappeared people join together with other relatives of disappeared people and the ways in which these relationships shape their coping mechanisms and support systems; and 3) the emotional and social impacts of engaging in the search for their daughters and sons.

B. Methodology

The analysis I present in this thesis is based on semi-structured interviews I conducted with ten mothers whose daughters and sons disappeared in Mexico in or after 2004. The interviews were carried out between June 2017 and April 2018. Eight of the interviews were carried out in person in Mexico City between June and August 2017. One additional interview was also done in person in January 2018 also in Mexico City. The final interview was done over Skype in April 2018 from my home office in Austin, Texas. Only one interview was carried out with each informant. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin approved this study on June 13, 2017.

All of the women who shared their stories with me had at least one disappeared daughter or son—representing a total of eleven sons and two daughters ages 16 to 32—who went missing in or after 2004. The women were actively involved in a collective of relatives of disappeared people and lived in Mexico at the time of the disappearance and

the interview. Of the ten mothers I interviewed, four lived in Mexico City, two lived in Mexico State, one lived in Coahuila, one lived in Baja California, and two did not disclose where they lived due to security concerns. All of them were actively involved in advocacy related to the issue of disappearance in Mexico through membership in at least one collective of relatives of disappeared people. The mothers ranged in age from 45 years old to 67 years old and they all had at least one other daughter or son who had not been disappeared.¹⁰⁸ All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is the language that the mothers spoke. I am a native-Spanish speaker and I am familiar with Mexican society because I was born, raised, and educated through fifth grade in Mexico.¹⁰⁹ This shared language and culture has helped enormously at every stage of the research process.

I recruited participants in person and through snowball sampling strategies. Initially, I contacted mothers of disappeared people who I had met through work I had carried out on human rights in Mexico between 2010 and 2012. I also circulated a call for participants through local contacts and human rights defenders in Mexico, including other relatives of disappeared people. One of my local contacts posted a brief call for participants in a group on Whatsapp, a texting app commonly used in Mexico, that included members of almost every collective of family members of disappeared people in Mexico and was being actively used to share solidarity and information. The call for participants included the number to contact me through Whatsapp so that those interested

¹⁰⁸ See Appendix A for a list of informants.

¹⁰⁹ I transcribed all of the interviews in Spanish myself. I did my best to follow all of the Spanish grammar rules when doing this, but there may be unintentional misspellings, oversights, or errors in the Spanish text.

could follow up with me this way. However, many of those who contacted me did not meet the sample criteria as they were fathers of disappeared people or an in-person interview was not feasible.

I also recruited participants in person during public events in Mexico City on the topic of disappearance or human rights. During and after these events, I approached women who had identified themselves as mothers of disappeared people during the presentation to invite them to be interviewed for this project. I was also able to recruit other participants through local contacts, including journalists, who shared my call for participants with potential informants.

Unexpectedly, one of the most challenging aspects of the recruitment process was scheduling a time to speak with mothers of disappeared people. I soon realized that mothers of disappeared people are incredibly busy and have very full schedules, full of meetings to check in on the progress of the investigation into the disappearances of their daughters and sons and many other commitments related to the search for their loved one. This was significant in terms of scheduling an interview, but also highlighted the degree and types of demands that mothers of disappeared people navigate in the process of searching for their daughters and sons.

The interviews ranged from one to three hours and were structured using an interview guide that I developed. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the purpose and goals of the project and obtained participants' informed consent to participate in the research study. Interview questions focused on each mother's experience in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons, their search

and advocacy efforts, the sources of support to which the mothers had access, the coping mechanisms they employed to deal with the disappearance, and their feelings about their experiences as part of collectives of relatives of disappeared people. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix B in English and Spanish. I transcribed and analyzed all interviews myself. I worked on this project in dialogue with Dr. Gloria González-López, my thesis advisor, and other scholars and professionals, including Dr. Dawn Paley.

C. Emotional and ethical challenges of conducting research on disappearance

Conducting research on the experiences of mothers of disappeared people in Mexico has been an emotionally challenging process for me. As I will discuss in the concluding chapter of this thesis, bearing witness to the pain of disappearance has been emotionally overwhelming, and at times paralyzing. While working on this project I have felt emotionally exhausted, struggled with writer’s block, and generally avoided it—experiences which are in line with what scholars refer to as trauma exposure,¹¹⁰ vicarious trauma,¹¹¹ and/or secondary traumatic stress.¹¹² Despite my training as a clinical social worker—a profession where trauma exposure is common—and the awareness I had about the potential impact that this research could have on me, I too have struggled emotionally with the experience of trauma that has resulted from exploring disappearance in such an intimate way. Studies on the experiences of researchers who investigate sensitive subjects have also found that “individuals listening to and working with the traumatic experiences

¹¹⁰ van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009.

¹¹¹ Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwala, 2014.

¹¹² Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016.

of others begin to experience the effects of trauma themselves.”¹¹³ This is echoed by other scholarship on the impacts of trauma exposure on researchers.¹¹⁴ Despite these challenges, connecting emotionally to the experiences of mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico has also informed the analysis presented in subsequent chapters. As sociologist Gloria González-López suggests, emotional wounds can be “epistemological site[s] of sociological knowledge”—an assertion that I explore more in the concluding chapter of this thesis.¹¹⁵

At the same time, conducting research about the coping mechanisms and support systems of mothers of disappeared people has also brought up important ethical challenges. One important ethical dilemma that emerged concerned informants’ disclosure regarding tensions within collectives of relatives of disappeared people—as I will discuss in Chapter 3. Thinking about if and how this information could be taken out of context or could be misused to disarticulate collectives or impact relatives of disappeared people in other ways really troubled me. Although this could be the case with any and all of the information shared in this document, my awareness of the history of the State’s weaponizing of internal conflicts within groups that actively and vocally resist its violence, and the risk of my research being used in that way, concerned me greatly. After consulting with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Gloria González-López, I decided to include reflections concerning these internal tensions as part of this thesis and to explicitly discuss the ethical challenges that making this decision brought up for me. Dr.

¹¹³ Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009, p. 72.

¹¹⁴ Bahn & Weatherill, 2012; Coles & Mudaly, 2010; Coles et al., 2014; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016.

¹¹⁵ González-López, 2006, p. 22.

González-López’s guidance and feedback have been key in navigating this ethical dilemma, as have been her reflections on *mindful ethics*—an “ethical consciousness” informed by mindfulness, grounded theory, and the actual life experiences of informants.¹¹⁶ The decision to write about tensions within collectives of disappeared people has also been informed by sociologist Jodi O’Brien’s assertion that the tensions and messiness that emerge from our research can be rich places of knowledge production.¹¹⁷ It is my hope that by engaging with my own discomfort about these findings and the tensions that the women I interviewed voiced, the analysis presented here will result in, as O’Brien writes, “work that resonates, work that matters.”¹¹⁸

SECTION 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis presented in this thesis draws from and expands on research and theoretical analyses from three broad fields of academic literature: research on the role of mothers in human rights struggles in Latin America, explorations on ambiguous loss, and studies on violence in Mexico in the context of the Drug War. The following section provides an overview of the literature from each of these fields and the ways they contribute to my analysis of the experiences of mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico.

¹¹⁶ González-López, 2011, p. 449.

¹¹⁷ O’Brien, 2009.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18.

A. Mothers organized in response to human rights abuses in Latin America

The work of postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty informs my reading of the literature on the role of mothers in human rights struggles in Latin America. In particular, Mohanty's exploration of the discursive creation of "the average Third World Woman" by Western feminist scholars grounds my understanding of this scholarship and my subsequent analysis.¹¹⁹ In her seminal work "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Mohanty highlights the ways in which feminist thinkers take Western feminism as a referent when analyzing the lived experiences of women in the so-called Third World.¹²⁰ Furthermore, she finds this scholarship ignores and discounts the diversity of women in the Third World. According to Mohanty,

the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency."¹²¹

In response, Mohanty calls for analyses of the experiences of women in the Third World that situate them within the diverse, complex, and, at times, contradictory social and material realities that characterize their lives.¹²² The work of feminist scholars exploring the role of mothers in confronting State violence that I present in the following section seeks to do precisely this.

This thesis is informed by and builds on academic analyses of the role of mothers in human rights struggles in Latin America. Scholarship produced in the so-called Global

¹¹⁹ Mohanty, 2003.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Mohanty, 2003, p. 39.

¹²² Ibid.

North on this topic has largely focused on analyzing motherhood as an identity in the context of social movements in Latin America.¹²³ However, the subjective experience of these mothers and the specific ways in which they cope with the trauma of disappearance continues to be an under-theorized topic. Some scholars, particularly those working on the topic of mothers actively engaged in grassroots organizing in Brazil, have provided some initial steps in this direction.¹²⁴

Motherhood as an identity has informed the work of some feminist researchers who have analyzed movements of women organized in response to human rights struggles in Mexico, particularly those concerned with *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez. An important example of this is the work of Cynthia Bejarano, a respected Chicana justice scholar and public intellectual. Bejarano's research focuses on the actions of mothers seeking justice for their daughters who have been victims of femicide.¹²⁵ In particular, Bejarano queries the ways in which these mothers challenge and transform gendered citizenship while engaging in the search for justice for their daughters—much like the mothers of disappeared people in El Salvador and Argentina did.¹²⁶ For Bejarano, the revolutionary power of these motherist groups is not just their ability to become “inquisitors of the State” on behalf of their daughters and sons, but also their ability to transgress and blur the private/public divide that characterized their lives before the disappearance of their loved ones.¹²⁷ In this way, she argues, these mothers “acted

¹²³ Bejarano, 2002; Guzman Bouvard, 1994; Stephen 1997, 2001; Wright, 2007.

¹²⁴ de Oliveira Rocha, 2014; Smith, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c.

¹²⁵ Bejarano, 2002.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

collectively to transfer empowerment from the private sphere of citizenship reserved for mothers and housewives to the public sphere of motherist activism.”¹²⁸ Bejarano unpacks the ways in which mothers’ diverse perspectives on motherhood push beyond the narrow definitions that States hold about their political role. By demanding justice and an end to impunity, mothers exceed the limits of the State’s perception of gendered citizenship and in the process transform it.¹²⁹

Bejarano has further engaged with the role and impact of mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Ciudad Juárez in the book *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, which she co-edited with Rosa-Linda Fregoso.¹³⁰ The book focuses on the crisis of *femicidio* and femicidal violence in the Americas and centers the experiences and testimonies of relatives of disappeared and murdered women throughout—including the testimony of two mothers of victims of *femicidio* in Ciudad Juárez. Furthermore, a number of chapters—including the one written by Adriana Carmona López, Alma Gómez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodríguez titled “Femicide in Latin America and the Movement for Women’s Human Rights”—discuss the active engagement of the mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Ciudad Juárez in efforts to demand justice for them.¹³¹ The analyses collected within this book are not only helpful in understanding *femicidio* in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, but also provide important lessons about the role of relatives of victims, the State, impunity, and the criminalization

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Bejarano & Fregoso (Eds.), 2010.

¹³¹ Carmona López, Gómez Caballero, & Castro Rodríguez, 2010.

of victims that can help us expand our analysis of the generalized violence currently impacting Mexico.

Another important scholar whose work on femicide in Ciudad Juárez has been influential is feminist scholar Julia Monárrez Fragoso. Her explorations of serial sexual femicide and the role of class in this violence have provided important tools for analyzing femicide.¹³² In particular, Monárrez Fragoso pays close attention to the criminalization of victims of femicide in an effort to blame them for their own death.¹³³ This is very similar to the way that the Mexican State criminalizes victims of disappearance, a topic that I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Other scholars have also analyzed women's political organizing and engagement in the context of their identity as mothers. In their work on women and popular protest in Latin America, Sallie Westwood and Sarah Radcliffe propose an analysis rooted in seeing mothers as political subjects in relation to "the multiplicity of sites wherein women are engaged in power struggles."¹³⁴ In other words, Westwood and Radcliffe's approach calls for an intersectional perspective to understand the use of motherhood as a political tool. Similarly, in her examination on women and social movements in Latin America, anthropologist Lynn Stephen advocates for a framework that is grounded in the context from which collective action emerges and that engages with the inherent

¹³² Monárrez Fragoso, 2003.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993, p. 20.

contradictions and tensions that arise from women's experiences, an analysis that provides a useful framework for my research.¹³⁵

In her ethnographic research with CO-MADRES, a group of activist mothers who organized to search for disappeared daughters and sons during the civil war in El Salvador, Stephen pays particular attention to their use of motherhood as an identity.¹³⁶ She argues that for members of CO-MADRES, “‘being a mother’ and ‘motherhood’ were constantly changing concepts which were expansive in the sense that they came to represent a wide range of issues within the organization.”¹³⁷ In other words, the label of mother allows for diverse understandings of the term, even as it serves to unify women in a collective program. Furthermore, Stephen contends that emphasizing their identities as mothers was a strategic choice that made it possible for the women of CO-MADRES to make themselves and their demands legible before the State.¹³⁸

The work of black feminist scholars, particularly those working on mothers organizing in response to state violence in Brazil, has also been influential to my analysis. Their work provides useful tools to analyze the subjective experience of mothers of victims of state violence and how they organize to seek justice for their daughters and sons. Anthropologist Luciane de Oliveira Rocha analyzes the experiences of black mothers in Brazil using the concept of *outraged mothering*. For de Oliveira Rocha, outraged mothering can be understood through two models of action in the aftermath of

¹³⁵ Stephen, 1997.

¹³⁶ Stephen, 2001.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

¹³⁸ Stephen, 2001, p. 54-55.

the state-sanctioned killing of black people in Brazil. She calls the first model *outraged grief* and states that the mothers who embody it “engage in a life of trauma where their memories of the deaths of their loved ones generates shame and blame.”¹³⁹ The second modality is *outraged luta*, through which “mourning is a possibility only after [mothers] achieve some kind of justice for their loss...mothers [become] activists and [use] their positionality as mothers as a strategic position to raise their voices against the state.”¹⁴⁰ Although her work deals with the aftermath of extrajudicial killings and not disappearance, the framework of *outraged luta* is useful in unpacking the motivations for mothers to engage in organizing to demand justice and hold the State accountable.

Building on de Oliveira Rocha’s work on activist motherhood in Brazil, Christen Smith addresses the gendered implications of State violence and in particular the affective impact of State terror tactics. A socio-cultural anthropologist, Smith’s work focuses on performance and anti-Black violence in Brazil—emphasizing the gendered aspects of this form of State violence. In particular, Smith’s work on black mothering and *sequelae*, “the gendered, reverberating, deadly effects of state terror that infect the affective communities of the dead,” is instrumental in analyzing the impacts of trauma on mothers’ lives.¹⁴¹ In her analysis, “sequelae are necropolitical mechanisms that terrorize Black mothers and inhibit their ability to further care for Black life.”¹⁴² That is, sequelae are instrumental in quelling resistance to State violence. In the case of mothers in

¹³⁹ de Oliveira Rocha, 2014, p. 48.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Smith, 2016b, p. 31.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 42.

Mexico, they too experience trauma as a result of the disappearance of their daughters and sons—a form of sequelae that not only limits action, but which has real impacts on women’s emotional and physical wellbeing.

B. Ambiguous loss research

Ambiguous loss, a term coined by senior scholar and clinician Pauline Boss, describes the psychosocial experience of relatives of disappeared or missing people.¹⁴³ According to Boss, ambiguous loss is a type of loss that is unclear because the fate of the person who has disappeared is not known.¹⁴⁴ It is precisely this uncertainty that is a form of chronic trauma that may last a whole lifetime, as the disappearance continues unresolved. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, one of the main findings that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people is that uncertainty is one of the most challenging aspects of the disappearance of a loved one.

Boss writes about her experience supporting families of men and women who were disappeared during the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, in New York.¹⁴⁵ Some findings from this work are particularly relevant to the analysis I present here. For example, the collective sharing process was vital to the success of these interventions, as Boss found that grouping “multiple families together in their own familiar community setting, sitting in circles, so that they [could] hear each other’s stories and form connections through common experience” was one of the most helpful parts of

¹⁴³ Boss, 1999.

¹⁴⁴ Boss, 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Boss, 2004.

the process.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Boss found that relatives of disappeared people reported that “hearing stories and telling stories about the missing person help[ed] begin their healing process.”¹⁴⁷ Finally, according to Boss, resilient families and individuals are those that are best able to develop *both/and thinking*—that is, the ability to embrace the paradox of thinking that their loved one is alive while acknowledging that they may be dead.¹⁴⁸ These are important insights that guide the analysis of mothers’ coping mechanisms for dealing with ambiguous loss that is presented in subsequent chapters.

Human rights researcher and expert Simon Robins has expanded on ambiguous loss theory to investigate the ways in which it impacts the relatives of victims of politically motivated enforced disappearances in the so-called Global South.¹⁴⁹ Robins sheds light on the important role that social and political context plays in mediating the impact of disappearance on families.¹⁵⁰ In particular, Robins found that coming together with other relatives of disappeared people creates a vital space for counterhegemonic discourses regarding the disappearances that contribute to creating new meanings, an element that he identifies as key to resilience.¹⁵¹ This too is an important component of the experience of mothers of disappeared people in Mexico.

Although the literature on ambiguous loss is very rich and provides many insights about resilience and the role of collectivity in supporting relatives of disappeared people, little research has used this framework to analyze the Mexican context. Much of the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 558.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Boss & Ishii, 2015.

¹⁴⁹ Robins, 2010, 2016.

¹⁵⁰ Robins, 2016.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

research on ambiguous loss is informed by work carried out in English-speaking North America¹⁵² or South East Asia¹⁵³. Hardly any research on ambiguous loss has been undertaken in a Latin American context, and especially Mexico. The analysis presented in this thesis aims to expand the ambiguous loss framework to disappearance in contemporary Mexico. In this way, this thesis provides a valuable contribution to this body of work and offers suggestions for other ways to expand the field of ambiguous loss scholarship to include disappearances within the context of a militarized Drug War in Latin America.

C. Scholarship on disappearance in contemporary Mexico

The work of two thinkers on disappearance in contemporary Mexico has been vital and influential to shaping my analysis of the experiences of the mothers who shared their stories with me. Sociologist Dawn Paley's analysis of the neoliberal Drug War and the role of disappearance within it has been fundamental to my understanding of the context of contemporary Mexico.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, investigative journalist John Gibler, who has focused on the disappearance of the 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College, writes about two stages of disappearance: the material stage and the legal-administrative stage. Both of these writers' work helped me theorize the links between disappearance, uncertainty, and State violence.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Boss, 2002, 2004, 2007.

¹⁵³ Robins, 2010, 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Paley 2014, 2015, 2018.

¹⁵⁵ Gibler, 2017.

Paley’s analysis of the Drug War guides my understanding of disappearance in contemporary Mexico. Paley posits that there is a clear link between the escalation of its militarization and the deepening of neoliberal policy in Mexico.¹⁵⁶ In particular, she points to the use of a whole array of violent tactics—including disappearance—as a way to expand the State’s counterinsurgency strategy as a means to intimidate and silence opposition to neoliberal dispossession.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, Paley argues that in Mexico, “the disappearance of dozens (or hundreds) of thousands of people has contributed in a fundamental way to a war against the people at the same time that it has provoked terror and confusion and has reduced in order of magnitude the number of homicides recognized in the last decade.”¹⁵⁸ She calls disappearances that take place within this context “neoliberal disappearances” to distinguish them from “Cold War disappearances,” where the link between the State and political repression was much easier to ascertain.¹⁵⁹ Another important contribution of Paley’s work to my analysis is her argument that what relatives of disappeared people teach us regarding the fate of disappeared people is that “it is possible to hold both possibilities (they are alive or they are dead) at the same time.”¹⁶⁰ As with the work of Pauline Boss, this is an important argument that is in line with the findings I present in Chapter 1.

¹⁵⁶ Paley, 2014, 2015.

¹⁵⁷ Paley, 2015, 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “la desaparición de decenas (o cientos) de miles de personas ha contribuido de forma integral a una guerra contra el pueblo a la vez que ha provocado terror y confusión y ha bajado por orden de magnitud la cantidad de asesinatos reconocidos en los últimos 10 años.” Paley, 2018, p. 63.

¹⁵⁹ Paley, 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “se puede tener las dos posibilidades (está vivo o está muerto) a la vez.” Paley, 2018, p. 164.

John Gibler describes two interconnected stages of disappearance: the material stage and the legal-administrative stage. The material stage refers to the physical abduction of a person. During the legal-administrative stage of disappearance, the state “attempt[s] to disappear the truth—any and all verifiable knowledge about the events” surrounding the disappearance.¹⁶¹ In this second stage, the entire administrative apparatus of the state is put into the service of maintaining the disappearance of individuals by not investigating their physical whereabouts. The legal-administrative stage of disappearance may include mundane administrative “errors” or more serious interference with the investigation (i.e. torturing alleged perpetrators to confess to the disappearance although they did not perpetrate it). This framework for understanding disappearance has been important in shaping my analysis of the role of uncertainty within State violence.

SECTION 4. OVERVIEW OF THESIS

The following chapters present some of the main findings that emerged from interviews with ten mothers of disappeared people in Mexico. The analysis presented here highlights important ways in which this group of mothers is impacted by the disappearance of their daughters and sons, but also their remarkable resilience and courage.

The first chapter highlights uncertainty as a key aspect of disappearance informed by ambiguous loss theory, as articulated by Pauline Boss. In particular, the uncertainty that these women experience is a form of chronic trauma and impacts them emotionally

¹⁶¹ Gibler, 2017, p. 258.

and physically. Mothers of disappeared people describe feeling pain, anguish, self-judgment, guilt, lack of joy, disinterest in the future, and a sense of becoming “living dead.” Furthermore, these women mentioned dealing with a number of physical health issues including rapid weight gain or loss, memory loss, and stroke. Mothers of disappeared people demonstrate a remarkable emotional and cognitive flexibility when grappling with the uncertain fate of their daughters and sons. This means that they are simultaneously able to hold seemingly contradicting beliefs about the status of their loved ones as alive and dead, which helps them navigate uncertainty—a concept that Boss calls *both-and thinking*. Regardless, mothers of disappeared people continue to demand that the State find their disappeared daughters and sons, arguing that the maintenance of uncertainty is intentional and deliberate. In this way, I argue that uncertainty is maintained by the State and can be understood as a component of State violence.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzes two important components of mothers’ involvement in the search for their disappeared daughters and sons: 1) their motivations for searching and 2) how this search impacts mothers. Mothers are motivated to search for their loved ones because of their hope of finding them and their love for them. They are also moved to take action out of a commitment to end all disappearances in Mexico so that others will not go through what they have experienced. Similarly, these women discussed embracing a search for all the disappeared, not just their own daughters and sons. Finally, the gendered division of labor among heterosexual couples in Mexico and women’s perceptions about their role as mothers also inform and motivate their search efforts. Active involvement in searching for their daughters and sons is an important

source of strength for mothers, especially as they describe their own personal transformation into human rights defenders. However, this search also creates tensions within their own families—namely in their relationships with their other daughters and sons and their spouses. Finally, the safety and material wellbeing of these women has also been negatively impacted as a result of their involvement in the search for the disappeared.

The third chapter explores two important forces in the lives of the women interviewed for this study in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons: social isolation and collective support. The first section briefly discusses the State's criminalization of victims of disappearance in contemporary Mexico and the ways in which this contributes to stigma and social isolation for relatives of disappeared people. In particular, the women who shared their stories with me discussed feeling isolated from their extended family. Although in some cases, mothers stated that their extended family was an important source of support, it was also apparent that this support often wanes as the years pass. The second section of this chapter discusses three types of support that mothers access through their involvement in collectives of relatives of disappeared people. Mothers of disappeared people described the various ways in which they provide and receive support to navigate the legal-administrative process that holding the State accountable for investigating and searching for their daughters and sons entails. Importantly, some mothers highlighted emotional support as a key component of their involvement in collectives. The third type of support that this group of women discussed concerns the material help that the collectives of relatives of disappeared people provide

members. Although being a part of these groups of their peers is an important source of support for mothers of disappeared people, there are also important tensions within these collectives that can limit their effectiveness.

Finally, the conclusion highlights the main findings of the thesis, discusses trauma exposure in the field, explores the limitations of this thesis, considers areas for future research, and includes recommendations based on the analysis presented here.

Chapter 1: *Vivir en la Incertidumbre es Morir Poco a Poco*¹⁶²: Uncertainty in the Lives of Mothers of Disappeared People

La autoridad sabe que la prioridad es encontrar a mi hijo. Y eso lo hemos mantenido desde siempre. Pero desgraciadamente no se puede encontrar a mi hijo, como no se ha podido encontrar a nadie porque el estado no quiere que se encuentren. No quiere que salgan a la luz todas las gentes desaparecidas porque nos ha impuesto un estado de terror. Porque vivir en la incertidumbre es morir poco a poco, es morir poco a poco.

The authorities know that the priority is to find my son. We have always maintained this. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find my son, just as no one else has been found because the State does not want them to be found. They do not want all those people who have been disappeared to come to light because they have imposed a state of terror on us. Because to live in uncertainty is to die little by little, it is to die little by little.

—Margarita.

Margarita, a 67-year-old woman, has been looking for her son Mauricio since he was disappeared in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila in January 2009. She keeps a manila folder with photos and articles about his case that she shows me when I interview her in Mexico City in June 2017. In one of the photos, a young man in glasses is dressed in a winter coat and stares at the camera with a big smile. “This one is from when he went to learn English in Canada,” Margarita tells me, clearly proud of her son. She flips through newspaper clippings about Mauricio’s case and the different national and international advocacy efforts to highlight the crisis of disappearance in Mexico in which she has participated in the years since his disappearance. She is meticulous in documenting her nearly nine-year search for her beloved son; the manila folder serves as an archive of the pain that she lives with each day since his disappearance.

¹⁶² English translation: “To live in uncertainty is to die little by little.”

Mauricio, an engineer, was disappeared while driving alone in early 2009 when he was 32 years old. Since then, Margarita has been determined to find him and to seek justice in his case. Despite her hard work and dogged efforts, federal and state law enforcement have done little to meaningfully investigate Mauricio's disappearance and have failed to locate him; a couple of people suspected of being involved in the case were arrested but the case has not been resolved. Given the lack of investigation by State authorities into his disappearance, Margarita lives with the unending uncertainty about the fate of her son. Some days are easier than others, but not knowing what happened to him is very difficult.

Ambiguous loss, a term coined by Pauline Boss, describes the psychosocial experience of living with uncertainty that families of disappeared people experience.¹⁶³ Boss defines ambiguous loss as a “loss that remains unclear” because the whereabouts and fate of the disappeared person are unknown.¹⁶⁴ Given the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the disappeared person, “there is no possibility of closure or even resolution for this type of loss,” making it one of the most painful and difficult types of loss.¹⁶⁵ The uncertainty that characterizes ambiguous loss is in itself a traumatizing event—a chronic trauma, especially as the disappearance continues unresolved.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, as Boss and Ishii argue, “‘not knowing’ the whereabouts or fate of a family member is a stress beyond normal human expectations.”¹⁶⁷ The experiences of mothers of disappeared

¹⁶³ Boss 1999, 2004, 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Boss, 2007, p. 105.

¹⁶⁵ Boss & Ishii, 2015, p. 272.

¹⁶⁶ Boss, 2007; Boss & Ishii, 2015.

¹⁶⁷ Boss & Ishii, 2015, p. 272.

people that I interviewed as part of the research for this thesis illustrate the ways in which uncertainty is often one of the hardest parts of the disappearance of a loved one and creates particular challenges for them. Nevertheless, mothers of disappeared people have also developed *both-and thinking*, which is an important ability to navigate the uncertain fate of their loved one and a key component of resilience in the context of ambiguous loss.¹⁶⁸

Like Margarita, most of the mothers of disappeared people I interviewed do not definitively know what happened to their daughters and sons. For them, uncertainty is an unending aspect of the disappearance of their loved ones that they live with everyday. Marta, a 67-year-old mother of four men who were disappeared at the ages of 19, 24, 25, and 28 in two separate incidents in 2008 and 2010, and a leader in the movement for the disappeared, raised the topic of uncertainty when I interviewed her—especially highlighting the painful nature of it. Soon after our interview began, Marta began to cry when talking about the disappearance of her first two sons in 2008:

Cuando pasaron ya tres días, pues ya me empezó a dar ese miedo, esa incertidumbre de ¿qué pasó? ¿dónde están? ¿por qué? Hacerse todas las preguntas que se hace cualquier familiar que nos pasa esto. Yo creo que mejor dicho todos los familiares. Pasamos de la esperanza, al dolor, a la incertidumbre, pues a esta búsqueda sin fin.

When three days had passed, well I started to grow afraid, to feel uncertain. What happened? Where are they? Why? Asking myself all those questions that any relative that this happens to asks. Or rather all relatives. We go from hope, to pain, to uncertainty, to this unending search.

¹⁶⁸ Boss, 2013; Boss & Ishii, 2015.

Marta described the uncertainty and unanswered questions that emerged for her after two of her sons were disappeared in Veracruz in 2008 when they were 24 and 19 years old. She specifically describes how her initial hope of finding her sons gave way to pain and uncertainty as time passed. For Marta, the uncertainty of their fate is a painful part of her “unending search” for them.

Diana, whose son was disappeared in the northern state of Coahuila in 2009 when he was 25 years old, also described what life has been like for her in the aftermath of his disappearance. “Every aspect of the disappearance is terrible because you are in limbo. You do not know.”¹⁶⁹ For Diana, like for other mothers of disappeared people, the limbo is one of the hardest parts of the experience of having a disappeared daughter or son.

Research on the experiences of parents of disappeared people in Latin America and other places around the world has discussed the traumatic impacts of uncertainty in their lives. In an ethnographic exploration of the experiences of mothers of people disappeared during the Contra War in Nicaragua, anthropologist Sheila Tully found that uncertainty mediated the experiences of mothers organized as part of the Nicaraguan Association of Mothers and Relatives of the Kidnapped and Disappeared (AMFASEDEN by its initials in Spanish).¹⁷⁰ According to Tully, this group of mothers reported anxiety, inability to concentrate, and difficulties with memory in the aftermath of the disappearance of their loved ones.¹⁷¹ Similarly, in a study of the experiences of parents of young children disappeared during Guatemala’s civil war, social worker and researcher

¹⁶⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “Es tremendo toda la desaparición porque estas en el limbo. No sabes.”

¹⁷⁰ Tully, 1995.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Claudia María Anleu Hernández found that uncertainty is probably “the feeling that causes the most harm and that has stayed with relatives during all these years.”¹⁷²

Writing about the experiences of the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa in 2014, a team of psychologists also identified the traumatic impact of uncertainty.¹⁷³ In particular, researchers found that “the void that disappearance and uncertainty entail is filled with fantasies about the situation of their sons, the harm, and mistreatment that they could be experiencing.”¹⁷⁴ Another important study with relatives of disappeared people in Sri Lanka also points to uncertainty as an emotionally challenging experience. This study found that “being unsure whether the disappeared person was dead or alive was highly predictive” of mental health challenges including depression.¹⁷⁵ These are findings that are echoed in the experiences of the women who shared their stories with me and that I will discuss in this chapter.

As Margarita asserts in the epigraph to this chapter, the uncertainty that mothers of disappeared people live with everyday is not just a random side effect of having a disappeared daughter or son. Margarita and other mothers of disappeared people emphasize that the individual emotional and health impacts of uncertainty surrounding the fate of her son are the result of a broader structural issue: the State’s unwillingness to thoroughly investigate his disappearance. I will argue that the uncertainty that

¹⁷² Original quote in Spanish: “el sentimiento que más daño les provoca y que ha permanecido en los familiares durante todos estos años.” Anleu Hernández, 2015, p. 57.

¹⁷³ Fundar, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Original quote: “El vacío que significa la desaparición y la incertidumbre se va llenando de fantasías sobre la situación de sus hijos, las vejaciones y malos tratos que podrían estar recibiendo.” Fundar, 2018, p. 310.

¹⁷⁵ Isuru, Hewage, Bandumithra, & Williams, 2018, p. 1.

characterizes disappearance is not simply an individually traumatizing event, but rather a component of State violence. Margarita's experience is echoed in the interviews that I conducted with other mothers of disappeared people, who also describe the emotional and physical challenges of not knowing what happened to their daughters and sons, the dynamic ways in which they navigate their beliefs about their fate, and the ways in which this uncertainty is maintained by the State.

* * *

This chapter will explore three key features of uncertainty that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people. First, uncertainty is experienced as traumatic and leads to emotional and physical challenges for mothers of disappeared people. Second, an important feature of uncertainty that I will discuss is the emotional and cognitive flexibility that mothers develop to hold seemingly conflicting beliefs regarding the fate of their daughters and sons in the face of uncertainty. And third, the uncertainty that characterizes disappearance is *not only* an individually traumatizing event, but also becomes part of a complex and multidimensional expression of State violence. Ultimately, as Margarita affirms in the epigraph, the main demand of mothers of disappeared people that I interviewed is to eventually find their daughters and sons—an effort to end the uncertainty surrounding their fate.

SECTION 1. *ES UN DOLOR QUE TE SOBREPASA EN TODOS LOS ASPECTOS*¹⁷⁶: UNCERTAINTY AS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

Having a disappeared daughter or son implies not knowing what happened to them or their whereabouts. It is precisely this “not knowing” their fate, and where they are, that is the most difficult part of the experience to live with every day.¹⁷⁷ Ambiguous loss theory is premised on the assumption that “uncertainty or a lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one as absent or present, as dead or alive, is traumatizing for most individuals, couples, and families.”¹⁷⁸ Because the fate of an individual is unknown, the grief process can never begin and thus relatives may not ever find closure.¹⁷⁹ As a result, researchers have identified ambiguous loss as the most stressful type of loss “because it defies resolution and creates confused perceptions about who is in or out of a particular family,” often experienced as a form of chronic trauma.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, scholars highlight that ambiguous loss is different than post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); PTSD is seen as an individual disorder, while ambiguous loss is a relational one that emerges from a “relational rupture that presumes a close relationship with the lost person.”¹⁸¹ Furthermore, research on ambiguous loss has shown that the long-term uncertainty that is a hallmark of not knowing the fate of a disappeared person

¹⁷⁶ English translation: “It is a pain that overwhelms you in all areas [of life].”

¹⁷⁷ Boss, 2007; Boss & Ishii, 2015.

¹⁷⁸ Boss, 2007, p. 105.

¹⁷⁹ Boss, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Boss, 2004, p. 553.

¹⁸¹ Boss & Ishii, 2015, p. 275. Also see Pérez-Sales, Durán-Pérez, & Bacic Herzfeld, 2000 for a discussion about this.

may result in emotional and physical difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and somatic distress.¹⁸²

While interviewing mothers of disappeared people in Mexico, the issue of uncertainty or not knowing what happened to their daughter or son came up over and over again. For most mothers, the uncertain fate of their daughter or son has been a part of their experience for many years as the disappearances took place between 2004 and 2014. The interviews that I conducted with ten mothers of disappeared people support the arguments that Boss and other scholars make about the traumatic impacts of uncertainty in the lives of relatives of missing people, in particular highlighting the emotional and physical impacts that it has had on them.

A. Emotional impacts of uncertainty

Many of the mothers I met with made reference to the emotional challenges that they had faced since the disappearance of their daughter or son. For some, the aftermath of the disappearance resulted in pain, anguish, self-judgment, guilt, lack of enjoyment in daily life, abandoning their future plans, and becoming “living dead.”¹⁸³ Margarita expressed this clearly when she stated, “*Vivir en la incertidumbre es morir poco a poco.*”¹⁸⁴ The experience of having disappeared daughters and sons is one that the mothers described as *dolorosa*—painful. Over and over again, mothers of disappeared daughters and sons described the painful nature of their experience and the difficulty of living with uncertainty every day.

¹⁸² Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003.

¹⁸³ de Oliveira Rocha, 2012.

¹⁸⁴ English translation: “To live in uncertainty is to die little by little.”

For Marta, who has four sons who disappeared when they were 19, 24, 25, and 28, “There is no pain, there is no greater suffering than losing a daughter or son. And in my case, well, you can imagine with four empty chairs. The truth is that for me this has been too heavy and too cruel a blow.”¹⁸⁵ Angélica, a 59-year-old mother whose daughter was disappeared in Mexico State in 2004 when she was 20 years old, also echoes Marta’s argument that the disappearance of a daughter or son is excruciatingly painful. Angélica argues, “You need superhuman strength to endure, because there are *compañeras* who have fallen ill. There are *compañeras* who have died and there are *compañeros* who fell down from pain and no one can pick them up. So, it is a pain that overwhelms you in all areas [of life].”¹⁸⁶ In other words, the pain of disappearance overwhelms mothers in ways that lead to illness, and in some cases, death. I will come back to this point later in this section.

Other mothers state that although the pain remains the same, over the years they have learned how to manage it. Lorena, the founder of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Veracruz whose son was disappeared in that state in 2013 when he was 29 years old, explains it, stating,

Y al principio estas todavía terriblemente dolido ¿no? O sea todavía hoy el dolor es idéntico, pero en esos momentos no sabes manejarlo. Y no el dolor en sí, si no las emociones, lo que acarrea el dolor. Porque uno puede tener el dolor ahí y no llegar a llorar. Pero en esos momentos lloras nada más porque el simple hecho de estar parada te da ganas de llorar.

¹⁸⁵ Original text in Spanish: “No hay dolor, no hay sufrimiento más fuerte, más grande que perder un hijo. Y en mi caso, pues imagínate cuatro sillas vacías. La verdad que para mí esto ha sido un golpe demasiado fuerte y cruel.”

¹⁸⁶ Original quote in Spanish: “Se necesita una fuerza sobrehumana para que resistas, porque hay compañeras que se han enfermado. Hay compañeras que se han muerto y hay compañeros que están tirados del dolor y nadie los levanta. Entonces es un dolor que te sobrepasa en todos los aspectos.”

At the beginning you are still terribly hurt, no? Still today the pain is identical, but in those moments you don't know how to manage it. And not the pain itself, rather the emotions, what pain entails. Because one can have the pain there and not cry. But in those moments you cry just because the simple fact that you are standing makes you want to cry.

Diana, a 53-year-old mother whose son was disappeared in the northern state of Coahuila in 2009 when he was 25 years old, also warns that the pain cannot be measured, as it is the same for all mothers of disappeared people, even those who may not appear to be in pain,

Aquí no puedes medir el dolor. Aquí no va a medir el dolor porque a todos nos duele p'al carajo igual. Simplemente que unos le ponen una cosa o otra. Unos se ponen careta. O sea el dolor no lo vas a medir, todo es igual. Todos estamos en el mismo nivel. En el mismito nivel, *mija*, porque no hemos recuperado a los muchachos. Estamos en el mismito carajo nivel.

You can't measure pain here. The pain can't be measured here because it hurts us all the same damn much. Just that some put one thing or another over it. Some put a mask on. You will not measure the pain, it is the same. We are all in the same level. In the same exact level, *mija*, because we have not recovered the boys. We are in the same damn level.

Alicia, a 54-year-old mother of a man who was disappeared in Michoacán in 2009 when he was 23 years old and while working as a police officer, also describes how she has dealt with the pain that emerges from the uncertainty surrounding her son's disappearance. She explains that she made the conscious decision to defeat the pain in order to continue searching for her son,

De pronto era mucho el dolor que yo venía cargando en mi ser. Era, solo tener en mi mente las dos palabras: vencer o morir. Yo decidí no morir, mejor vencer. Vencer quiere decir para mi, vencer ese dolor tan grande que yo tenía dentro de mi y tener fuerza para seguir luchando para adelante.

All of a sudden it was a lot of pain that I was carrying in my soul. It was having only two words in my mind: overcome or die. I decided not to die, but to overcome. To me, to overcome means to overcome that great pain that I had inside myself and to have strength to continue fighting onward.

Lorena, Diana, and Alicia's moving reflections highlight the fact that mothers have learned to manage their pain, asserting that the pain is just as intense, even while they have developed strategies to cope with it. Later in this chapter, I will explore an important aspect of mothers' resilience: the dynamic ways in which they navigate beliefs about the fate of their daughters and sons. And in the following two chapters, I will also discuss two key coping mechanisms that mothers of disappeared people have developed in order to manage the pain of disappearance: actively searching for their daughters and sons and being a part of a collective of relatives of disappeared people.

Not only is not knowing what happened to their daughters and sons a painful experience, but this uncertainty also leads mothers to imagine the terrible things that could be happening to their loved ones—an experience that they described as a tormenting anguish. Alicia describes the experience of the everyday uncertainty as *una agonía*—an agony—and *una angustia*—an anguish—especially as she imagines what her son may be experiencing,

Es muy difícil, muy doloroso caminar con la ausencia de [mi hijo] porque la incertidumbre te va llevando a una agonía del día a día. De que si ¿está vivo, que me le están haciendo? ¿Me lo están torturando? ¿Me lo están lastimando? ¿Se siente mal? Él padecía de su presión, se le bajaba mucho su presión. ¿Se siente mal? ¿Ya le dieron de comer? Es una angustia que vas viviendo minuto a minuto...son muchas cosas que te van llevando a un estado de dolor, a que te vuelvan a rodar las lágrimas. Pero también eso te lleva a tener coraje, coraje, rabia. Te lleva a seguir caminando, a seguir dando pasos firmes hacia delante.

It is very difficult, very painful to walk with the absence of [my son] because uncertainty leads you to an agony day to day. Wondering, is he alive? What are they doing to him? Are they torturing him? Are they hurting him? Does he feel sick? He suffered from blood pressure; he would get very low blood pressure. Does he feel sick? Did they feed him already? It is an anguish that you experience moment to moment...many things lead you to this pain, to crying again. But that also leads you to be angry, to feel anger, rage. It leads you to continue walking, to continue taking firm steps forward.

For Alicia, not knowing what has happened to her son has led to her wondering what terrible things her son might be enduring and to questions about his wellbeing—an experience that she also states is agonizing. For her the torment of imagining the possible violence her son may be experiencing has led to a lot of pain, but also to anger and motivation to continue her dogged efforts to find him.

Women like Alicia are not alone in their experience of the painful and traumatic nature of living with uncertainty concerning the disappearance of their loved ones. Wives and mothers of people disappeared during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹⁸⁷ relatives of people disappeared in Chile during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet,¹⁸⁸ and mothers of people disappeared in Nicaragua during the civil war¹⁸⁹ have similarly faced a number of emotional challenges stemming from uncertainty regarding the fate of their loved ones. As I will discuss later in this thesis, searching and membership in collectives of relatives of disappeared people are also two important ways that some of these relatives have coped with this pain.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Barakovic, Avdibegovic, & Sinanovic, 2013; Powell, Butol, & Hagl, 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Pérez-Sales, Durán-Pérez, & Bacic Herzfeld, 2000.

¹⁸⁹ Tully, 1995.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

Like Alicia, Margarita also describes experiencing anguish from imagining what might be happening to her disappeared son. Margarita stated that in the face of uncertainty, “I suffered a lot while torturing myself. [I asked myself] whether they were mutilating him, whether he was suffering, whether they had hit him on the head and he was at a psychiatric hospital.”¹⁹¹ Like Alicia, Margarita also imagined terrible things that might be happening to her son: mutilation and suffering or a blow to the head, for example. Margarita describes having these thoughts as a torment that she suffered through. This is not unlike what other groups of parents have experienced as discussed by psychologist working with the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.¹⁹²

For other mothers, the reality that they face while searching for bodies of disappeared people also makes them think about the possible terrible things that could have happened to their daughters and sons. Saraí, a 53-year-old mother whose daughter was disappeared in Coahuila when she was 16 years old in 2004, is the founder of a collective in that northern state. Her collective regularly organizes searches in the desert to look for bodies of missing people. She also described how the uncertainty of her daughter’s fate has led her to imagining what might have happened to her. This is especially true when she routinely finds human remains and learns what befell other disappeared people in her state: “Finding is not easy because you see and you suffer.

¹⁹¹ Original quote in Spanish: “Mucho sufrí al estarme atormentando. [Me preguntaba] que si lo estaban mutilando, que si estaba sufriendo, que si le habían dado un golpe en la cabeza y estaba en un psiquiátrico.”

¹⁹² Fundar, 2018.

Why do you suffer? Because of the way that you see and that you find. Then you start to imagine what happened. It is very difficult.”¹⁹³

Faced with the uncertain fate of their disappeared daughters and sons and imagining the terrible things that they may have suffered or may be suffering currently also leads some mothers to self-judgment and to guilt about enjoying their lives. Marta describes how uncertainty about her four sons’ fate leads her to not want to experience enjoyable things, such as laughter,

...si salgo al publico, ahí a cualquier espacio publico, y me río, siento que no tengo derecho a reírme. Yo misma me juzgo y digo, “¿Qué es posible que me este riendo cuando no se si mis hijos...por lo que estén pasando? [No sé] si estén vivos, si estén muertos, si tendrán lo necesario, si no lo tendrán...Igual cuando tengo la oportunidad de comer, como ahora que estuvimos ahí en ciertos banquetes. Me siento culpable, siento que no debo, siento que no lo merezco.”

...if I go out in public, to whatever public space, and I laugh, I feel that I do not have a right to laugh. I judge myself and say, “How is it possible that I am laughing when I do not know if my sons...what they are going through? [I do not know] if they are alive, if they are dead, if they have what they need, if they do not have it...It is the same case when I have the opportunity to eat, like now when we were at some banquets. I feel guilty, I feel that I shouldn’t, I feel that I do not deserve it.”

Similarly, for Estefanía, a 45-year-old mother whose son was disappeared in Veracruz in 2014 when he was 19 years old, the uncertain fate and whereabouts of her son also brings up feelings of guilt: “Even with food. What am I going to eat if I do not know if my son is eating? They are such horrible feelings. Like I told you, your life is

¹⁹³ Original quote in Spanish: “Encontrar no es fácil porque ves y sufres. ¿Por qué sufres? Por la forma en que ves y encuentras. Luego te empiezas a imaginar lo que le sucedió. Es muy difícil.”

horrible. You are left without a life.”¹⁹⁴ As with Marta, Estefanía feels that she too cannot enjoy food without knowing whether her son is also eating. In the absence of certainty about the wellbeing of their daughters and sons, some mothers experience anguish when they imagine the terrible things that their disappeared loved one might be enduring. This uncertainty also leads to guilt and self-judgment about meeting their basic needs—such as eating—because mothers do not know whether the basic needs of their daughters and sons are being met.

Even when the mothers do not experience self-judgment and guilt, they describe how things that were once enjoyable no longer bring them pleasure. Since she began her search for her two sons who were disappeared in 2008 when they were 19 and 24 years old—and her subsequent search for two additional sons who were disappeared in 2010 when they were 25 and 28 years old—Marta has encountered much support from other people. However, she explains how the experience of having disappeared sons has left her with a void that she cannot fill—even when surrounded by supportive people. She states, “But then I say that I am ungrateful because I am surrounded by good people, very nice people and even then I do not feel fulfilled. I always have this emptiness, this thing here in my heart.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Original quote in Spanish: “O sea hasta la misma comida. ¿Qué voy a comer yo si no se si mi hijo está comiendo? Son unos sentimientos tan horribles. O sea te digo, es horrible tu vida. Te quedas sin vida.”

¹⁹⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “Pero luego digo que soy una malagradecida porque me ha rodeado de mucha gente buena, de mucha gente linda y aún así yo no me siento que me llene. Siempre traigo este vacío, esta cosa en mi corazón.”

Estefanía also describes how she cannot enjoy traveling to other countries as part of her advocacy efforts—another thing that she would have otherwise found to be a pleasant experience.

O sea no hay nada que te pueda dar gusto en la vida. Como te dije, yo he viajado ahorita un montón. No se ni cuantos países he conocido en todo esto, pero no hay algo que realmente pueda yo decir “¡Ay, que padre, como me satisface!” No, no, no. Ya le pierdes el sabor a la vida. Ya no es lo mismo.

In other words, there is nothing that can bring you joy in life. As I said, I have travelled now a lot. I do not know how many countries I have gotten to see in all of this, but there isn’t something that I can truly say, “Oh how cool! How that satisfies me!” No, no, no. You lose your zest for life. It is not the same.

For Estefanía, life has “lost its zest” in the aftermath of her son’s disappearance in Veracruz when he was 19 years old, which to her means that she cannot truly enjoy the new experiences that she has had of traveling to new countries as part of her advocacy efforts. Researchers working with families of missing people in the United Kingdom also discuss their feelings of guilt and self-judgment in the aftermath of the disappearance of a loved one—especially concerning “taking pleasure in any personal pursuit” and relaxing.¹⁹⁶ Similar findings are echoed in a qualitative study of the experiences of parents of children disappeared during the civil war in Guatemala, where guilt was a major emotion that this group experienced—even 20 years after the disappearance took place.¹⁹⁷

Even other ordinary activities lose their appeal for mothers of disappeared people in the aftermath of their disappearance. Family parties and other social gatherings they

¹⁹⁶ Holmes, 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Anleu Hernandez, 2005.

would have previously enjoyed attending are no longer something that mothers find appealing. This is the case with Sofía, a 51-year-old mother of a young man who was disappeared in Hidalgo in 2013 when he was 19 years old. She states, “Saying, ‘Well today I am going to go have fun at a party and I am not going to care about anything,’ it is not true, I can no longer do this. First, because I don’t feel like doing it and, second, I am not 100% or available enough to tell you, ‘Now I can forget about everything, now I will live,’ because that is not the case. At least it isn’t in my case.”¹⁹⁸ The lack of interest in attending family gatherings and other parties is one of the contributing factor that leads to the social isolation of mothers in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons—an issue that I will explore in more depth in Chapter 3.

In addition to no longer enjoying the things they otherwise would have, mothers describe how their plans for the future are abandoned after the disappearance of their daughters and sons. For example, Lorena, whose son was disappeared in Veracruz in 2013, had been planning to move to a new apartment before her son was disappeared, but describes how his disappearance changed that for her: “But when they kidnapped my son, I lost all desire to do that. I did not see life with that goal anymore. I said, ‘I do not want to have anything to do with that.’”¹⁹⁹ Like Lorena, Angélica also highlighted how future plans are put on hold or dashed in the aftermath of the disappearance of a daughter or son: “It is a very difficult situation. You don’t have the confidence to do all of the things

¹⁹⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “Decir, ‘Pues ahora me voy a ir a divertir en una fiesta y no me va a importa nada’, no es cierto, yo no puedo ir a hacerlo. En primera no me nace y en segunda no estoy lo 100% o lo disponible para decirte ahora me olvidó de todo y ahora vivo porque no es así. Al menos en mi caso no.”

¹⁹⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “Pero cuando secuestran a mi hijo, se me fueron todas esas ganas ya. Ya no vi la vida para nada en función de eso. Yo dije, ‘Ya no quiero saber de eso.’”

that you would have been able to do before. Without taking into account that all of those life plans that one has, they are over.”²⁰⁰ Thus, for some mothers the disappearance of a daughter or son represents a radical rupture in their lives, which leads them to no longer find pleasure in their everyday life as well as to abandon their plans for the future.

Mental health professionals who have worked with mothers of disappeared people in Argentina have similarly found that relatives of disappeared people suspend their plans for their future in the face of uncertainty. According to Lucila Edelman and Diana Kordon, two founders of the *Equipo Argentino de Trabajo e Investigación Psicosocial* (EATIP),²⁰¹ “This trend was particularly frequent and was in direct relation with the uncertainty that the status of disappeared entails. Relatives could not make decisions concerning important projects while the situation of the loved one was undefined.”²⁰²

As Margarita asserts in the epigraph to this chapter, living with the uncertainty of the disappearance of her son since 2009 feels like “dying little by little.” For some mothers, the initial pain of the disappearance may be so overwhelming that they considered death. Marta, upon hearing about the disappearance of two of her sons in 2010 after two of her sons had previously been disappeared in 2008, describes feeling “that she was not going to be able to live.”²⁰³ She explained how for the first three months after the second disappearance she “felt that the best thing would be to die and I stopped and

²⁰⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “Es una situación muy difícil. No puede uno llegar y con toda la confianza hacer muchas cosas que antes las pudiéramos hacer. Sin contar que piensa uno que todos esos proyectos de vida que uno tiene, se acaban.”

²⁰¹ Name in English: Argentine Psychosocial Work and Research Team.

²⁰² Original quote in Spanish: “Este fenómeno fue particularmente frecuente y estaba en relación directa con la indefinición que conlleva el estatus del desaparecido. Los familiares no podían decidir proyectos vitales en tanto la situación del ser querido permanecía indefinida.” Edelman & Kordon, 1995, p. 104.

²⁰³ Original quote in Spanish: “que ya no iba a poder vivir.”

wished with all my heart that that would happen. However, when I reacted and decided that I needed to stand up to search for my sons.”²⁰⁴ Unfortunately, this is not a rare experience among relatives of disappeared people. Similarly, research on the affective impacts of disappearance on wives of missing men in Bosnia and Herzegovina found that they had high rates of suicidal ideation (thoughts about suicide).²⁰⁵

Black scholars researching the experiences of black mothers in the aftermath of other forms of violence against their daughters and sons perpetrated by the State have highlighted mothers’ assertions about becoming “living dead” in the aftermath of their children’s murder.²⁰⁶ Some mothers of disappeared people experience something similar to this. For example, Estefanía explains of herself and her husband “we are alive, but not inside”²⁰⁷ and “we were left living dead. What kind of life could we have?”²⁰⁸

Although the consideration of death indicates an emotional low point, Marta also highlights something that emerged from the interviews: mothers’ incredible resilience. As Alicia, whose son was disappeared in Michoacán in 2009, so eloquently asserts, “There has been a lot of pain, a lot of fatigue, but in this process I have learned to be resilient—which is a very important part of surviving.”²⁰⁹ Despite all of the emotional challenges that living with uncertainty brings, such as pain, anguish, guilt, not experiencing joy, abandoning future plans, and becoming *muertos en vida*—living dead—mothers of

²⁰⁴ Original quote in Spanish: “sentía que lo mejor era morir y me detuve y deseaba con todo mi corazón que así fuera. Sin embargo cuando ya reaccioné y decidí que tenía que estar de pie para buscar a mis hijos.”

²⁰⁵ Powell, Butollo, & Hagl, 2010.

²⁰⁶ de Oliveira Rocha, 2012; Smith, 2016a, 2016b.

²⁰⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “estamos vivos, pero por dentro no.”

²⁰⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “quedamos muertos en vida ¿Qué vida podemos tener?”

²⁰⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “Ha sido mucho dolor, mucho cansancio, pero en este caminar he aprendido a tener resiliencia—que es parte muy importante en la vida de la sobrevivencia.”

disappeared people are able to continue demanding justice for their daughters and sons and for them to be found.

B. Physical impacts of uncertainty

As the previous section shows, the experience of disappearance and uncertainty brings with it a lot of emotional challenges for mothers of disappeared people. Mothers also describe the physical challenges and health problems that they have experienced in the aftermath of the disappearance, which they link to the emotional challenges of uncertainty. Angélica, describing her experience in the aftermath of her daughter's disappearance in 2004 when she was 20 years old, highlights this connection: "And because of this, one becomes ill with diseases that aren't curable."²¹⁰ In nearly every interview, mothers of disappeared people—like Angélica—described the various physical health issues that have plagued them since their daughters and sons were disappeared.

Research on trauma has found that traumatic experiences are not just felt emotionally, but also have a significant physical impact.²¹¹ Bessel van der Kolk, a preeminent scholar on trauma, has found that, in particular, "stressful experiences—whether divorce or final exams or loneliness—have a negative effect on immune function."²¹² Thus, stress weakens people's immune systems, making them more prone to illness and autoimmune diseases. In some cases, people dealing with post-traumatic stress have particularly experienced chronic diseases.²¹³ One study on the physical impacts of

²¹⁰ Original quote in Spanish: "Y a raíz de eso, se enferma uno de enfermedades que ya no se curan."

²¹¹ Spitzer et al., 2009; van der Kolk, 2014; Waldrep & Benight, 2015.

²¹² van der Kolk, 2014, p. 240.

²¹³ Waldrep & Benight, 2015.

exposure to trauma and PTSD found that people who have experienced trauma are more likely to have a number of health challenges including heart failure, stroke, and asthma.²¹⁴ Other studies have shown the connection between PTSD and somatic symptoms such as blurred vision and dizziness that cannot be explained medically.²¹⁵ Thus, as Bessel van der Kolk writes, “we have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body.”²¹⁶ This is also true for the mothers of disappeared people I listened to, who reported a range of health challenges that they have faced in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons.

One other important impact that trauma has on people is on their memory. Research on trauma and memory has shown that people who have traumatic experiences also report memory loss in the aftermath of the traumatic event. As van der Kolk writes, “Memory loss has been reported in people who have experienced natural disasters, accidents, war trauma, kidnapping, torture, concentration camps, and physical and sexual abuse... Memory loss has been part of the criteria for PTSD since the diagnosis was first introduced.”²¹⁷ Several mothers of disappeared people discussed memory loss or challenges with memory after their daughters and sons were disappeared—in line with findings regarding the impacts of trauma on memory.

²¹⁴ Spitzer et al., 2009.

²¹⁵ Gupta, 2012.

²¹⁶ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 21.

²¹⁷ Ibid, p. 190.

According to the mothers I listened to, the initial shock in the aftermath of the disappearance of their loved one has the most significant physical impacts on them. Margarita, whose son Mauricio disappeared in 2009 in Coahuila, highlights this: “It is a radical change. Bit by bit you learn that nothing happens. Well, I lost 15 kilos in the first month. Imagine. 15 kilos! I stopped eating.”²¹⁸ For Margarita, the physical impacts initially were drastic, but then she was taught bit by bit to manage the impacts. Margarita’s health issues were not just limited to her weight, as she also suffered a minor stroke while traveling by plane within a few months of the disappearance of her son.

Sofía, whose son was disappeared in 2013 in Hidalgo, also discussed similar impacts to her weight and her health in the aftermath of the disappearance. She states, “well, I had a pre-heart attack. I gained a lot of weight, almost 15 kilos. Sometimes I get like a nervous thing on my skin, I start to feel itchy...Allergy, skin allergy.”²¹⁹

Lorena also faced health challenges in the first months after her son’s disappearance in 2013. Lorena highlights the connection between her pain and anguish and her physical health. She states that she started going to the psychiatrists “because I had collapsed very, very, very, very, very, very severely. And I was putting myself in danger, a lot. I had a fall, I broke my clavicle, and I was doing things to myself. As a

²¹⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “Es un cambio radical. Poco a poco lo van enseñando a uno que no pasa nada. Bueno yo bajé 15 kilos en el primer mes, imagínese. ¡15 kilos! Dejé de comer.”

²¹⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “pues ya tuve un pre-infarto. Subí mucho de peso, casi unos 15 kilos. Hay veces que me da como de nervios en la piel, me empieza a dar así como comezón...Alergia, alergia de piel.”

result of all of this, no?”²²⁰ Angélica too describes how the aftermath of the disappearance of her daughter brought with it health problems. According to her, “Our life changed completely. It is a drastic turn because, well to begin, many illnesses begin. The despair, the pressure, and everything is so great that your immune system is compromised. One starts to get sick with everything.”²²¹ Thus, Angélica, identifies the connection between the despair she experienced and the various challenges to her physical health that she has faced.

Research on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people around the world also discusses the links between the traumatic nature of disappearance and physical health issues. Studies have paid particular attention to somatic complaints—such as digestive issues, headaches, physical pain, and dizziness—among these groups of relatives. A study of women whose relatives disappeared during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s found that they “show a higher intensity of somatic symptoms than women without a war missing family members.”²²² This study also found that mothers of disappeared people showed significantly higher rates of emotional and physical challenges than other groups of women—daughters, sisters, wives of disappeared people.²²³ Human rights expert and researcher Simon Robins also highlights the physical impacts of disappearance on relatives of victims of enforced disappearance

²²⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “porque si caí muy, muy, muy, muy, muy, muy fuerte. Y ya me estaba poniendo en peligro yo misma, mucho. Tuve una caída, me rompí la clavícula y me estaba haciendo cosas. Por lo mismo ¿no?”

²²¹ Original quote in Spanish: “Nuestra vida cambia completamente. Es un giro tremendo porque, bueno para empezar, empiezan muchas enfermedades. Le baja a uno, es tanta la desesperación, la presión y demás, que empieza a bajar todas las defensas. Se empieza uno a enfermar de todo.”

²²² Barakovic, Avdibegovic, & Sinanovic, 2013, p. 201.

²²³ Ibid.

during Nepal's Maoist Revolution, with over a quarter of the relatives interviewed mentioning chronic somatic issues.²²⁴ According to Robins, this group of relatives understood these health issues to be directly connected to the emotional pain of disappearance.²²⁵ Similarly, research on the experiences of relatives of victims of enforced disappearance in Honduras in the 1970s and 1980s shows somatic complaints to be a significant outcome of the uncertainty surrounding the fate of a loved one.²²⁶ Researchers working with parents of disappeared children in Guatemala²²⁷ and the 43 students from Ayotzinapa disappeared in Mexico in 2014,²²⁸ as well as with women whose relatives were disappeared during the Pinochet regime in Chile,²²⁹ also highlighted the impacts of this traumatic experience on the health of these groups of relatives.

Another surprising impact of the disappearance of their daughters and sons that mothers describe is memory loss. Estefanía discusses how she has experienced difficulties with her memory since her son's disappearance in Veracruz in 2014: "One of the things that I have as a result of this is that I lost a lot of my vision and short term memory. Like, it has affected me a lot. So if you ask me what I did yesterday, I can tell you, but I have a hard time remembering."²³⁰ Similarly, Diana has increasingly had

²²⁴ Robins, 2010.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Quirk & Casco, 1994.

²²⁷ Anleu Hernández, 2005.

²²⁸ Fundar, 2018.

²²⁹ Rojas Baeza, 2009.

²³⁰ Original quote in Spanish: "Yo una de las cosas que tengo es que a raíz de esto perdí mucho la vista y memoria a corto plazo. O sea, me a afectado muchísimo. O sea tu me preguntas que hiciste ayer, y si te lo puedo decir, pero me da mucho trabajo recordar."

problems with her ability to retain information: “Every day I am worse. Every day I am worse with my mind, I retain things less.”²³¹

In other cases, the loss of memory is more severe—at times resulting in missing memories of things that happened over a period of a couple of years. This is what happened to Paulina in the aftermath of her son’s disappearance in 2011 in Nuevo León: “Two years of my life were lost because I do not remember what happened. I do not remember... There are many things that happened that I think I acted because I had to act, but there are many things that I do not remember.”²³² Paulina attributes the memory loss to the experience of being shown a graphic video by investigators in her son’s case: “They showed me a video where they supposedly beheaded my son... In my life, I will never forget that... I think that it was then, from then on that everything got cloudy and from then on I do not remember anything anymore. I think that this was a consequence of that.”²³³ Thus, Paulina ascribes her memory loss to the traumatic experience of being shown the video of the supposed decapitation of her son. In this case, memory loss emerges from the revictimization of Paulina by the investigators in her son’s case, rather than the uncertainty of his disappearance. Unfortunately, Paulina’s experience of revictimization by authorities is not unique and is a frequent challenge that mothers face when advocating for justice for their daughters and sons.

²³¹ Original quote in Spanish: “Yo todos los días estoy peor. Cada día estoy peor con mi mente, menos retengo cosas.”

²³² Original quote in Spanish: “Dos años de mi vida se perdieron porque no recuerdo que pasó. No recuerdo... Hay muchas cosas que pasaron que yo creo actué porque tenía que actuar, pero hay muchas cosas que yo no recuerdo.”

²³³ Original quote in Spanish: “Me enseñaron un video a donde supuestamente degollaron a mi hijo... Eso jamás en mi vida lo voy a... Yo creo que de ahí, de ahí fue de donde yo se me nubló todo y es ahí donde yo ya no recuerdo. Yo digo que eso fue la consecuencia de eso.”

Other mothers also highlighted the impact of the State’s investigation—or lack thereof—into the disappearances of their daughters and sons on their health. For Sofía, the connection between her health problems and the State’s inaction or obstruction in the search for her son since he was disappeared in Hidalgo in 2013, what journalist John Gibler refers to as “the legal-administrative phase of disappearance,” is clear.²³⁴ Her words are revealing:

Eso a la larga te lleva a enfermarte porque la frustración es mucha. La frustración, el enojo, el que llegues y te digan “Fíjese que no tengo nada”...Entonces eso te lleva a la larga a enfermarte, porque te llevas tus corajes entripados. Te llevas tus lágrimas bien guardaditas. Entonces cuando llega el tiempo, cuando llega el momento en el que el cuerpo te dice, “¿Sabes qué? Estás mal. Ya no te voy a aguantar” y explota.

In the long-term, that leads you to get sick because the frustration is so great. The frustration, the anger, arriving and being told “I don’t have anything”...So, in the long run that leads you to get sick because you take your anger with you in your guts. You also take your tears, hidden. So the time comes, when the moment comes when your body tells you, “You know what? You are sick. I am not going to bear it anymore” and you explode.

Similarly, Margarita discussed the criminal case against one of the perpetrators of her son’s disappearance. The legal case against this man has been a challenging one for Margarita and her husband, as they have faced new barriers to seeking justice at every turn—including a lack of thorough investigation into the case, the State’s refusal to charge the perpetrators with the disappearance of their son, and threats to their safety because of their insistence on justice. She also highlights the impacts of this frustrating process to her health: “I think that this criminal process is what has made us sick, it is

²³⁴ Gibler, 2017.

what has made us sick.”²³⁵ According to Margarita, it is precisely the legal process of seeking justice for her son that has impacted her health the most.

The examples from Margarita, Lorena, Sofía, Angélica, Estefanía, and Paulina show us the physical impacts of the disappearance of their daughters and sons and the State’s maintenance of this uncertainty by not fully investigating their disappearance—ranging from weight loss/gain, strokes, skin rashes, injuries, illnesses, and memory loss—that seem to be more acute in the immediate aftermath, but continue beyond it as well. As Sofía and Margarita assert, it is precisely the frustrations and challenges that they face in the process of holding the State accountable to investigate the disappearance of their daughters and sons and in seeking justice that also leads to illness. I will explore the State’s role in maintaining uncertainty in a later section of this chapter.

SECTION 2. *NISABEMOS SI ESTÁ VIVO O SI ESTÁ MUERTO*²³⁶: BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY OF LIFE AND DEATH

How do mothers of disappeared people make sense of the fate and whereabouts of their daughters and sons given the uncertainty that they live with everyday? How do they speak about the current status of their disappeared daughters and sons—alive, dead, both? These questions guide the following analysis and my initial attempts to understand the ways in which mothers grapple with the question of the fate of their disappeared daughters and sons in the face of uncertainty.

²³⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “Yo creo este proceso penal es el que nos ha enfermado, es el que nos ha enfermado.”

²³⁶ English translation: “We don’t even know if he is alive or if he is dead.”

As I discussed earlier, a key aspect of disappearance is that the fate of those who have been disappeared is uncertain. In this context, uncertainty above all is not knowing what has happened to a person in the aftermath of their disappearance.²³⁷ In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, they express a range of beliefs about the situation of their disappeared daughters and sons that were often seemingly contradictory and incredibly difficult to understand for someone who has not experienced the disappearance of a relative. Thus, the ideas put forward in this section are not meant to definitively describe the beliefs that mothers of disappeared people hold about the fate of their daughters and sons, but rather to highlight the dynamic and flexible ways in which they navigate ideas of life and death when describing the current circumstances of their loved ones.

What emerged from the interviews I conducted is that the beliefs that mothers of disappeared people hold about what has happened to their daughters and sons in the aftermath of their disappearance go beyond the dichotomy of life and death. In other words, the mothers I listened to demonstrate a remarkable emotional and cognitive flexibility when grappling with the uncertain fate of their daughters and sons. Some mothers, like Margarita, make a conscious decision to think of their loved ones as dead as a way of coping with the increasingly painful horrors that they imagine that they might be enduring. However, reframing the situation in this way has not precluded Margarita—as well as other mothers—from continuing to look for her son, nor did it mean that she has given up hope of finding him alive. Other mothers, while not explicitly thinking about

²³⁷ Boss, 2007.

their daughters and sons as dead, acknowledge the decreasing likelihood of finding them alive. Ultimately, they also expressed their hope and belief that their loved ones are alive.

A number of researchers have analyzed the ways in which relatives of disappeared people navigate their beliefs regarding the fate of their disappeared loved ones. One such scholar whose work has explored this topic in the context of relatives of disappeared people in Mexico is sociologist Carolina Robledo Silvestre.²³⁸ Although Robledo Silvestre acknowledges that the experience of disappearance is different than grief and could even be considered “a non-grief in the sense that there is not certainty about the death that makes it possible to begin the process of detachment,”²³⁹ the concept of grief figures heavily in her study on the experiences of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in the Mexican border city of Tijuana, Baja California. According to her, the graphic display of murdered and mutilated bodies in Tijuana has informed the beliefs of relatives of disappeared people regarding the possible death of their disappeared loved ones.²⁴⁰ She writes, “the prevalence of the bodies of young people found executed in the streets...act as a detonating process for a common narrative: the disappeared could be dead.”²⁴¹ For the collective that Robledo Silvestre follows in her study, she argues that the presumption of the death of their disappeared relatives is also a political decision as they have found it easier to negotiate with and demand action from

²³⁸ Robledo Silvestre, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2016b

²³⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “un no-duelo en el sentido de que no se posee la certeza de la muerte que permite iniciar el proceso del desapego.” Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 25.

²⁴⁰ Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

²⁴¹ Original quote in Spanish: “la cotidianidad de cuerpos de jóvenes encontrados en las calles ejecutados...actúan como procesos detonadores de una narrativa común: los desaparecidos podrían estar muertos.” Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 286.

the State when insisting that the dead bodies of disappeared people be found, as opposed to demanding that they be returned alive.²⁴²

Although the disappearance of a relative brings with it a number of complex challenges that have a lot in common with grief, death and disappearance are two different experiences—each with its own particularities²⁴³—something that Robledo Silvestre also acknowledges.²⁴⁴ However, in her analysis of the experiences of disappearance in Tijuana, Robledo Silvestre’s use of grief as a guiding category of analysis imposes a finality to the fate of the disappeared that does not account for the complex ways in which relatives of disappeared people make sense of their situation. She seems to imply that the death of disappeared people is inevitable, a conclusion that is not shared by the mothers that I interviewed. Her analysis of relatives’ feelings regarding the question of the uncertain fate of their loved ones forces them within a dichotomy of being either alive or dead that does not account for the dynamic and flexible ways in which the mothers of disappeared people that I interviewed navigate ideas of life and death. However, Robledo Silvestre does point to this flexibility when highlight the diversity of opinions within the collective, as some members of the collective firmly believe that their relative is alive. As she writes,

...la identidad del grupo es conflictiva y en ella coexisten fuerzas en permanente disputa: las creencias que van desde la vida del ausente en el plano familiar y personal, hasta la certeza de su muerte en el plano social. Los familiares de los desaparecidos experimentan en el seno de su duelo estas permanentes contradicciones propias de la relación no acabada con el ausente.

²⁴² Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

²⁴³ Boss & Ishii, 2015.

²⁴⁴ Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

...the identity of the group is conflictive and forces in permanent dispute coexist within it: beliefs that range from the disappeared person being alive in the familial and personal realm, to the certainty of their death in the social realm. The relatives of the disappeared experience at the core of their grief these permanent contradictions that characterize the ongoing relationship with the absent person.²⁴⁵

According to Robledo Silvestre, the beliefs that relatives of disappeared people hold are in “permanent contradiction.” Despite this recognition about the diverse perspectives within the collective, her framework imposes the need to think of disappeared people either as dead or alive, an impossible choice given their uncertain status.

Conversely, other scholars have highlighted how the perspectives of mothers of disappeared people push us to think beyond the dichotomy of life and death in order to hold both beliefs at the same time. In an ethnographic study of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in the northern state of Coahuila, sociologist Dawn Paley describes the ability of relatives of disappeared people to transit from one category to another—alive and dead—in their understanding about the fate of their loved one.²⁴⁶ She writes, “There is much agility among relatives in their way of facing the possibility that a loved one could be dead, without completely giving in to this possibility.”²⁴⁷ In other words, relatives of disappeared people display an emotional and cognitive agility that makes it possible for them to acknowledge the possibility that their loved one may be dead, while also holding on to hope that they are alive. Instead of believing that their relative is either dead or alive, Paley asserts that the families of disappeared people teach us that “it is

²⁴⁵ Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 295.

²⁴⁶ Paley, 2018.

²⁴⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “Hay mucha agilidad entre los familiares en su forma de abordar la posibilidad de que su ser querido pueda estar muerto, sin entregarse totalmente a esta posibilidad.” Paley, 2018, p. 163.

possible to have the two possibilities (they are alive or they are dead) at the same time.”²⁴⁸ For them, their perspective on the status of their relative is not that they are *either alive or dead*, but rather an acknowledgement that they may be *both alive and dead*.

In their work on ambiguous loss with relatives of disappeared people in Japan, Boss and Ishii also highlight the ability to embrace “*both-and* thinking” as a key part of resilience in the context of uncertainty.²⁴⁹ Writing about the experiences of working with survivors of the 2011 tsunami in Japan, Boss and Ishii argue that for families of missing people,

Talking with others who are experiencing the same type of loss helps people learn the dialectic of *both-and* thinking. That is, they slowly learn to embrace the paradox of ambiguous loss: “She is probably dead, but maybe not,” “He is gone, but still here sometimes in my thoughts and dreams.” To find some measure of meaning in the meaninglessness of ambiguous loss, they give up on absolute thinking and accept the paradox. They learn to hold two opposing ideas in their minds at the same time.”²⁵⁰

Thus, according to Boss and Ishii, the ability of relatives of disappeared people to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death is a sign of resilience and “an effective way to cope with the long-term stress of ‘not knowing.’”²⁵¹ Boss terms the ability to hold seemingly contradictory ideas “tolerance for ambiguity.”²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “se puede tener las dos posibilidades (está vivo o está muerto) a la vez.” Paley, 2018, p. 164.

²⁴⁹ Boss & Ishii, 2015, p. 283, emphasis in the original.

²⁵⁰ Boss & Ishii, 2015, p. 283.

²⁵¹ Ibid, p. 287

²⁵² Boss, 2013.

Similarly, scholars have explored the links between flexibility—cognitive, emotional, and psychological—and resilience.²⁵³ For example, in their work on healing rituals, Devon Hinton and Laurence Kirmayer, both psychiatrists with extensive research on culture and mental health, argue, “a key source of potential efficacy in healing ritual and psychotherapy is the communication, evocation, and induction of flexibility in cognition and attention.”²⁵⁴ According to them, engaging in healing rituals increases people’s cognitive and emotional flexibility and ultimately “can contribute to better coping, problem solving, and adaptation.”²⁵⁵ These arguments are echoed in the work of psychologists Todd Kashdan and Jonathan Rottenberg who contend that psychological flexibility is a key aspect of psychological health.²⁵⁶ Kashdan and Rottenberg define psychological flexibility as “a number of dynamic processes that unfold over time. This could be reflected by how a person: (1) adapts to fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigures mental resources, (3) shifts perspective, and (4) balances competing desires, needs, and life domains.”²⁵⁷ The work of these authors further helps us understand the emotional and cognitive flexibility that makes it possible for mothers to hold the seemingly contradictory beliefs that their daughters and sons are alive, while acknowledging the likelihood of their death. As with theorizing on *both-and thinking*, this cognitive flexibility is a marker of the resilience of these women.

²⁵³ Hinton & Kirmayer, 2017; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010.

²⁵⁴ Hinton & Kirmayer, 2017, p. 28.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 28.

²⁵⁶ Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 866.

Although Boss' work is helpful in understanding mothers' of disappeared people's ability to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death when discussing the fate of their daughters and sons, her argument that tolerance for ambiguity entails "embracing the 'not-knowing'" does not fully account for these women's experience.²⁵⁸ Mothers of disappeared people I listened to are dogged about their attempts to find their disappeared daughters and sons—in whatever state—and thus do not passively accept the lack of information about their fate. For the mothers that I interviewed, the demand that their daughters and sons be found is itself a major part of their resiliency—as will be discussed in the following chapter. Instead of passively embracing the "not knowing,"²⁵⁹ mothers of disappeared people both acknowledge that they may never get all the answers or see their daughters and sons, while at the same time continuing to demand an investigation of the disappearance and search for their loved ones. In this way, the analysis presented in this section sets out to expand current research on ambiguous loss to account for the ways that mothers of disappeared people actively seek to end the uncertainty of the fate of their daughters and sons, while also embracing the ambiguity of their fate.

A. *Both-and thinking* and mothers of disappeared people

What emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people is their ability to navigate uncertainty by simultaneously holding seemingly contradictory beliefs about the fate and whereabouts of their daughters and sons. Some mothers explicitly state their belief that their loved ones are dead or refer to them as being dead. Others mothers do not

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Boss, 1999, 2007, 2013.

explicitly state this, but do acknowledge the likelihood that they might be dead. However, acknowledging death as a possibility—explicitly or implicitly—does not preclude mothers from also expressing their hope that their loved ones will be found alive. Analyzing the interviews with mothers of disappeared people, it became apparent that their understandings of the fate of their disappeared daughters and sons go beyond the dichotomy of life and death, thus embracing both-and thinking.²⁶⁰

Some mothers of disappeared people explicitly acknowledge that death was the likely fate of their daughters and sons as a means of coping with the trauma of uncertainty. This was the case with Margarita, who explained the way she reframed the disappearance of her son in order to be able to continue searching for him,

Entonces empezó a cambiar mi chip...Entonces, en vez de pensar que lo están martirizando, pues empecé a pensar que está muerto pero que lo tengo que hallar. Y se convirtió en algo que mi esposo y yo, nos comprometimos al doble a que si lo buscáramos vivo. Seguirlo buscando. El saber que desgraciadamente lo más seguro es que no esté vivo, nos compromete a buscarlo...con todo el esfuerzo posible, con todas las ganas posibles hasta donde nos permita la vida. Es un compromiso de amor con él. Pero ya dejé de estarme martirizando.

So my chip started to change...So, instead of thinking that they were torturing him, well I started to think that he was dead, but that I had to find him. And it became something that my husband and I, we committed twice as much as if we were looking for him alive. Continue to look for him. Knowing that, unfortunately, it is most likely that he is not alive, commits us to search for him...with as much effort as possible, with all our strength as long as life allows us. It is a commitment born out of love for him. But I stopped torturing myself.

For Margarita, whose son was disappeared in Coahuila in 2009, this shift in her thinking meant an end to the *martirio*—the agony—that the uncertainty of his whereabouts created in her, especially as she would imagine all the terrible things that

²⁶⁰ Boss & Ishii, 2015

may have happened to him. According to her, thinking about her son's fate in this way—or “changing her chip”—has made her even more committed to searching for him and has also decreased the pain that not knowing created for her. Robledo Silvestre also found this to be true in her analysis of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Tijuana, stating, “for those people who have been searching for their daughters and sons for years, accepting their death over any other fate is a more emotionally viable option.”²⁶¹ Similarly, research on the psychosocial impacts of disappearance on relatives of disappeared people in Sri Lanka also found that “belief that the missing person was dead enabled better [mental health] outcomes.”²⁶²

Other mothers are not as explicit in their beliefs that their disappeared daughters and sons are dead. However, they speak about them in the past tense and express their goals as if death had been the fate of their disappeared daughters and sons. For example, Marta, mother of four sons who were disappeared in 2008 and 2010, expressed the objective of her search as finding their bodies: “my fundamental goal is to deliver the remains of their fathers [to my grandchildren] so that they can say, ‘They are here. We have them here.’”²⁶³ For Marta, like for all mothers I interviewed, her goal is to find her disappeared sons. However, Marta describes her goal as delivering the remains of her sons to her grandchildren. This implies that like Margarita, Marta has shifted her thinking

²⁶¹ Original quote in Spanish: “para aquellas personas que llevan más años buscando a sus hijos, aceptar la muerte por encima de cualquier otro destino resulta un camino más viable en términos emocionales.” Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 294.

²⁶² Isuru, Hewage, Bandumithra, & Williams, 2018, p. 7.

²⁶³ Original quote in Spanish: “la esencial meta mía es entregar los restos de sus padres [a mis nietos] para que ya ellos digan, ‘Aquí están. Aquí los tenemos.’”

and now thinks about her sons as dead. Nevertheless, this has not changed her resolve to ultimately find them.

Other mothers of disappeared people I interviewed did not explicitly refer to their daughters and sons in the past tense or as dead, but did acknowledge the decreased likelihood that they would find them alive. However, they also highlighted the inability to definitely say that they are dead without a physical body. For example, Saraí, whose daughter was disappeared in Coahuila in 2004 when she was sixteen years old, clearly articulates this,

Mientras que no lo encontremos, para uno es una esperanza. Es decir “está vivo” aunque, como al menos nosotros vemos, la probabilidad más grande es que esté muerto. Pero, aún así mientras que no esté en caja, como esté, yo no voy a tener ese duelo porque tu mente no te deja.

As long as we haven't found them, for us this is hope. It is saying “they are alive” although, at least how we see it, the more likely possibility is that they are dead. But even then, as long as they are not in a box, however they are, I am not going to have that mourning because your mind won't let you.

While Saraí acknowledges that it is more likely that her disappeared daughter is dead, her mind will not allow her to think of her as dead without having certitude that this is what happened to her, which would come from seeing her dead body in a coffin—*estar en caja*. Saraí is the leader and founder of a collective in a northern state that organizes weekly searches for the disappeared. During these searches, members of the collective go out to search for traces of dead bodies in the dessert. Thus, although Saraí firmly asserts that it is more likely that those who are disappeared are dead and dedicates much of her time to searching for human remains, she explains how she thinks of disappeared people as alive as long as their remains are not found. This would suggest that, as Paley argues,

for mothers of disappeared people, believing that their daughters and sons are dead and searching for them in this state is not incompatible with their belief that they are also alive or with also searching for them alive.²⁶⁴

Ultimately, mothers of disappeared people have as their main goal finding their daughters and sons, dead or alive. As Paulina, a 49-year-old mother of a police officer who was disappeared in Nuevo Leon in 2011 when he was 23 years old, states, “I do not know if he is alive or if he is dead. The only thing I know is that I am searching for him and whatever his fate, I want to find him. That is what I have clear in my mind.”²⁶⁵ Thus, having clarity about the main goal of finding their daughters and sons alive also helps navigate this uncertainty. It has also led mothers to acknowledge and hold both the possibilities of life and death at the same time. Diana, a 53-year-old mother of a man who was disappeared in Coahuila in 2009, describes how these two possible fates have shaped the thinking of the collective of relatives of disappeared people to which she belongs,

Ahora, te digo que en nuestro colectivo ya estamos hablando. Como todo un proceso los buscamos en vida, pero después de tantos años ya como que nos estamos abriendo y aceptando que puede ser de otra manera. El tiempo apremia y sabemos que es difícil después de tanto tiempo encontrarlos como queremos encontrarlos, pero no nos negamos a que pueda ser de otra manera.

Now, I tell you that in my collective we are talking now. During the entire process we search for them alive, but after so many years, we are sort of opening ourselves and accepting that it could be another way. Time is of the essence and we know that it is difficult after so much time to find them as we want, but we do not reject that it could be another way.

²⁶⁴ Paley, 2018.

²⁶⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “Yo no se si está vivo, yo no se si está muerto. Lo único que yo se es que yo lo estoy buscando y como esté, yo lo quiero encontrar. Eso es lo claro que tengo en mi mente.”

Thus, although their main strategy is to search for disappeared people alive, they also acknowledge that it may be possible that they could find them *de otra manera*—in other words, dead.

Even when mothers acknowledge that their daughter or son is likely dead, this does not preclude them from asserting their hope that they may be alive—again showing the dynamic ways in which mothers hold both of these two possible fates. For example, Margarita—who stated that she had made the conscious decision to think of her son as dead—also continues to hold on to the hope of finding him alive.

...mi hijo no hay un cadáver, ni sabemos si está vivo o si está muerto. Quiero decirle que no es que ya no tengamos esperanza de encontrarlo vivo, porque su recámara esta puesta. Nunca ha dejado de estar puesta su recámara y como él la dejó. Entonces esa es la única esperanza que tenemos ¿no? No nos cerramos a los milagros.

...there is no body for my son, we don't even know if he is alive or if he is dead. I want to tell you that it is not as if we do not have any hope of finding him alive, because his bedroom is set. It has never not been set and as he left it. So, that is the only hope we have, no? We do not rule out miracles.

In other words, although Margarita has shifted her thinking to think of her son as dead in order to cope with uncertainty, she also simultaneously hopes to find him alive—a hope that is symbolized by maintaining his bedroom in the same state he left it in before his disappearance. Like other mothers of disappeared people, Margarita holds seemingly contradictory assertions—an acknowledgment that the disappeared person is likely dead and the hope of finding them alive.

The flexible ways in which mothers simultaneously hold the belief that their daughters and sons are both alive and dead also allows them to hold other contradicting

beliefs regarding their search. For example, some mothers strongly hope that they will eventually know what happened to their daughters and sons. For them, this hope is a strong motivator to continue their search despite the pain of uncertainty. At the same time, mothers are cognizant of the possibility that they will never definitively know the fate of their daughters and sons. One of the most striking examples of this is Paulina's perspective,

Yo creo que yo voy a saber algo de mi hijo. Yo si tengo la esperanza. Yo si tengo la esperanza. Entonces como tengo la esperanza, también digo, honestamente y haciendo señalamiento que sabemos en la realidad que muchas nos vamos a quedar en el limbo también. Pero yo tengo la seguridad que voy a saber algo de mi hijo. Entonces eso me mantiene a la raya.

I think that I am going to know something about my son. I do have hope. I do have that hope. So, since I am hopeful I also say, honestly and making this statement, that we know that the reality is that many of us will also stay in limbo. But I am sure that I will know something about my son. So, this is what sustains me.

The emotional and cognitive flexibility that navigating uncertainty everyday entails allows mothers like Paulina to hold a strong conviction that this uncertainty will eventually end, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is possible she may be in limbo forever. To an outside observer it may seem that she is contradicting herself in her statement, but in reality she is displaying comfort with *both-and thinking*.²⁶⁶

However, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of stances regarding life and death within the movement for the disappeared in Mexico. Although the mothers that I interviewed displayed an emotional and cognitive flexibility that allows them to hold both the belief that their daughters and sons are alive and acknowledge the likelihood of

²⁶⁶ Boss & Ishii, 2015.

their death, other relatives of disappeared people are unequivocal in their public assertion that their loved ones are alive. Beyond individual beliefs regarding the fate of a disappeared daughter or son, the question of whether those who have been disappeared are alive or dead is, for some relatives of disappeared people, also a political one. Other scholars have highlighted tensions within movements for the disappeared in Mexico and Argentina precisely over the topic of searching for the bodies of disappeared people versus searching for them alive.²⁶⁷ For example, *Comité ¡Eureka!*—a collective of relatives of people disappeared during the political repression of the Dirty War—and the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa are unequivocal in their demand for their daughters and sons to be returned alive.²⁶⁸ As Robledo Silvestre argues,

Las creencias alrededor de la desaparición en Tijuana en el marco de la Guerra contra el Narcotráfico no tienen aún la estabilidad que puedan tener aquellas de la Guerra Sucia en México o en otros países latinoamericanos como Argentina. El poco tiempo de la lucha y la vigencia del fenómeno hace que se trate de un sustrato flexible y vacilante.

The beliefs concerning disappearance in Tijuana in the context of the Drug War are not yet as stable as those from the Dirty War in Mexico or in other Latin American countries such as Argentina. The recent nature of the struggle and existence of this situation makes it so that it is a flexible and unsteady concept.²⁶⁹

Thus, relatives of disappeared people within the movements for the disappeared in Mexico have different ideas about the fate of their disappeared loved ones and how to search for them. Further research on the issue should analyze the ways in which relatives of disappeared people who exclusively search for their loved ones alive navigate the

²⁶⁷ Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

²⁶⁸ Gibler, 2017; Paley, 2018.

²⁶⁹ Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 292.

uncertainty that surrounds their fate and the implications of this on their beliefs regarding the topic.

SECTION 3. *EL GOBIERNO NO QUIERE ENCONTRARLOS*²⁷⁰: UNCERTAINTY AS A FORM OF STATE VIOLENCE

Margarita’s son, Mauricio, was physically disappeared in 2009 at the age of 32. She continues to work every day to find him, yet most of her days are consumed with stopping another type of disappearance: the State’s legal-administrative disappearance of Mauricio. John Gibler, an investigative journalist who has reported in depth on the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa, describes two interconnected stages of disappearance: the material stage and the legal-administrative stage.²⁷¹ The material stage refers to the physical abduction of a person. The legal-administrative stage describes the State’s “attempt[s] to disappear the truth—any and all verifiable knowledge about the events—along with the bodies of those being disappeared.”²⁷² In this second stage, the entire administrative apparatus of the State is put into the service of maintaining the disappearance of individuals by not investigating their fate or whereabouts. Examples of the legal-administrative stage of disappearance range from the mundane—such as filing the wrong paperwork—to the more dangerous—destroying important evidence in a case. Although Margarita and other mothers of disappeared people are affected by both stages of disappearance, it is the second stage that consumes a disproportionate amount of their time and energy.

²⁷⁰ English translation: “The government does not want to find them.”

²⁷¹ Gibler, 2017.

²⁷² Ibid, p. 238.

As Margarita states in the epigraph to this chapter, mothers of disappeared people argue that there is a clear connection between the uncertainty they live with everyday and the State's strategy of terror. Margarita asserts that by not searching for disappeared people, the State seeks to impose terror through uncertainty and impunity, an experience that is killing her little by little. In this section, I will argue that the uncertainty that characterizes disappearance is not simply an individually traumatizing event, but rather is a component of State violence. Furthermore, the legal-administrative stage of disappearance is the mechanism through which the State maintains the uncertainty surrounding the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared. Margarita's perspective is echoed in the interviews that I conducted with other mothers of disappeared people who also describe the ways in which this uncertainty is maintained by the State.

A. Maintaining uncertainty through the legal-administrative stage of disappearance

A key demand of mothers of disappeared people is that the State find their daughters and sons. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases mothers are forced to do the majority of the work to find the disappeared—an issue that will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 2—because the State does not conduct a comprehensive, full investigation into the disappearance. Unfortunately, impunity in contemporary Mexico is widespread.²⁷³ Gibler argues that impunity in Mexico cannot be understood as merely “a result of ‘corruption’ or ‘incompetence’ or a ‘lack of resources.’” Impunity is an exquisitely crafted function of the judicial system; it is in fact the defining feature of the

²⁷³ Gibler, 2017; Paley, 2015.

judicial system.”²⁷⁴ In other words, impunity is systemic and a reality for the overwhelming majority of victims of violence in contemporary Mexico. In the context of disappearance, the impunity surrounding cases is exemplified through the legal-administrative stage of disappearance.

Mental health professionals working with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina found important links between uncertainty, impunity, and the emotional challenges that mothers of disappeared people experience. Edelman and Kordon, two founders of the *Equipo Argentino de Trabajo e Investigación Psicosocial (EATIP)*, argue that the uncertainty regarding the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared person “creates a space of psychosis-inducing ambiguity that is reinforced by the impunity of those who carry out the disappearance...in this case it is unknown what must be accepted, what the character of the loss is. This has a destructuring impact on the psyche.”²⁷⁵ Edelman and Kordon highlight the psychological impacts of uncertainty—as was argued in the first section of this chapter—but also assert that these are reinforced by the fact that those who are responsible for the disappearance are not held responsible for their crimes. In fact, impunity does not only serve to maintain the uncertainty surrounding the disappearance, but further exacerbates the emotional impacts of that uncertainty that mothers face.

The concept of *sequelae* helps to further understand the connections between uncertainty, the legal-administrative stage of disappearance, and State violence.

²⁷⁴ Gibler, 2017, p. 253.

²⁷⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “crea una zona de ambigüedad psicotizante que se ve reforzada por la impunidad de los ‘desaparecidos’...en este caso no se sabe qué es lo que se debe aceptar, cuál es el carácter de la pérdida. Esto tiene un efecto desestructurante para el psiquismo.” Edelman & Kordon, 1995, p. 107.

Anthropologist Christen Smith uses the concept of sequelae in her work on anti-Black State violence in Brazil and the United States to gender her analysis of its impacts.²⁷⁶ She argues for a more comprehensive understanding of State violence against black people, stating that although it “often results in the immediate physical death of young Black men, it is principally, yet tacitly, performed for Black women and impacts Black women disproportionately.”²⁷⁷ Smith highlights the ways in which the violence that kills black men often has devastating emotional and social impacts on the mothers and sisters of these men, which often translates to physical and health challenges that, in some cases, lead to their death.²⁷⁸ Smith uses the term sequelae, which in a medical context means the after effects of a condition or injury, to describe “the gendered, reverberating, deadly effects of state terror that infect the affective communities of the dead.”²⁷⁹ In other words, sequelae are a useful description of how the emotional impacts of State violence go beyond the deaths of black men and impact their families and communities in ways that are not accounted for in official death tolls.

In the context of disappearances in contemporary Mexico, sequelae can help us understand the emotional and physical impacts of the uncertainty of disappearance as a key part of State violence. The concept of sequelae expands our understanding of State violence by also incorporating an analysis of the cumulative emotional and physical impacts of living with uncertainty—maintained by the State through the legal-

²⁷⁶ Smith, 2016a.

²⁷⁷ Smith, 2016a, p. 31.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

administrative stage of disappearance—as an important component of disappearance. In this way, the trauma of uncertainty described in the first section of this chapter is not merely an unfortunate side effect of the disappearance of a daughter or son, but rather is intentionally inflicted on mothers by the State. Thus, uncertainty can be understood as one component in a broad set of forms of violence—including disappearance and homicide—that the State routinely uses in contemporary Mexico.

Other analyses of disappearance have also found uncertainty to be a key part of State violence. For example, in their final report regarding State violence during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, the *Comisión de Verdad de Paraguay* stated that the State used “the impossibility of grieving as a strategy of political domination and control.”²⁸⁰ In other words, enforced disappearance was a useful tactic because the uncertain fate and whereabouts of disappeared people meant that their relatives were unable to mourn them, which the State used as a strategy for social and political control.

The work of sociologist Dawn Paley also helps inform my reading of uncertainty as a form of State violence.²⁸¹ Paley argues that far from addressing drug trafficking or eliminating organized crime networks, the militarization of Mexico under the auspices of the so-called Drug War has resulted in widespread violence and disappearance, tools through which the state controls and terrorizes the population.²⁸² Paley argues that Mexico is currently experiencing a neoliberal war that includes three key characteristics,

²⁸⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “la imposibilidad de realizar un duelo como estrategia de dominación y control político.” Comisión de Verdad, 2008, p. 142, as quoted in Paley, 2018, p. 66.

²⁸¹ Paley, 2015, 2018.

²⁸² Paley, 2015, 2018.

1) la confusión de los perpetradores en medio de una narrativa de conflicto entre “narcos” reiteradamente producida y amplificada, 2) la ampliación de la categoría insurgente y 3) el uso de un complejo de violencia que va desde la muerte espectacular hasta la desaparición forzada de forma masiva.

1) The confusion of perpetrators in the midst of a narrative of a conflict between “narcos” repeatedly produced and amplified, 2) the expansion of the category of insurgent and 3) the use of an array of forms of violence that range from spectacular death to mass enforced disappearance.²⁸³

The legal-administrative stage of disappearance allows the State to obfuscate its role in perpetrating disappearance. However, as I will show later in this section, mothers of disappeared people are clear in their assertion that the State is often responsible for the disappearance of their daughters and sons and that its efforts to not search for them are part of the work of maintaining confusion about who the perpetrators truly are. In her analysis of neoliberal war, Paley highlights the use of a whole range of forms of violence as a third characteristic.²⁸⁴ The analysis put forth in this section seeks to broaden Paley’s analysis and to account for uncertainty itself as one of the many forms of violence that the relatives of disappeared people face.

Mothers are keenly aware of the legal-administrative stage of disappearance and the ways in which it perpetuates uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of their daughters and sons. Marta, who has become a prominent leader within the movement for the disappeared in Mexico, highlights the State’s unwillingness to search for disappeared people despite its responsibility to do so: “I have a lot of faith in God. I do not have faith in the authorities, I do not have faith in the government, I do not expect it to comply with

²⁸³ Paley, 2018, p. 50.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

its responsibilities, with its obligations because we are truly at our limit...It is their responsibility, their obligation, to search and they have not done it. They haven't wanted to do it."²⁸⁵ Given that the State does not search for disappeared people, Marta and other leaders within the movement for the disappeared have made searches for bodies a priority of their work.

Similarly, Lorena, another leader in the movement, highlights the State's lack of investigation and action when people are disappeared, stating,

Entonces yo vi que las autoridades eran un fracaso total. Que no tenían recursos, ni humanos, ni material, ni mental, de ningún tipo. Que la investigación en México no existe. Que la procuración de justicia no existe. Que la tecnología en México no se ocupa en los casos, solamente en los de muy, muy, muy, alto perfil. Que no hay rendición de cuentas. Me di cuenta de todo, de golpe.

So I saw that the authorities were a total failure. That they did not have resources, not human resources, not material, not mental, no resources of any kind. That investigations in Mexico do not exist. That the procurement of justice does not exist. That technology in Mexico is not used in cases, only in those that are very, very, very high profile. That there isn't accountability. I realized all of this suddenly.

For Lorena, the lack of investigation of cases of disappearance is tied to the lack of accountability and justice that she experiences and that she has come to see through her efforts to find her son. Like Marta, she too has dedicated much of her time to searching for bodies in mass graves in Veracruz.

Other mothers further discussed how their experience also highlighted the impunity that is rampant in the Mexican judicial system. Discussing her son's disappearance, Alicia stated, "This is how the *via crucis* began that to this day we have

²⁸⁵ Original quote in Spanish: "Tengo mucha fe en Dios. No tengo fe en las autoridades, no tengo fe en el gobierno, no espero que cumpla con su deber, con su obligación porque la verdad estamos hasta el tope...Es responsabilidad de ellos, obligación de ellos, buscar y no lo han hecho. No lo han querido hacer."

been living.²⁸⁶ It is in the midst of impunity, corruption, inaction, the delay of the authorities in searching, and many irregularities that have characterized all of this process.”²⁸⁷ Again, Alicia clearly articulates the connections between impunity and inaction in terms of searching, highlighting how for her this has become an ordeal—what she calls a *via crucis*.

In some cases, the State’s refusal to investigate is even more blatant as they pretend to be taking action on the case for months until mothers realize that no investigation or search has been carried out. In Sofía’s case, she was made to believe that the State was looking for her son since his disappearance in Hidalgo in 2013, when in reality the type of document that they filled out when she went to report his disappearance did not trigger an investigation into his case. It was not until ten months later—after going to ask for updates about her son’s whereabouts almost every week—that Sofía found out that officials had not started an official investigation, but merely filed a form where she stated that her son was missing. According to Sofía, at this point she decided to hire a lawyer who told her “I had only given notice that my son did not return home. They never told me that they were not looking for him. At this point in time,

²⁸⁶ *Via crucis* refers to the torture that Jesus Christ endured while carrying the cross and walking down the path—the *via*—towards the site where he was to be crucified according to the New Testament.

²⁸⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “Así es como empieza el viacrucis que hasta el día de hoy he venido viviendo. Se plasma entre impunidad, corrupción, inacción, dilación de las autoridades en la búsqueda y muchas irregularidades marcadas en todo este proceso.”

well obviously possible lines of enquiry are lost, ways of searching are lost, ways of knowing what really happened that moment.”²⁸⁸

A similar thing happened to a member of Lorena’s collective. According to Lorena, the woman went to the Marines after the disappearance of her brother to seek help in investigating his disappearance and finding him. The officials with whom she spoke took down her information and pretended to be investigating her brother’s whereabouts. A year and a half after his disappearance, this woman sought the support of Lorena. According to Lorena,

Le dije, “La marina no hace expedientes de desapariciones.” [Ella contestó,] “Sí, ahí me tomaron todo.” Le digo, “La marina no hace eso. Vente vamos a ver mañana eso.” Y efectivamente, ellos anotaron esto y lo otro y nunca, jamás le dijeron, “Vete y pon una denuncia.” Ella iba cada rato [y le decían] “No señora, todavía no hay nada. No se preocupé que en cuanto aparezca nosotros le avisamos.” Ella a los 15 días volvía [y le decían,] “Todavía no tenemos nada.” Y cuando llega conmigo no tiene absolutamente nada.

I told her, “The Navy does not have disappearance dossiers.” [She answered,] “Yes, that is where they took down all my information.” I told her, “The Navy does not do that. Come, tomorrow we will go look into it.” And, indeed, they wrote down this and that and never, ever did they tell her, “Go and report this.” She went every so often [and they would tell her] “No ma’am, we still don’t have anything. Don’t worry, we will let you know whenever he appears.” Two weeks later, she would go back [and they would tell her] “We still don’t have anything.” And when she came to me, she had absolutely nothing.

The cases of Sofia and the woman that Lorena supported illustrate the ways in which the State actively uses its resources—in this case officials at the two government agencies where the two women initially reported the disappearance—in order to not investigate or search for the disappeared person. Relatives of disappeared people are emphatic in their

²⁸⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “que pues yo nada más avisé que mi hijo no regresó a casa. Nunca me dijeron que no lo estaban buscando. Ya para hablar de ese tiempo pues obvio se pierden líneas de investigación, se pierde modo de buscar, modo de saber realmente que pasó en el momento.”

assertion that the earlier the investigation and search efforts begin, the higher the chances of finding the disappeared person or learning what has happened to them. Beginning an investigation into the disappearance of a person many months after they went missing means that valuable information about the case is irrevocably lost. Given this reality, it is unlikely that an investigation will find the person or find out what happened to them. In refusing to investigate cases of disappearance, the State—either intentionally or not—ensures that uncertainty about the person’s fate or whereabouts will be maintained. These two cases are clear examples of the way in which the legal-administrative stage of disappearance functions to maintain uncertainty.

Mothers of disappeared people interviewed for this thesis argue that not only is the State maintaining uncertainty through the legal-administrative stage, but that it is also responsible for carrying out the material disappearance of their relative. According to Angélica, it is rare that a person is disappeared by a non-State actor, stating, “Generally, people from the State are involved, police from all ranks, because otherwise it is not easy to disappear a person, it is not easy.”²⁸⁹ In the case of the disappearance of Angélica’s daughter, after much investigating on their own, she and her family realized that the disappearance was carried out by local police officers who lived just a couple blocks from their home.

Paulina also believes that her son’s disappearance was carried out by the State, highlighting the lack of investigation as a form of maintaining impunity. Paulina’s son, a

²⁸⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “Generalmente están inmiscuidos personas del estado, policías de cualquier rango, porque de lo contrario no es fácil desaparecer a una persona, no es fácil.”

23-year-old federal police officer who was stationed in Monterrey, Nuevo León, was disappeared from his own room in the hotel that served as the headquarters of the Federal Police in Monterrey in 2011. Paulina argues that the many challenges that she has faced in the process of investigating her son's disappearance have been an effort to erase any and all information about his disappearance in an effort to maintain impunity, as the perpetrator of the disappearance is the State itself. She states,

Han habido muchas trabas en no darme la ayuda, en no buscar cuando es su obligación. Nosotros ahorita, ahí vamos en la investigación. Mira, yo les he tirado toda su línea de investigación, porque nosotros tenemos claro que Policía Federal lo desapareció...Entonces, a mi la mera verdad, la mera verdad me queda más que claro que el gobierno no quiere encontrarlos. Que al fin y al cabo todo esto es un pacto porque el crimen organizado son ellos mismos—los funcionarios, los gobernadores, los diputados, los senadores. Dime tu, ¿quién no esta inmiscuido en todo esto? Entonces obviamente a ellos no les conviene que nosotros comencemos, o que aparezcan.

There have been many obstacles to not give me help, to not search when it is their responsibility. Right now, we are in the investigation. Look, I have invalidated all of their lines of enquiry, because we are clear that it was the Federal Police that disappeared him...So, the real truth, the real truth is that it is crystal clear to me that the government does not want to find them. At the end of the day, all of this is a pact because they themselves are organized crime—the officials, the governors, the congressional representatives, the senators. Tell me, who is not involved in all of this? So, obviously it is not to their benefit if we start [investigating] or that [the disappeared] appear.

As touched on earlier in this section, sociologist Dawn Paley highlights the role that the State has in perpetrating disappearance and other forms of violence within the context of the Drug War, despite portraying the conflict as one between the good State and the bad narco-traffickers. Paley's analysis bolsters Angélica and Paulina's understanding of the role that the State itself plays in the disappearances of their daughter

and son, arguing, “the state forces and the individuals and groups tied to drug trafficking *as a whole* are responsible for the acts of violence and terror against the people.”²⁹⁰

Beyond serving as a way of maintaining impunity, the legal-administrative stage of disappearance also serves to tire mothers of disappeared people out so that they will stop searching for their daughters and sons. Alicia, who has been searching for her son since his disappearance in Michoacán in 2009, states,

Yo las instancias a donde debí denunciar en mi país ya las denuncié, más sin embargo no han investigado. Una investigación exhaustiva, eficiente, no la han hecho. Y tan no la han hecho que han apostado al desgaste y al cansancio y han estado dejando prescribir los delitos. Por ende si un delito prescribe, ya no se puede investigar.

I already reported the disappearance before the institutions in my country where I had to report it, however they have not investigated. They have not carried out an exhaustive, efficient investigation. And they haven't done it as they have bet on burnout and exhaustion and they have let the cases be closed. Therefore if a case is closed, it can no longer be investigated.

The possibility that their loved one's case will be closed without being resolved is another challenge that mothers of disappeared people face in the legal-administrative stage of disappearance. Mothers of disappeared people are constantly working so that their cases will remain open, especially as the State often closes cases where the person was disappeared several years ago. Angélica has worked hard to stop this from happening in her daughter's case, which dates back to 2004. According to her: “We see many cases, for example they say, ‘Well it has been many years. Close the dossier and it is over.’ So, that is the advantage that we have had so far. There hasn't been more investigation, but

²⁹⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “son las fuerzas estatales y los individuos y grupos ligadas al tráfico de las drogas *en su conjunto* los responsables de actos de violencia y terror contra los pueblos.” Paley, 2018, p. 57-58, emphasis in the original.

our dossiers haven't been closed. And I say dossiers because we have several."²⁹¹ Such is the level of State inaction on the investigation and search for disappeared people that Angélica considers it a win that the case is still open, even if it is still not being investigated.

Ultimately, mothers of disappeared people are aware that the lack of investigation and the maintenance of impunity are part of the State's strategies to terrorize them. In this way, uncertainty is key to this terror. As Margarita states, "It is a system of terror that we face from a lawless state, and the uncertainty of living like this, well it is forever."²⁹² Angélica also highlights the uphill battle that mothers face when taking on the State and its maintenance of uncertainty. She has come to learn that they are "fighting against a monster with a thousand heads that is very powerful, that is the State. So fighting against him is very difficult. We jump a little, but we cannot reach it, and much less hit it."²⁹³ Nevertheless, as we will see in the following chapter, mothers are dogged in their efforts to find their daughters and sons and to demand justice in their cases.

SECTION 4. CONCLUSION

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, mothers of disappeared people interviewed for this thesis face unending uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of

²⁹¹ Original quote in Spanish: "Vemos en muchos casos, por ejemplo dicen, 'Pues ya lleva muchos años. Pues ya cierra la carpeta y se acabó.' Entonces, es la ventaja que hasta ahorita hemos tenido. No hay mayor investigación, pero no se han cerrado nuestras carpetas. Y digo carpetas porque han sido varias."

²⁹² Original quote in Spanish: "Es un sistema de terror al que nos enfrentamos de un estado sin derecho y que la incertidumbre de vivir así, pues es para siempre."

²⁹³ Original quote in Spanish: "peleando contra un monstruo de mil cabezas que es muy poderoso, que es el estado. Entonces el pelear contra él es muy difícil. Damos brinquitos, brinquitos y no lo alcanzamos, menos lo golpeamos."

their loved ones. The experiences of this group of women highlight the traumatic nature of this uncertainty and the resilient and flexible ways in which mothers grapple with the fate of their daughters and sons. Importantly, they argue that uncertainty is maintained by the State. In this way it can be understood as a type of State violence.

One of the main characteristics of uncertainty that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people is its traumatic nature, which impacts this group of women emotionally and physically. Ambiguous loss theorists and other researchers who explore the experiences of relatives of disappeared people hold that uncertainty is one of the most challenging aspects of the experience.²⁹⁴ In an investigation of enforced disappearance in Mexico, Human Rights Watch also found, “not knowing what happened to a relative is a source of ongoing suffering, and may even amount to torture, according to the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearance.”²⁹⁵ Furthermore, Amnesty International found that for the relatives of disappeared people in Syria, “their greatest suffering was caused by the uncertainty and conflicting reports they had received about their relatives.”²⁹⁶ The women who shared their stories with me described a number of ways in which the uncertain fate of their daughters and sons has impacted them emotionally. These include overwhelming emotional pain, anguish when imagining what may be happening to their loved ones, self-judgment and guilt, lack of joy, disinterest in future plans, and becoming “living dead.” Similarly, a report by the International Center for

²⁹⁴ Anleu Hernández, 2015; Boss & Ishii, 2015.

²⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, 2013.

²⁹⁶ Amnesty International, 2015, p. 21.

Transitional Justice and UN Women on the gendered impacts of disappearance found that “enforced disappearances negatively affect women’s mental health.”²⁹⁷

Trauma scholars have found important links between emotional trauma and physical health.²⁹⁸ This is also true of the experience of the women who shared their stories with me, who discussed a number of health issues that have afflicted them since the disappearance of their loved one. Among these were dramatic weight gain or loss, stroke, skin rashes, injuries, a compromised immune system, problems with vision, and challenges with memory—including serious memory loss. These findings echo research on the impacts of disappearance on the health of relatives of the disappeared around the world.²⁹⁹ For example, Amnesty International found that relatives of disappeared people in Syria experienced health problems including high blood pressure and heart problems.³⁰⁰

Despite these challenges, the mothers of disappeared people who shared their stories with me have developed dynamic ways of navigating the uncertain fate of their daughters and sons that go beyond the dichotomy of life and death. Psychologist Pauline Boss calls the ability to simultaneously hold seemingly conflicting beliefs about the fate of their children *both-and thinking* and argues that it is a key component in the face of uncertainty.³⁰¹ The mothers of disappeared people who shared their stories with me demonstrate a remarkable emotional and cognitive flexibility when grappling with the

²⁹⁷ Dewhirst & Kapur, 2015.

²⁹⁸ van der Kolk, 2014.

²⁹⁹ Anleu Hernández, 2005; Barakovic, Avdibegovic, & Sinanovic, 2013; Dewhirst & Kapur, 2015; Fundar, 2018; Quirk & Casco, 1994; Robins, 2010; Rojas Baeza, 2009.

³⁰⁰ Amnesty International, 2015.

³⁰¹ Boss, 2013.

uncertain fate of their children, which makes it possible for them to simultaneously believe that their daughters and sons are alive while also acknowledging the possibility that they may be dead. However, there are groups of relatives of disappeared people in Mexico—such as *Comité ¡Eureka!* and the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa—that publicly affirm that their loved ones are alive and demand that they be returned alive.

Finally, the third characteristic of uncertainty that I discuss in this chapter is its role as a form of State violence. Anthropologist Christen Smith uses the concept of *sequelae* to explain how the impacts of the State's physical violence go beyond the direct victims of this violence—in this case, disappeared people—and impact their relatives.³⁰² Thus, the trauma of uncertainty and its emotional and physical impacts are not just unfortunate and random side effects of the disappearance of a loved one, but are actually part of the violence of the State. Furthermore, the experiences of the group of women interviewed for this thesis illustrate how the Mexican State uses its vast resources to avoid investigating disappearances—what journalist John Gibler calls the *legal-administrative stage* of disappearance.³⁰³ These can be understood as efforts to perpetuate uncertainty and thus inflict further sequelae on mothers. In this way, uncertainty can be understood as a form of State violence.

Despite living with the difficult emotional challenges that uncertainty brings, mothers of disappeared people are resilient and undeterred in their efforts to find their children. As the following chapter will show, one important method mothers use to cope

³⁰² Smith, 2016a.

³⁰³ Gibler, 2017.

with the uncertainty of the disappearance is the active involvement in searching for their child and advocacy on the issue of disappearance. As Paulina clearly articulates, “it is not easy at all, but here we are.”³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Original quote in Spanish: “no es nada fácil, pero aquí estamos.”

Chapter 2: *La Búsqueda*³⁰⁵: Motivations and Impacts of Searching for the Disappeared

¿Cómo me mantengo? Porque quiero a mi muchacho de regreso y sé que si no estuviera en la búsqueda ya me hubiera vuelto loca. Me hubiera vuelto más loca. Te lo juro...El quererlo de regreso, el estar en la lucha, eso es lo que me mantiene.

How do I continue? Because I want my boy back and I know that if I were not involved in the search I would have already gone crazy. I would have already gone even crazier. I swear...wanting him back, being in the struggle, that is what sustains me.

—Diana

Diana has been looking for her son, Carlos, since he was disappeared in May 2009 in Coahuila. Carlos, who was 25 years old at the time of his disappearance, worked at an export-import agency in Baja California and was travelling with his boss and a friend of his boss when they were disappeared by a group of armed men in western Coahuila. As is often the case, Diana and the families of the other men who were disappeared alongside him have done most of the work of investigating the disappearance of their relatives. Since Carlos's disappearance, Diana has also become involved in *la búsqueda*—the search—and *la lucha*—the struggle—through her involvement in a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Coahuila. As a member of this collective, she has actively participated in actions to demand an end to disappearances in Mexico and to call for justice for her son, including participating in a briefing at the U.S. House of Representatives and a meeting with representatives from the State Department to advocate for an end to the Drug War in Mexico in Washington, D.C.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ English translation: “The Search.”

³⁰⁶ Field notes October 4, 2017.

I first met Diana, a 53-year-old woman from Baja California, at the end of 2017 at a dinner in Washington, D.C. the day before she was to participate in a House of Representatives briefing. When I introduced myself and briefly mentioned my thesis research on the experiences of mothers of disappeared people, Diana was curious and asked me what I had learned. I told her that I had learned how important collective support was in sustaining mothers' struggle for truth and justice—a finding that I will discuss in depth in Chapter 3. Diana provided a gentle, constructive critique of my answer, maintaining that, although collective support was important, the main aspect that sustained mother's struggle for justice was their wish to find people they loved deeply. Her feedback during our short conversation that evening has been invaluable to helping me begin to understand her experience and that of the other mothers of disappeared people that I interviewed as part of this thesis. Diana's assertion about what motivates her search efforts when we first met—echoed later when I interviewed her formally for this thesis in April 2018—are at the heart of this chapter.

For Diana and other mothers of disappeared people, *searching* for their disappeared son or daughter is at the heart of everything they do. Women who shared their stories with me described a number of different actions that they carry out as part of the search for their daughters and sons. These include looking for the disappeared person themselves in the area where they were disappeared; posting missing person flyers with the photo of the disappeared person; looking for the disappeared person in jails, hospitals, and morgues; locating human remains and mass clandestine graves; providing DNA samples to possibly identify the remains of a disappeared person; attending meetings with

high level officials regarding the investigation of their relatives' disappearance; participating in local and national marches and protests to demand justice for the disappeared; participating in hunger strikes and occupations in front of State agencies to pressure authorities to investigate disappearances; sharing their testimony at events and panels on the issue of disappearance; and participating in drafting the General Law on Disappearances. There are countless other ways that mothers seek to advance the search for their daughters and sons and end disappearance in Mexico.

Recent scholarship on disappearance in contemporary Mexico has explored some of these strategies, including searches for human remains organized by relatives of disappeared people,³⁰⁷ national and international caravans to demand an end to the Drug War,³⁰⁸ public actions to remember the disappeared,³⁰⁹ and search brigades to look for disappeared people in jails and psychiatric hospitals.³¹⁰ Furthermore, journalists in Mexico have covered the work of different collectives, especially those engaged in searching for human remains, in detail.³¹¹ Other researchers have also traced the connections between the women-led activism in response to femicide in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s and 2000s and women-led activism in the context of the militarization of the Drug War.³¹² This body of literature often frames its analysis through the framework of

³⁰⁷ Hincapié, 2017; Paley, 2018; Schwartz-Marin & Cruz-Santiago, 2016.

³⁰⁸ Muehlmann, 2017; Sicilia & Vázquez Martín (Eds.), 2016.

³⁰⁹ Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

³¹⁰ Romero Ventura, 2018.

³¹¹ See the excellent work of the Red de Periodistas de a Pie and Pie de Página in the documentary series titled *Buscadores* for an example.

³¹² Bejarano, 2002, 2013; Hincapié, 2017; Wright, 2007.

citizenship³¹³ and social movements³¹⁴—with a specific focus on the specific strategies used by women and the dynamics within organized civil society. However, scant attention has been placed on the emotional and social motivations and impacts of being engaged in these actions. Furthermore, a psychosocial perspective—that is, one that pays particular attention to emotional and social issues—remains largely absent from scholarship on the search for the disappeared in Mexico. Thus, this chapter will focus less on the specific actions that mothers take as part of *la búsqueda* and more on what motivates them to search and how taking these actions has impacted them emotionally and socially.

Scholarship about the emotional and social impacts of engaging in search efforts for the disappeared has discussed its therapeutic potential. In a 2018 report about the psychosocial impacts of the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa on their parents, a team of psychologists and researchers found that engaging in search efforts was an important part of their coping mechanisms.³¹⁵ In an ethnographic study of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Coahuila, sociologist Dawn Paley also found that their weekly search brigades represent a type of therapy and self-care for relatives of disappeared people involved in such efforts.³¹⁶ Furthermore, Paley argues that participation in collective search efforts makes it possible for relatives of disappeared people to mitigate the painful possibility of finding the remains of their own loved one.³¹⁷

³¹³ Bejarano, 2002; Schwartz-Marin & Cruz-Santiago, 2016.

³¹⁴ Hincapié, 2017; Muehlmann, 2017; Wright, 2007.

³¹⁵ Fundar, 2018.

³¹⁶ Paley, 2018.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

For example, she argues that framing their efforts as a search for “someone else’s relative” instead of their own allows relatives of disappeared people to cope with the emotionally challenging process of searching for human remains.³¹⁸ Similarly, researchers have identified taking action and moving from personal pain to “a more universal level, which was often seen as a continuation of the work their children had begun before their disappearance” as two important ways in which the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo navigated the impacts of disappearance.³¹⁹ In addition, research on the experiences of relatives of missing people in the United Kingdom found that engaging in search efforts “enables ways of managing the emotions constituting ambiguous loss and the difficult absent-presence of their missing people.”³²⁰ Nevertheless, scholars have also found that hope of finding the disappeared has also led to challenges in the long-term as frustration and disappointment about the search can create anxiety for relatives of disappeared people in Uganda³²¹ and Colombia.³²²

Other scholars have also discussed the ways in which searching for a loved one is understood as an extension of motherhood. In her research on the experiences of mothers of people disappeared during the Contra War in Nicaragua, anthropologist Sheila Tully discussed the role of motherhood in efforts to challenge the silence concerning the disappeared in the early 1990s.³²³ Tully described the ways in which mothers of disappeared people viewed “their public demonstrations and their searches for the

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Thornton, 2000, p 286.

³²⁰ Parr, Stevenson, & Woolnough, 2016, p. 68.

³²¹ Hollander, 2016.

³²² Heeke, Stammel & Knaevelsrud, 2015.

³²³ Tully, 1995.

disappeared, as logical extensions of Nicaraguan mothers' traditionally private responsibilities to their families."³²⁴ Cynthia Bejarano, a respected Chicana justice scholar and public intellectual, also discusses this in her work on the experiences of mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Ciudad Juárez. Bejarano writes that,

Traditionally, 'good' mothers were protectors of their children, but only so far as the parameters of playgrounds and the streets of their neighborhoods—never against the ubiquitous state and its assassins. As activist mothers, however, they acted and engaged their maternal citizenship in the public sphere.³²⁵

In this way, Bejarano argues that mothers engaged in search efforts for their daughters in Ciudad Juárez transformed, redefined, and politicized motherhood in the context of *feminicidio*. The experiences of the group of women that shared their stories with me illustrate the ways in which motherhood is a motivating factor for searching for their loved ones.

As Diana stated in the epigraph of this chapter, actively working to search for her son and joining *la lucha* to end disappearance in Mexico have been crucial to her process of coping with the emotional challenges of having a disappeared daughter or son that I highlighted in Chapter 1. For many other mothers like Diana, *searching*—defined broadly as proactively taking any action that has the goal of finding their disappeared daughters or sons, and ending disappearance in Mexico—in itself is a strategy for coping with the pain of uncertainty. The motivation and impacts of this search that I highlight in this chapter serve as an internal sources of strength and resilience.

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 1602.

³²⁵ Bejarano, 2002, p. 131.

In the following chapter, I will analyze two important components of mothers' involvement in *la búsqueda*: 1) their main motivations for being engaged in these efforts and 2) the ways in which they are impacted emotionally and socially as a result of this search and advocacy. The first section will highlight the main motivators that mothers discussed in interviews including the following: their hope of finding their daughters and sons, their *compromiso de amor* to the disappeared, the principle of non-repetition and a genuine commitment to search for all the disappeared, and gendered ideas about motherhood. The second section of the chapter will discuss the ways in which mothers are impacted by *la búsqueda* including their transformation into human rights defenders, tensions in their relationships with their other daughters and sons and their partner or spouse, increased safety risks, and economic challenges.

SECTION 1. *POR ESO NO NOS CANSAMOS*³²⁶: MOTIVATIONS TO SEARCH

A. Hope of finding disappeared daughters and sons

As Diana expressed in the epigraph to this chapter, the hope of finding her son is an important motivating factor that has allowed her to continue to be a part of *la búsqueda* and *la lucha*. This has also been an important source of motivation for other mothers. Sofia expresses the connection between her love for her son and her hope of finding him, stating that what sustains her is “the desire to see them again, to not resign ourselves, to not say ‘one day he will come back on his own,’ because no. That is what pushes us...our love for them.”³²⁷ Ultimately, mothers of disappeared people want, above

³²⁶ English translation: “This is why we do not get tired.”

³²⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “Las ganas de volverlos a ver, de no resignarnos, de no decir ‘un día él va a regresar él solo,’ porque no. Eso es lo que nos impulsa...el amor por ellos.”

all else, to find their daughters and sons whatever their fate might have been. In this way the search for the disappeared can be understood as an effort to end uncertainty surrounding their fate and whereabouts.

Although uncertainty is a key part of disappearance, as I discussed in Chapter 1, some mothers of disappeared people hope to find their loved one alive, while also acknowledging the possibility of finding their remains. This is another example of the flexible ways in which they navigate uncertainty—what Pauline Boss has called “both-and thinking”.³²⁸ For example, the hope of finding her son alive is a strong motivator for Paulina, whose son was disappeared while working as a federal police officer in Nuevo León in 2011. Paulina describes imagining what her son would say if he knew everything she was doing to find him. She states,

Como conozco a mi hijo, él ha de estar diciendo, “Mi mamá me anda buscando y me va a encontrar un día.” Yo lo sé. Entonces como que eso me mantiene. Me mantiene el tener este, el tener la esperanza.

Knowing my son, he must be saying, “My mom is looking for me and one day she will find me.” I know it. So that is what sustains me. Having that hope is what sustains me.

Estefanía’s case is a particularly illustrative one in this respect. Estefanía has been looking for her son, Tomás, who was 19 years old at the time, since he disappeared in 2014. Just a few months before I interviewed her in August 2017, she had been informed that it was likely that the body of her son had been found in a mass grave in Veracruz. However, the identity of the body had not been confirmed when I interviewed her. When we spoke, Estefanía was clearly distraught about the possibility that her son’s body may have been found. For her, like for Sofía, Paulina, Diana, and countless other mothers, the

³²⁸ Boss, 2007.

hope of finding her son alive had been the guiding light of her efforts since his disappearance. However, the news of the possibility that he may be dead presented another emotional challenge that seemed to overwhelm the tools that she had developed to confront uncertainty and the pain of his disappearance. She stated, “Well, what sustained me was the search for my son. That was what sustained me. I tell you, I supposedly already made up my mind that I will continue, but—I tell you—I do not know how I am going to manage when I know for certain that they are my son’s remains.”³²⁹ Although Estefanía discussed how she felt compelled to continue searching on behalf of all those other mothers who were unable to look for their own disappeared daughters and sons—a topic that I will discuss more in depth later in this chapter—the news of the possibility of finding his body had impacted her deeply. During our conversation, she mentioned the emotional anguish that she was feeling and how at times she wished she could die and be with her two sons. Her case demonstrates how powerful a motivator the hope of finding their son or daughter is for mothers of disappeared people and how devastating it can be to lose that North Star. It also highlights the need to ensure that mothers who are experiencing this receive adequate psychosocial accompaniment during the process of the identification of the remains of their loved ones. A study of the experiences of relatives of disappeared people in Sri Lanka also highlighted the emotional challenges that arise in the process of exhumations and investigations into

³²⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “Pues a mi me mantenía en pie la búsqueda de mi hijo. Eso fue lo que me mantenía en pie. Te digo ahorita, yo ya según yo ya me hice a la idea de que voy a seguir, pero te digo no se cuando yo tenga la seguridad de que son los restos de mi hijo como le voy a hacer.”

enforced disappearance.³³⁰ Researchers noted that “the lengthy, complicated and uncertain nature of forensic investigations can be distressing for families of the disappeared” and recommended incorporating psychosocial approaches to support relatives throughout these processes.³³¹

Research on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people around the world has also underscored the importance of hope as a powerful force in their lives. Some scholars have identified hope as a source of strength in the short-term, but a source of anxiety in the long-term.³³² Theo Hollander, an interdisciplinary researcher focused on conflict studies and human rights, argues that hope of finding their daughters and sons alive “was also linked to intense worry and anxiety in the longer term” for parents of disappeared people in Uganda as they cycled from hope to despair and disappointment.³³³ Simon Robins, a researcher with the International Committee of the Red Cross and York University, has also discussed the role of hope on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people in Nepal. According to Robins, “[a]lthough most had little hope, 80% had some in that they did not believe their loved one was dead,” a belief which had an important impact on their experiences in the aftermath of disappearance.³³⁴ However, research conducted with relatives of disappeared people in Colombia also shows that hope mediated the severity of symptoms of prolonged grief disorder they experienced—with having “quite a bit of hope” of finding the disappeared relative associated with

³³⁰ Salih & Samarasighe, 2017.

³³¹ Ibid, p. 509.

³³² Hollander, 2016.

³³³ Ibid, p. 298.

³³⁴ Robins, 2010.

higher symptom severity—also illustrating the potential challenges that hope may present to mother’s well-being in the long term.³³⁵

B. *Compromiso de amor*³³⁶ to their disappeared daughters and sons

Another important motivator for mothers of disappeared people to continue their search for their loved ones is their love for their daughters and sons. Margarita, who has been searching for her son since he was disappeared in Coahuila in 2009, calls this a *compromiso de amor*—a commitment born out of love. According to Margarita, she and her husband are motivated to search for her son “doing everything possible, with all possible dedication as long as we are alive. It is a *compromiso de amor* with him.”³³⁷ Similarly Alicia, whose son was disappeared in Michoacán in 2009 when he was 23 years old, states, for mothers of disappeared people “there are two things that come together: the pain of not having him here, but the love that I have for him that will not let me give up and [motivates me] to continue searching for him.”³³⁸

C. *No repetición*³³⁹: I do not want anyone else to experience it

Another strong motivator for being involved in the search for their disappeared daughters and sons, as well as advocacy on the issue of disappearance, is mothers’ desire to end disappearance in Mexico. For example, Sofia describes how this motivates the

³³⁵ Heeke, Stammel & Knaevelsrud, 2015, p. 63.

³³⁶ English translation: “Commitment born out of love.”

³³⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “con todo el esfuerzo posible, con todas las ganas posibles hasta donde nos permita la vida. Es un compromiso de amor con él.”

³³⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “hay dos cosas que se conjugan: el dolor de no tenerlo, pero el amor que siento por él que no me deja vencerme y [me hace] seguir buscándolo.”

³³⁹ English translation: “Non-repetition.”

work of the collective which she joined, “this is a motto that the group has: I am here so that you will not go through what I am experiencing. I want to bear the burden of what could happen to you. Why? Because I am already experiencing it.”³⁴⁰ In this way, mothers “carry” the responsibility to search and advocate for an end to disappearance precisely because they do not want others to have to experience the same thing that they are going through.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *spiritual activism* provides a useful framework to understand this commitment to end all disappearances in Mexico. Writing about Anzaldúa’s thoughts on spiritual activism, feminist scholar AnaLouise Keating defines it as “spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one’s self and one’s world.”³⁴¹ Importantly, Anzaldúa’s conception of spiritual activism incorporates an understanding of the interrelated nature of liberation and social change.³⁴² The women who shared their stories with me echoed this understanding of interconnectedness as they become involved in *la búsqueda* and *la lucha* so that others will not have to experience the painful disappearance of a loved one. Spiritual activism also helps us understand mothers’ personal transformation in the process of searching for their daughters and sons—which I will discuss later in this chapter—and their commitment to social change. As Keating

³⁴⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “ese es un lema que tiene el grupo: estoy yo aquí para que lo que a mi me esté pasando no te pase a ti. Yo quiero cargar con todo lo que a ti te pueda pasar. ¿Por qué? Porque a mi ya me está pasando.”

³⁴¹ Keating, 2008, p. 54.

³⁴² Ibid.

writes, “For Anzaldúa and other spiritual activists, self-change and social transformation are mutually interdependent.”³⁴³

Alicia described how speaking out is an effort to make the crisis of disappearance in Mexico visible as an important step in order to ultimately ensure people are not disappeared. According to Alicia,

Ha sido un proceso de dar pasos y tener esa fe, esperanza y fuerza de decir, “Si mi hijo lo vivió, si yo lo estoy viviendo—esto que es como una pesadilla—no quiero que la viva nadie más.” Quiero la no repetición y para la no repetición tengo que visibilizar lo que pasó con [mi hijo]...si yo me callo es colaborar, es ser cómplice de esta barbarie, de esta emergencia humanitaria que estamos viviendo a nivel país.

It has been a process of taking steps and having that faith, hope, and strength to say, “If my son lived it, if I am living through it—this, which is like a nightmare—I do not want anyone else to experience it.” I want a guarantee of non-repetition and for that I have to make visible what I went through with [my son]...If I shut up, it is collaborating, it is being an accomplice to this barbarity, to this humanitarian emergency that we are experiencing in the country.

Alicia states that her goal in speaking out is *la no repetición*—non-repetition, a principle that is outlined by the United Nations as part of its guidelines regarding reparations for victims of serious human rights violations.³⁴⁴ The guarantee of non-repetition recognizes the responsibility of States to end serious human rights abuses, such as enforced disappearance, by implementing a number of measures to prevent them.³⁴⁵

Although sharing the story of the disappearance of their daughters and sons is a powerful strategy that mothers employ to make the issue visible, it can also be an emotionally painful endeavor. However, according to Angélica, who has shared her

³⁴³ Ibid, p. 59.

³⁴⁴ United Nations, General Assembly, 2005, art 23.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

testimonio—testimony—in public since the disappearance of her daughter in 2004, speaking out in order to end disappearance in general can serve as a mitigating factor for this emotional pain,

Sabemos que si alguien escucha este dolor que tenemos y lo va a compartir o va a ser para algo que no haya tantas réplicas de estas situaciones, entonces fabuloso. Yo creo que no es algo tan sencillo estarlo comentando ni te va a calmar el dolor que tu sientes, pero si sabes que es para que esto ya no suceda o para que ayude, pues desde luego que te va a hacer sentir mejor. Pero de que duele todas las veces, duele, de que te lastima, sí.

We know that if someone hears this pain that we have and they are going to share it or it is going to be so that there won't be so many instances of this situation, then fabulous. I think that it is not so easy to talk about it and it will not ease the pain that you feel, but if you know that it is so that this will no longer happen or that it will help, well of course it is going to make you feel better. But, it hurts every time, it hurts, it pains you, yes.

Thus, mothers are motivated to engage in *la lucha* even when it entails emotional pain because of their strong commitment to holding the Mexican State accountable to its responsibility to guarantee non-repetition of enforced disappearance.

Research on the use of testimony regarding traumatic events has highlighted its potential to support the healing process of victims of torture who share their stories publicly.³⁴⁶ However, some researchers whose work focuses on social movements led by mothers in Mexico have also suggested that the emotional labor inherent in repeating the testimony of disappearance may also be taxing.³⁴⁷ Angélica's experience shows that the experience of sharing testimony can be both healing and challenging when oriented towards working to end disappearance.

³⁴⁶ Agger, Raghuvanshi, Shabana, Polatin, & Laursen, 2008; Puvimanasinghe & Price, 2016.

³⁴⁷ Wright, 2007.

D. Searching for all the disappeared

Over and over again mothers of disappeared people shared with me that although they had initially started their involvement in *la lucha* specifically to find their own disappeared daughters and sons, through the process they have come to embrace the search for all disappeared people in Mexico. For Lorena her search for her son has expanded to include searching for all the disappeared relatives of the members of her collective. According to her, “I was searching for one, now I am searching for almost 200...I search for them with the same commitment with which I search for my son because I do not want any mother to experience what I experienced.”³⁴⁸

Other mothers also discussed the responsibility they felt to search on behalf of the mothers of disappeared people who are unable to do so—either because the emotional toll of living with uncertainty and disappearance is too unbearable or because they have died. Estefanía expresses this responsibility stating, “many mothers when something like this happens to you, you cannot get up. And I also understand them. So, those of us who can, have to fight for those who cannot. For example, me personally I don’t just search for my son, I search for thousands of young people who are disappeared.”³⁴⁹ Similarly, Diana discusses how her search for her son has transformed into a search for all other disappeared people:

tantas compañeras que nos han acompañado, que ahora sí que de esta vida nunca supieron nada de su familiar. Que han sido varios, varios y ya van dos, hombres

³⁴⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “Yo buscaba a uno, ahora busco a casi 200...los busco con la misma entrega con la busco a mi hijo porque yo no quiero ver que ninguna madre pase por esto que yo pasé.”

³⁴⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “muchas madres cuando te pasa algo así, no te puedes levantar. Y también las entiendo. Entonces las que sí podemos tenemos que luchar por las que no pueden. O sea, yo en lo personal, yo no busco solo a mi hijo, busco a miles de jóvenes que están desaparecidos.”

van dos. Pero madres, han sido varias que se nos han adelantado y ellas sin saber [que le pasó a sus hijos]. Ojalá que se hayan ido con la firme convicción de que nosotras íbamos a seguir con la búsqueda porque pues yo no [solo] busco a [mi hijo y sus compañeros].

so many of our *compañeras* that have accompanied us that in this life they never knew anything about their loved one. There have been a few, a few and there have been two, two men. But mothers, there have been several who have died without knowing [what happened to their daughters and sons]. I hope that they died with the firm conviction that we would continue the search because, well, I do not [just] search for [my son and the other men who disappeared with him].

At the same time, a couple of mothers mentioned that taking on the search for all disappeared people is not realistic for them or for other relatives of disappeared people. For example, Paulina, whose son was disappeared in 2011 in Nuevo León, cautions others about taking on the search for all the disappeared, “I am simply pursuing a struggle for justice and I am doing it for my son. I tell you, I am not going to take on hundreds on my shoulders because they don’t even deliver [on these promises]. If you cannot deliver on your own case, you will be even less likely to deliver [on other people’s cases].”³⁵⁰

For relatives of disappeared people who spend much of their time searching for human remains in remote locations, the search for all the disappeared is also an effort to end uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared. For Saraí that is what motivates her efforts to engage in searches for bodies in the desert of Coahuila. According to her, the motivating factor is,

ver el sufrimiento, hija. Ya lo viví. Ya lo viví. Dicen que yo ya lo superé. Entonces, no se trata de que lo superen, sino que quiero evitarlo. Ahorita, yo creo que esa es la meta. ¿Ya cuantos años llevamos? Ya son muchísimos años

³⁵⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “Simplemente yo voy por una lucha justa y voy por mi hijo. Te digo, yo no me voy a echar en el hombro a cientos porque ni siquiera le cumplen. Si tu ni cumples con el tuyo, menos le vas a cumplir [a otros].”

buscando a la niña, no me rindo, ni mi hijo se rinde pero también no quiero que pases tantos años. Yo quiero darte una solución ya.

Witnessing the suffering, sweetie. I already lived it. I already lived it. They say that I already overcame it. So, it is not just about them overcoming it, but rather that I want to prevent it. Now, I think this is the goal. How many years have been at this? Many years have passed while searching for my girl. I am not giving up, my son is not giving up, but also I do not want you to have to wait so many years. I want to give you a solution now.

Finding human remains in the desert and holding the State accountable to carry out the necessary DNA match is one of the ways that Saraí seeks to give relatives of disappeared people an “answer” about the fate of their loved ones.

Sociologist Dawn Paley refers to this process as the “collectivization of pain” and highlights its important role in mediating the emotional toll of searching for one’s loved one.³⁵¹ According to Paley, “displacement of the object of the search from one’s own relative to the relative of ‘someone’ is an important resource that those who search use because to think about finding the bones of one’s own relative is to face an extremely deep trauma during each search.”³⁵² In this way, embracing the search for all the disappeared can also be understood as a coping mechanism that mitigates the emotional challenges of disappearance.

E. *La búsqueda* as an extension of their roles as mothers

Mothers of disappeared people are also motivated to search for their disappeared daughters and sons as they see this as an extension of their responsibilities as mothers.

³⁵¹ Paley, 2018.

³⁵² Original quote in Spanish: “El desplazamiento del objeto de la búsqueda del familiar de uno hacia el familiar de ‘alguna persona’ es un recurso importante utilizado por los que van de búsqueda, porque de estar pensando en encontrar los huesos de su propio familiar es enfrentar un trauma extremadamente profundo en cada búsqueda.” Paley, 2018, p. 154.

One common refrain among the mothers that I interviewed was the sense that they would not be at ease “staying at home”—that is, they would not feel comfortable with the possibility of not searching for their daughters and sons. Paulina, whose son was disappeared in 2011 in Nuevo León, articulates this clearly when she affirms, “I think that no mother will stay home without trying to find their son or doing whatever they can to find their son.”³⁵³

Much scholarship on the mobilization of women in response to the disappearance of their daughters and sons has been framed through their identity as mothers.³⁵⁴ Some feminist scholars have argued that identifying as mothers makes it possible for women to be politically active in ways that they otherwise would not have been.³⁵⁵ In other words, it makes their political demands possible because these are understood as an extension of their roles as mothers.³⁵⁶ Others contend that identifying as mothers limits women’s political engagement because it must stay within what is expected of them as good mothers and may also restrict other women who are not mothers from participating in this way.³⁵⁷ The reality for the women who shared their stories of the disappearance of their daughters and sons is more nuanced than either of these stances. For example, for Alicia and Paulina their struggle began as an effort to find their disappeared sons, but has now expanded as they identify as human rights defenders. An important finding that illustrates this is the way that motherhood serves as a motivating factor for engagement in *la*

³⁵³ Original quote in Spanish: “yo creo que ninguna mamá se va a quedar en su casa sin tratar de encontrar a su hijo o hacer lo posible por encontrar a su hijo.”

³⁵⁴ Muehlmann, 2017; Stephen, 2001.

³⁵⁵ Bejarano, 2002, 2013.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Muehlmann, 2017; Wright, 2007.

búsqueda, while also placing the psychosocial impacts of searching almost entirely on mothers.

Gendered divisions of work in and outside the home often translate directly to the search. In many instances, mothers discuss their need to be the one that searches because their spouse is the “one that works”, that is, the one who has paid employment outside the home. For Diana, who has been the only one in her immediate family to be engaged in the search since her son’s disappearance in 2009, the fact that her husband has paid employment informs her decision to take on the search efforts all on her own,

...la única que ha andado en estas vueltas he sido yo. Te voy a decir algo, yo no veo a mi esposo que el vaya y yo quedarme en casa. No. Yo no me veo así. Mira, alguien tiene que trabajar. Alguien tiene que quedarse al frente de la casa. Entonces, no iba a ser yo la que me iba a quedar. Yo salí y yo he salido y yo he sido la que he andado en eso.

...the only one that has been involved in this has been me. I am going to tell you something, I do not picture my husband going and me staying home. No. I do not picture myself like that. Look, someone has to work. Someone has to stay and be in charge of the home. So, it was not going to be me who stayed. I went out, and I have gone out, and I have been the person who has been involved in this [search].

Nevertheless, there are other mothers whose partner and/or other adult children are actively involved in the search and/or the collectives to which they belong. However, even when a disappeared person’s father is also involved in the search, men’s traditional roles as breadwinners also influence the balance of responsibilities. This is the case with Margarita, whose husband has been alongside her in the search for their son, Mauricio, since his disappearance in 2009. Although he also attends meetings regarding the case and they travel back and forth between Coahuila and Mexico City together to follow up on the legal case concerning Mauricio’s disappearance, the bulk of the everyday work to

push for justice for Mauricio still falls on Margarita. According to her, her husband does not go with her to public talks or workshops about disappearance because “he has to work, but we have an agreement based on our *compromiso de amor* for our son that I am the person who is involved in this.”³⁵⁸

In the case of the mothers who shared their stories with me, five out of ten of them discussed having the active support of another member of their immediate family—daughters, sons, and/or spouse—in the search. For example, Marta, who has been searching for four of her sons who were disappeared in two separate incidents in 2008 and 2010, is almost always accompanied by two of her sons, Arturo and Pedro, who have travelled with her as part of national and international caravans and been actively involved in forging a national network of collectives of disappeared people. Arturo and Pedro have become leaders in the movement for the disappeared in their own right, most recently leading and organizing the fourth national search brigade in Mexico.

Saraí’s husband is also an active participant in the collective that she founded in 2013 and frequently participates in the searches for bodies that they carry out. He also travels to participate in meetings with officials in Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila, and Mexico City concerning the ongoing investigation into his daughter’s disappearance. Although he is currently actively involved, this was not always the case, “he joined this fairly recently, since the organization or the group was formed.”³⁵⁹ However between the disappearance of her daughter in 2004 and founding the collective in 2013—a total of

³⁵⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “él tiene que trabajar, pero tenemos el acuerdo de un compromiso de amor por mi hijo que yo soy la que me dedico a eso.”

³⁵⁹ Original quote in Spanish: “él tiene realmente poco que se unió a esto. Tiene lo que tiene la asociación, o sea el grupo.”

nine years—Saraí took on the search, investigation, and advocacy efforts concerning her daughter’s disappearance almost completely on her own. Thus, even in cases where fathers and siblings are an active part of finding their disappeared relative, a lot of the work still falls on the mother.

Another reason why mothers take on the search efforts is because they know that the State will not do so. As I discussed in Chapter 1, mothers are actively engaged in a struggle to avoid and stop the legal-administrative stage of disappearance, while also trying to shed light on the material disappearance of their daughters and sons. Mothers’ experiences engaging with the State and its simulation of investigations and searches for the disappeared has convinced them that it is up to them to find their loved ones. Paulina, who has been searching for her son since he was disappeared from his hotel room in Nuevo León in 2011, recounted a conversation she had with the *ministerio público*—a public prosecutor—who has been leading the investigation into her son’s disappearance. In a moment of frustration after once again not seeing any progress in the investigation, Paulina told her, “it is clear to me, ma’am, it is very clear to me that you have all the tools to find them, but that you do not want to find the disappeared. That is more than clear to me and if we do not do it ourselves, you will not do it.”³⁶⁰

Similarly Sofía discusses how she is motivated to search for her son because she knows that no one else in her family will search for him if she does not do so. According to her this is “not because they did not love him, simply because each person has their

³⁶⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “a mi me queda claro señora, me queda muy claro, que ustedes tienen todas las herramientas para encontrarlos pero no quieren encontrar a los desaparecidos. Eso me queda más que claro y si no lo hacemos nosotros, ustedes no lo van a hacer.”

own life, their routine. So, this is what I am involved in. Neither will his dad, I know that not even his dad will do it. Not even the dad that raised him. Why? Because everyone has their own issues.”³⁶¹ In this way, gendered roles that inform women’s participation in paid work and their responsibilities as mothers, as well as impunity and the State’s unwillingness to search for the disappeared, combine to place the overwhelming majority of responsibility for searching on mothers of disappeared people.

SECTION 2. *ME HA CAMBIADO LA VIDA*³⁶²: IMPACTS OF SEARCHING

Although the motivations for searching for their daughters and sons are important sources of strength for mothers of disappeared people, being engaged in *la búsqueda* impacts mothers—sometimes negatively. In the following section, I will highlight some of the most salient ways in which mothers are impacted by their involvement in searching and the broader struggle to end disappearance. These include their personal transformation as human rights defenders, increased tensions in their relationships with their other daughters and sons and spouses, concerns about their safety, and financial hardships.

A. On becoming a human rights defender

One of the most important impacts of becoming involved in the search for a disappeared son or daughter is the process of personal transformation that mothers experience. In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, they often referred to the

³⁶¹ Original quote in Spanish: “no porque no lo hayan querido, simplemente porque cada quien tiene su vida, su rol. Entonces en eso estoy yo. Ni su papá, yo sé que ni su papá lo va a ser. Ni el papá de crianza. ¿Por qué? Porque todos tienen sus cosas.”

³⁶² English translation: “It has changed my life.”

process of empowerment that they went through as a source of strength. For many, this personal transformation was a way in which they tapped into their personal agency as change makers.

Many scholars frame research on the actions of mothers of disappeared people from the perspective of activism.³⁶³ In fact, this was the framework that guided much of the preliminary work on this study.³⁶⁴ Although one of the mothers that I interviewed—Alicia—identified with this term, others rejected it. For example, Paulina clearly stated that she does not consider herself “an activist, but rather a human rights defender.”³⁶⁵ Other mothers of disappeared people also echo Paulina’s preference for the identity of human rights defender.³⁶⁶ Because of this, I will use the more general term of human rights defender. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) defines human rights defenders as “people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights.”³⁶⁷ According to the UN OHCHR, human rights defenders carry out a number of diverse actions including sharing information about human rights violations, supporting victims, and holding states accountable for human rights violations.³⁶⁸ The actions that mothers of disappeared people take as part of their search for their daughters and sons—which I have highlighted above—fall within the definition of human rights defenders.

³⁶³ Bejarano, 2013; Bosco, 2006; Wright, 2007.

³⁶⁴ de la O, 2018. See Appendix C.

³⁶⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “una activista sino como una defensora de derechos humanos.”

³⁶⁶ Field notes July 5, 2017; Paley, personal communication, December 7, 2018.

³⁶⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

Beyond the official definition of human rights defenders, mothers of disappeared people who shared their stories with me also identified with the identity of human rights defender. For them, becoming human rights defenders and identifying as such is a source of empowerment and inner strength that allows them to continue to be engaged in the search despite the emotional and social challenges of uncertainty (as examined in Chapter 1) and searching, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

One moving example of this transformation is the example of Alicia. Her son disappeared in 2009 when he was traveling to serve as a federal police officer in a new post in Michoacán, and she has become a leading figure in the movements for the disappeared. Before her son disappeared, Alicia worked as a receptionist at a hotel and had an elementary school education. Spurred by her desire to seek justice for her son and to find him, she has developed her skills as a public speaker, an advocate, and a leader since 2009. When we spoke in July 2017, Alicia was one of the members of the independent oversight board for the Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists³⁶⁹ in Mexico—a position that recognized the expertise she had gained in the process of advocating for justice for her son and an end to disappearance in the country. Reflecting on this process, Alicia stated,

Fue algo muy fuerte y pues todo este proceso me fue llevando a un cambio de sujeto, a un sujeto de cambio. De ser una recepcionista en un hotel me llevó a ser una activista. Una activista defensora de los derechos humanos. Porque desde el momento en que yo defendí...la reputación de mi hijo, su buen nombre de mi hijo, desde ese momento no sabía tampoco que era esto de la defensa de los derechos humanos real, pero ahora que pasó el tiempo y lo sé, pues en ese

³⁶⁹ Name in Spanish: Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas.

momento me convertí en la defensora de los derechos humanos que ahora, pues con orgullo lo digo.

It was something very difficult and well, all of this process has led me to a change of subjectivity, to being a subject of change. I went from being a receptionist at a hotel to an activist. An activist human rights defender. Because from the moment that I defended...my son's reputation, his good name, from that moment I did not know what human rights defense was, but now time has passed and I know what it is. Well in that moment, I became the human rights defender that now I say it with pride.

For Alicia, this has become a source of strength, especially when the challenges of the search become overwhelming. According to her, continued engagement and learning about human rights has been a coping mechanism: “I feel that I am going to break down again, I read a book, I go to [human rights] workshops, I go to talks, I go to the Museum of Memory and Tolerance³⁷⁰ to see whatever exhibit.”³⁷¹

As was the case with Alicia, the personal transformation that mothers experience when they engage in the struggle to end disappearance and to find their son or daughter is a source of pride and strength for mothers of disappeared people. Lorena, who has also become a leading voice within the movements for the disappeared and is the leader of a collective of relatives that she founded in Veracruz, discusses how her sense of her contributions in her life has changed since becoming a human rights defender, “it has changed my life in that it is a life that is much, much more realistic than the previous life.

³⁷⁰ The Museum of Memory and Tolerance is a museum that highlights genocide and other serious human rights violations that have taken place around the world. It also hosts a number of events—including panel discussions, report presentations, and documentary screenings—on disappearance in Mexico.

³⁷¹ Original quote in Spanish: “siento que me voy a volver a vencer, me pongo a leer un libro, voy a los talleres [de derechos humanos], voy a los conversatorios, voy al Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia a ver la exposición de no se que.”

It is very interesting, but I do not feel that it is, I feel that it is a better life, as an activity. Like, doing something valuable.”³⁷²

Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of being involved in advocacy on the lives of relatives of disappeared people. According to Robins, political engagement has been an effective coping mechanism for relatives of disappeared people in Nepal.³⁷³ Robins also found that empowerment and a sense of agency served to mitigate some of the emotional challenges that women who are related to disappeared people faced in Nepal.³⁷⁴ Furthermore, he highlighted relatives’ political engagement in response to disappearance as a sign of resilience and a source of strength.³⁷⁵

Psychologists have also discussed the motivations to become involved in supporting others in the aftermath of a personal trauma. Ervin Staub, a psychologist, developed the concept of *altruism born of suffering* to describe how people who have experienced extreme violence “rather than becoming hostile or vengeful against the world devote themselves in significant ways to helping others.”³⁷⁶ Other scholars have also discussed the positive changes that people experience in the aftermath of a traumatic event, calling this process *posttraumatic growth*.³⁷⁷ Feminist psychologist Pilar Hernández-Wolfe engages with these two concepts in her study of the experiences of thirty-five human rights activists in Colombia who experienced politically motivated

³⁷² Original quote in Spanish: “me ha cambiado la vida en que es una vida mucho, mucho, más realista que la anterior. Es muy curioso pero no siento que sea, yo siento que es una vida mejor, como actividad. Como hacer algo valioso.”

³⁷³ Robins, 2010.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Robins, 2010, 2016.

³⁷⁶ Staub, 2003, p. 540.

³⁷⁷ Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004.

violence.³⁷⁸ Hernández-Wolfe found that although they faced a number of traumatic experiences, the human rights defenders that she interviewed expressed their commitment to “bringing to light the roots of violence, include justice to build peace, recognition and equity for ethnic minorities, and gender equity.”³⁷⁹ In this way, this group of human rights defenders sought to take political action to help others and to prevent future forms of violence.³⁸⁰

B. Tensions within the relationship with other children and spouse

Mothers of disappeared people interviewed as part of this thesis discussed the importance of their immediate family—their other adult daughters and sons and their spouses or partners—in being able to face the search for the people they love. Although the bulk of the responsibility of searching for the disappeared often falls almost completely on mothers—as I discussed earlier in this chapter—the disappearance of a loved one impacts all other members of the immediate family in different ways. In particular, mothers who shared their stories with me discussed tensions that emerged in their relationships with their other daughters and sons and their relationship with their partner since the disappearance of their loved ones.

As I mentioned earlier, searching for a disappeared loved one and demanding an end to disappearance is a lengthy process that demands a lot of time and effort from mothers of disappeared people. At times, mothers feel challenged by having to balance their desire to be engaged in the search efforts while simultaneously spending time with

³⁷⁸ Hernández-Wolfe, 2011.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 245.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

their other daughters and sons. In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, it became clear that navigating their gendered responsibility as mothers—that is, searching for their daughters and sons while spending time with their other children—presents a struggle for some. These tensions emerge especially around the holidays and important dates.

A prime example of this tension is the case of Diana, whose oldest son was disappeared in Coahuila in 2009. Since his disappearance happened in a different state than the one where she lives, searching for her son and demanding justice in his case often entails traveling to Coahuila and Mexico City. When we spoke in April 2018, Diana had recently scheduled two such trips. One of the trips was to Mexico City to participate as a representative of her collective in the presentation of a report by the Open Society Foundation about human rights abuses in Mexico and to take part in the annual Mother's Day March where mothers of disappeared people gather to demand an end to disappearance and that their daughters and sons be found. Later that month, she had scheduled a second trip to Coahuila to participate in a review of progress in the investigation into her son's disappearance with State officials. However, one of Diana's younger sons was also planning to get married that month and the only two available dates fell within the dates that Diana had planned both trips outside of town. Furthermore, her youngest daughter also had an important college entrance exam around those dates for which Diana wanted to be present.

Beyond presenting scheduling and logistical problems, deciding which events to participate in also became an emotional issue for Diana, who cried while discussing how

she felt “between a rock and a hard place because I do not want to stop searching, but they also need me.”³⁸¹ Diana sought the advice of a friend who counseled her to “listen to her heart.” However, for Diana that brought up more complications, “I do not hear it! No, I cannot. And if I listen to it and what if it tells me something that I do not like? In other words, I want to be here and I also want to be there. [My friend] tells me, ‘Well, wherever you are most needed.’ I am needed in both places! But how the hell do I do it?”³⁸²

Other mothers also expressed feeling that they had “abandoned” their other daughters and sons while actively engaging in search efforts. Although as I discuss above, this may create tensions in their relationships with their other daughters and sons, mothers of disappeared people also describe the support of their children as a source of strength to engage in the search. As Alicia so clearly articulates, “Not seeing them, I have deprived my daughter and sons of my time. I say that now I have disappeared from them, but at the end of the day they are proud of me, they have told me so.”³⁸³

Although many times mothers of disappeared people mentioned their spouses as sources of emotional support and also partners in the search effort, they also highlighted tensions that have emerged in their relationship as a result of being involved in the search. Paulina clearly articulates the source of this tension, “There are many

³⁸¹ Original quote in Spanish: “entre la espada y la pared porque no quiero dejar la búsqueda, pero también ellos me ocupan.”

³⁸² Original quote in Spanish: “¡No lo oigo! No, no puedo. ¿Y si lo escucho y a lo mejor lo que me va a decir no me gusta? O sea, quiero estar aquí, quiero estar allá también. [Mi amiga] me dice, ‘Pues donde hagas mas falta.’ ¡Hago falta en las dos partes! Pero, ¿cómo carajos le hago?”

³⁸³ Original quote in Spanish: “A mis hijos sin verles, les he privado de mi tiempo. Yo digo, ahora me he desaparecido de ellos, pero al final del camino ellos están muy orgullosos de mi, me lo han dicho.”

[*compañeras*] who have gotten divorced, who have gotten divorced because they go to search, because the husbands don't want to anymore, because of money, because of many things."³⁸⁴ It seems that the emotional pain and frustration that emerge in the aftermath of a disappearance place a particular stress on this specific relationship that makes navigating even everyday disagreements very difficult. For example, although Saraí and her husband continue to be together even thirteen years after the disappearance of their teenage daughter, they have faced many challenges as well: "we are together, but we have had some fights like you can't imagine, these huge fights between him and me. But they say that is because of the disappearance."³⁸⁵

Sofía too has faced tensions in her relationship with her husband, especially around the involvement of her son's biological father in the search efforts:

Problemas con mi esposo también los he tenido, muchos...Él no es papá biológico de mi hijo, pero él lo crío desde chiquito. Entonces el hecho de que desaparece mi hijo y aparece el papá biológico entonces también es estar mediando, mediando de que, "Por qué te busca? ¿Él por que te habla?"

I have also had problems with my husband, many...He is not the biological father of my son, but he raised him since he was very little. So, the fact that my son disappears and the biological father appears, so now it is also having to navigate, navigate the 'Why is he looking for your?' Why is he calling you?'

Although Sofía describes her husband as a source of support and the only person that accompanies her on search efforts, he is also clearly a source of stress for her.

In other cases, the tensions that emerge in this relationship in the context of the search for a disappeared son or daughter led to a breakdown of the relationship. Such was

³⁸⁴ Original quote in Spanish: "Hay muchas [*compañeras*] divorciadas, que se han divorciado porque salen a la búsqueda, porque los maridos ya no quieren, porque el dinero, por muchas cosas."

³⁸⁵ Original quote in Spanish: "nosotros estamos juntos pero hemos tenido unos pleitos como no te imaginas, pero pleitos así grandes entre el y yo. Pero dicen que es de lo mismo."

the case for Alicia, who discusses how being involved in efforts to find her disappeared son impacted her relationship with her former partner,

Hoy en día pues eso es lo que yo vivo desde hace un año, el rompimiento de una pareja que yo tenía. ¿Por qué? Porque no me aguantó los pasos. De que “Alicia casi no está en tu casa,” ¿Por qué? Porque tengo una reunión, que un taller, que un conversatorio, que una conferencia.

Today it is what I have been living through for the past year, a break up with a partner I had. Why? Because he could not keep up. Like, “Alicia you are barely home” Why? Because I have a meeting, a workshop, a talk, a conference.

Alicia described how her former partner would accuse her of being in a relationship with another man because she was often not home, a situation which she described as a form of gender violence as she saw her partner’s jealousy as an attempt to control her actions and dismiss her work as a human rights defender.

Even when mothers of disappeared people have a supportive relationship with their partners, talking to them it became clear to me that they took on the role of emotional support person for them in ways that at times limited their ability to express their own emotional challenges. One example of this is Estefanía’s case, whose youngest son was murdered while searching for his disappeared brother in 2013. She described how she supported her husband in the aftermath of those two tragedies:

Cuando mataron a [mi hijo menor], ese día [mi esposo] no se podía parar. Él no dejaba de llorar, no se podía parar. Y yo [le decía] “¡párate!” A mi no me veías llorar. Yo [le decía] “Párate, órale. A él ya lo mataron. No puedes hacer nada por él, pero necesitamos buscar a [nuestro hijo desaparecido].” Aunque por dentro yo me estaba muriendo—o sea, era mi bebe. Pero siempre he tratado de darle fuerzas.

When they killed [my youngest son], that day [my husband] could not get up. He would not stop crying, he could not get up. And I [would say to him] “Get up!” You didn’t see me crying. I [said to him] “Get up, let’s go. They already killed

him. You cannot do anything for him, but we have to look for [our disappeared son].” Although inside I was dying—he was my baby. But I have always tried to give him strength.

The cases highlighted above clearly illustrate how mothers of disappeared people take on the responsibility to care for their spouses and daughters and sons—even when they are adults—an obligation that is informed by patriarchal responsibilities imposed on women that tie them to their home. Other experiences of parents of disappeared people elsewhere also highlight the tensions that may emerge within families. For example, Hollander highlighted how differences in coping strategies and understandings about the disappearance of a son or daughter often were at the root of tensions within spouses in Northern Uganda.³⁸⁶

Research also points to the emotional costs of becoming engaged in *la búsqueda* and *la lucha* for the disappeared. In an ethnographic study of the experiences of women whose relatives were disappeared during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), Maria O’Reilly, a feminist researcher focused on conflict and gender, found that for many “the search for missing persons is often marked by disappointment and by frustration.”³⁸⁷ This is especially true as the process of searching for the disappeared in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been slow and information regarding mass graves has been limited since witnesses fear being prosecuted.³⁸⁸ In another study with relatives of missing people in the United Kingdom, researchers found that searching for a disappeared person could produce hypervigilance in relatives. This

³⁸⁶ Hollander, 2016.

³⁸⁷ O’Reilly, 2018, p. 185.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

was the case as relatives felt the “need to remain alert and aware for long periods of time” to look for information about the missing person.³⁸⁹

C. Safety concerns and increased risks

Another way in which mothers of disappeared people are impacted by their involvement in *la búsqueda* is the increasing risks that they face. Mothers of disappeared people are caught at the intersection of two disturbing patterns of violence that have emerged in Mexico since the militarization of the Drug War in 2006: the dramatic increase in the number of people who have disappeared and the extraordinary rise in the violent repression of human rights defenders. Mothers of disappeared people seek justice for their daughters and sons while facing vulnerability and high risks because of their intersecting marginalized status as women and human rights defenders. Many are threatened and physically assaulted by State authorities, organized crime, or often both in collaboration.³⁹⁰ Women human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable as they struggle to uphold human rights in a violent context, facing specific forms of gender violence such as sexual violence, harassment, verbal abuse, defamation, and intimidation at the hands of state and non-state actors.³⁹¹

Although Mexico approved and implemented the Federal Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists—through which the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists was established—in 2012, human rights defenders continue to be subjected to different types of violence because of their work

³⁸⁹ Parr, Stevenson, & Woolnough, 2016, p. 73.

³⁹⁰ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2015.

³⁹¹ United Nations, General Assembly, 2013.

documenting and seeking justice for human rights violations in Mexico.³⁹² In this context, mothers of disappeared people have found themselves facing serious security risks as they continue to search for their loved ones. For example, four of the mothers of disappeared people with whom I spoke mentioned having protective measures issued to them through the protection mechanism due to the serious threats that they have received since the disappearance of their daughters and sons. Protective measures granted to human rights defenders may range from being given a cell phone with emergency contact numbers to having protection from armed plainclothes police officers.³⁹³

One illustrative example of the risks that mothers of disappeared people face is Angélica's. At the beginning of my interview with Angélica, I asked her where she lived, as this was basic biographical information that I had asked all other mothers I had interviewed up to that point. However, Angélica declined to tell me where she lived, citing security concerns. Angélica and her family are among the nearly 330,000 people who have been forcefully displaced from their homes in Mexico.³⁹⁴ Angélica's daughter was disappeared in 2004 in Mexico State by local police officers just a few blocks away from her house. Angélica and her husband decided to leave their home, "When we realized who the perpetrators were and that they lived almost at the corner from the house, we had to leave because we and our son were at risk, and they also let us know

³⁹² Comité Cerezo México, 2018; Espacio_OSC, 2017.

³⁹³ Espacio_OSC, 2017.

³⁹⁴ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2018.

through threats.”³⁹⁵ Although moving away is a strategy to mitigate the risks that Angélica and her family experience, it has not in itself solved their security concerns. As Angélica explains,

Te sales de tu lugar de origen o donde estabas radicando y ya no puedes hacer una vida normal. ¿Por qué? Porque los perpetradores siendo de la policía tienen manera de encontrarlo a uno y entonces andamos como si fuéramos nosotros los delincuentes. Entonces, ¿cómo no le cambia a uno la vida?

You leave your place of origin or where you were living and you can no longer have a normal life. Why? Because since the perpetrators are the police, they have a way of finding you and so we are living as if we were the criminals. So, how can your life not change?

Human rights organizations in Mexico and the United States have documented at least thirteen murders of relatives of disappeared people in the country since 2008.³⁹⁶ Urgent Action for Human Rights Defenders³⁹⁷ (ACUDDEH by its initials in Spanish)—a non-governmental organization that documents human rights violations against human rights defenders—has also highlighted the ongoing violence directed to defenders in recent years.³⁹⁸ According to them, 228 human rights defenders have been extrajudicially executed by State actors since 2006.³⁹⁹ According to Article 19, an organization that promotes freedom of expression around the world, 124 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000.⁴⁰⁰ Alarming, a recent UNESCO report places the country as the

³⁹⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “Cuando nos dimos cuenta de quienes eran los perpetradores y que los teníamos casi en la esquina de la casa, tuvimos que salir porque corríamos riesgo nosotros y nuestro hijo y además nos lo hicieron saber con amenazas.”

³⁹⁶ Center for Justice and International Law, 2017.

³⁹⁷ Name in Spanish: Acción Urgente para Defensores de Derechos Humanos.

³⁹⁸ Acción Urgente para Defensores de Derechos Humanos, A.C., 2018.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Article 19, 2019.

deadliest in the world for journalists.⁴⁰¹ Given the context of violence against human rights defenders in Mexico, it is unsurprising that almost all of the women with whom I spoke mentioned concerns about their safety during our conversations. Other researchers have also highlighted the impacts of participating in processes to hold perpetrators of disappearance accountable, including increased risks, for relatives of victims of disappearance in Sri Lanka.⁴⁰²

D. Financial hardships

One of the most surprising findings that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people has been the financial challenges that arise from being involved in involvement in the search. Involvement in *la búsqueda* also entails material costs for women as mothers must pay for transportation, private investigators, or forgo working to dedicate themselves fulltime to the search. In this way, the decision to seek justice for their daughters and sons impacts certain mothers in distinct, classed ways.

Marta, who has four sons who were disappeared in two separate incidents in 2008 and 2010, discussed the financial impacts of searching for the disappeared. She explains that she had to travel from her hometown to the municipal headquarters and to the capital city of her state while demanding that authorities conduct investigations into her sons' disappearances. Finally, seeing that nothing was being done at the state level, she began to travel to Mexico City to bring the case before federal authorities. This required various trips to and from Mexico City, which Marta and her family paid through loans from

⁴⁰¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018.

⁴⁰² Salih & Samarasinghe, 2017.

acquaintances and family. However, soon that money ran out and she was left with very little resources to continue her search. Marta told me that she would save her limited earnings from her small business selling used clothes and use those funds to finance her travel to Mexico City. Often, that money was only enough to cover her bus tickets, so Marta described how she slept in the bus station and relied on generous employees at the bus depot who gave her sandwiches and let her use the public bathroom for free.⁴⁰³

Researchers have also highlighted the financial burdens of involvement in the search for the disappeared entails. Anthropologist Shaylih Muehlmann highlighted these challenges in her ethnographic work on the experiences of mothers of disappeared people who participated in the caravan to the United States organized by the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity⁴⁰⁴ (MPJD for its initials in Spanish).⁴⁰⁵ According to her, “many of the women on the tour suffered significant economic hardship as a result of leaving their families and sometimes their jobs.”⁴⁰⁶

Other scholarship on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people also highlights economic stressors that result from disappearance and engagement in search efforts. In an ethnographic study of the impacts of disappearance on relatives of disappeared people in Northern Uganda, Theo Hollander found that “poverty-related stressors” played a big role in the lives of parents of disappeared people.⁴⁰⁷ In this particular context, the lack of a comprehensive social safety net in Uganda and family’s

⁴⁰³ Public restrooms in Mexico often charge a small fee for use ranging from \$2 to \$5 pesos.

⁴⁰⁴ Name in Spanish: Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad

⁴⁰⁵ Muehlmann, 2017.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁴⁰⁷ Hollander, 2016, p. 297.

reliance on subsistence farming meant that having a missing adult child had a disproportionate impact on parents' ability to provide for their basic needs.⁴⁰⁸ Simon Robins has also highlighted the economic implications of disappearance—especially when the disappeared person is the main wage earner—on families of disappeared people in Nepal⁴⁰⁹ and Timor-Leste.⁴¹⁰

SECTION 3. CONCLUSION

Involvement in *la búsqueda* and *la lucha* is an important way that mothers of disappeared people cope with the challenges of uncertainty and disappearance. This is true for Saraí, who talks about how the search has sustained her since her daughter's disappearance in 2004, “there is something that has helped me a lot: always doing something. When I don't do something regarding my girl, I feel depressed and I cry. Every day I have to do something. Even if it is, for example, being here with you right now, because I am representing her.”⁴¹¹

Saraí and other mothers of disappeared people in Mexico are motivated to engage in the search for their loved ones for a number of reasons, which are a source of support for them. As Diana states in the epigraph to this chapter, mothers' hope of finding their daughters and sons is the most important motivating factor for engaging in *la búsqueda*. In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, it became clear that ultimately they

⁴⁰⁸ Hollander, 2016.

⁴⁰⁹ Robins, 2010.

⁴¹⁰ Robins, 2012.

⁴¹¹ Original quote in Spanish: “hay algo que me a ayudado mucho: no dejar de hacer algo. Cuando no hago algo con respecto a la niña, estoy deprimida y estoy llorando. Todos los días tengo que hacer algo. Aunque sea por ejemplo ahorita estar contigo, porque le estoy dando presencia.”

want to find their loved ones—whether alive or dead. When discussing this hope, some mothers are clear that their hope is to find their sons alive, while simultaneously acknowledging that they may not. This is another example of the ability of mothers of disappeared people to engage in both-and thinking—that is, to hold the thought that their daughters and sons may be alive, while also recognizing the possibility that they may be dead. Although hope of finding their loved one is a source of sustenance and strength for mothers of disappeared people in Mexico, research on the experiences of other relatives of the disappeared around the world also highlights the potential emotional challenges that this hope could bring in the long-term.

Another strong source of motivation for searching for their loved ones is what Margarita calls *compromiso de amor*, the commitment born out of love they referred to in our interviews. It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that mothers of disappeared people are motivated by their love for their daughters and sons. However, it is not just their love for the disappeared, but a specific *personal* commitment that is born out of that love that actually mobilizes mothers to engage in the search and in broader efforts to end disappearance.

A *collective* commitment to end disappearances and to search for all the disappeared are also important motivators for mothers of disappeared people. Mothers, like Alicia, repeatedly discussed their commitment to *la no repetición*—the principle of non-repetition of serious human rights abuses—so that no other families will have to endure what they did. This is closely tied to mothers' commitment to search for all disappeared people, not just their own daughters and sons. Mothers of disappeared people

expressed a strong resolve to engage in *la búsqueda* on behalf of those mothers who have passed away or who are so distraught that they cannot search themselves. This commitment is particularly present for the women who participate in search brigades to look for bodies. In this case, their hope is to bring closure to families through their efforts to find human remains.

Finally, one of the most important motivators for women to be engaged in the search for their daughters and sons is their perception of *la búsqueda* as an extension of their roles as mothers. In interviews with mothers, it became clear that the gendered divisions of work in and outside of the home translates directly to how responsibility for the search is shared among spouses. Furthermore, traditional gender roles that designate men as the breadwinner in the heterosexual head of household family arrangement also influence the division of responsibilities as part of *la búsqueda* as mothers discuss their need to be the one that searches because their spouse is the “one that works.”

In this chapter, I also highlighted the impacts that the process of searching has on the lives of mothers of disappeared people. One important way in which these women are impacted is in their personal transformations into human rights defenders. Identifying as human rights defenders is a source of pride and empowerment for mothers of disappeared people. This type of political engagement is an important aspect of what resilience looks like for this group of women.

Simultaneously, these women are also experiencing some difficult challenges that emerge from involvement in the search. An important one that mothers of disappeared people must reckon with is the tensions that arise in their relationships with their other

daughters and sons and partners/spouses. At times, mothers of disappeared people find that gendered expectations about their role in supporting and meeting the needs of the rest of their family are at odds with their commitment to searching for their disappeared daughters and sons. Balancing the responsibilities that are placed on them within this context at times creates tensions within these relationships.

Two additional challenges that mothers experience as a result of searching for their daughters and sons are increased security risks and financial hardships. As human rights defenders, these women face particular risks due to the current context of political repression in Mexico. These risks are real—especially as at least thirteen relatives of disappeared people have been killed because of their search efforts. Financial hardships also shape mothers’ ability to be engaged in the search for their loved ones. This process often entails travel expenses and time away from paid work, two elements that place financial burdens on some families.

Sociologist Dawn Paley has highlighted the therapeutic nature of efforts to search for the disappeared. Paley argues, that for the relatives that participate in the weekly search brigades that the collective organizes, “that day represents a type of therapy, of self-care and healing, an activity that justified their absence from their home and fulfilled the need of relatives of disappeared people to do something for their disappeared loved one.”⁴¹² The findings I have presented throughout this chapter echo this assertion and point to the involvement in search efforts as an important coping mechanism for mothers

⁴¹² Original quote in Spanish: “ese día representa una forma de terapia, de auto-cuidado y sanación, una actividad que justificaba su ausencia en la casa y llenaba una necesidad de parte de los familiares de hacer algo por la búsqueda de su familiar desaparecido.” Paley, 2018, p. 158.

of disappeared people. The motivations and some of the ways in which their lives are impacted serve as sources of strength in the midst of serious emotional and social challenges. In the next chapter, I will discuss different forms of support that mothers experience through their involvement in collectives of relatives of disappeared people and how these serve as another important source of strength for their continued efforts to find their loved ones, alive or dead.

Chapter 3: *Esta es Nuestra Nueva Familia*⁴¹³: Collective Support in the Aftermath of a Disappearance

“¿Sabes qué empecé a hacer? Retirarme de mi familia porque no quería escuchar las negativas. Que “¡Ya párale!”, “¡Ya deja!”, “Estás arriesgando a los demás”, “Piénsale que al rato te pudiera pasar, ¡piénsale!”. Eran tantas cosas que yo sabía que sí las pienso, pero que no me gusta que me las digan. Muy lejos de que me digan, “¡Échale ganas! ¿En qué te podemos ayudar? ¿Cómo te podemos ayudar?” Decirte, “¡Ya deja!” Yo decía, “¡No!” Y me retiré. Y me retiré de mi familia, pero encontré miles de familias acá que tenemos las mismas necesidades, el mismo objetivo. En una palabra: la misma lucha.”

Do you know what I started to do? [I started to] withdraw from my family because I did not want to hear negative messages—“Stop it!” “Just let go already!” “You are putting others at risk,” “Think about what could happen to you, think about it!” So many things that I knew and I did think about, but I don’t like when others talked to me about them. Far from telling me, “Keep at it! How can we help you?” they said, “Stop it!” I said, “No!” and I withdrew. And I withdrew from my family, but I found thousands of families here that have the same needs as us, the same goal. In one word: the same struggle—Marta.

Marta is the mother of four men who disappeared in two separate incidents in 2008 and 2010 and one of the leaders of the movement for the disappeared in Mexico. She is a petite 67 year-old woman with a head of grey hair that she keeps short. She often wears a pained expression, almost as if the anguish and sorrow of her nearly nine year search for her sons has etched itself on her face. Her voice commands the attention of entire rooms of State officials and other relatives of disappeared people when she speaks. Marta is well known among her peers—other family members of disappeared people—and is affectionately called Doña Marta by those with whom she collaborates. She has been searching for two of her sons, Arturo and Juan, since August 2008, when they were disappeared while traveling for work in the southeastern state of Guerrero. Two years

⁴¹³ English translation: “This is Our New Family.”

later, in September 2010, another two of her sons, Lorenzo and Gabriel, were disappeared by local police in Veracruz also while traveling for work. Since then, she has led a tireless search for all four of them, in the process forming a collective of families of disappeared people as well as a network that brings together many collectives of disappeared people throughout the country.

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, throughout Mexico's history, coming together in collectives has been an important strategy that relatives of disappeared people have used to demand justice for the disappeared. Relatives of disappeared people formed organizations and collectives during Mexico's Dirty War to mobilize to press the Mexican State to end its practice of forcefully disappearing people perceived to be political dissidents.⁴¹⁴ They continue to demand justice for their disappeared relatives through legal means—bringing the case of the enforced disappearance of Rosendo Radilla before the Inter-American Court of Human⁴¹⁵—preserving the memory of the disappeared—through initiatives like the House of the Untamed Memory⁴¹⁶ in Mexico City.⁴¹⁷ Another notable example of mothers coming together in this way are the mothers of victims of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, who continue to demand justice for their daughters and have spurred a broader movement

⁴¹⁴ Karl, 2014; Mendoza García, 2016.

⁴¹⁵ Radilla Pacheco v. Mexico, 2009.

⁴¹⁶ Name in Spanish: La Casa de la Memoria Indómita. This museum and community space is an initiative of the Comité ¡Eureka!, an organization of relatives of people disappeared during Mexico's Dirty War, to provide a historical record of that time period and to remember their disappeared relatives (Field notes, July 19, 2016).

⁴¹⁷ Karl, 2014.

against violence against women.⁴¹⁸ As I have discussed in previous chapters, the increase of disappearances in the context of the militarization since 2006 has also been met by important organizing by relatives of the disappeared to demand justice for the loved ones.

Many of the mothers that shared their stories with me began their involvement in organized efforts to demand justice for their daughters and sons as part of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD for its initials in Spanish).⁴¹⁹ The MPJD emerged in 2011 and brought together victims of the violence that emerged in Mexico in the context of the militarization of the Drug War.⁴²⁰ It resulted in response to the disappearance and subsequent murder of Juan Francisco Sicilia Ortega and a group of young people in Morelos in March 2011.⁴²¹ Javier Sicilia, a well-known poet and journalist and Juan Francisco's father, organized a series of protests and marches that brought together relatives of other victims of violence around the country.⁴²² Through caravans to the north and south of Mexico as well as to the U.S. and dialogues with then President Felipe Calderón and other members of his cabinet, the MPJD made visible the tragic outcomes of the so-called Drug War in Mexico.⁴²³ Although it eventually disintegrated as a movement, the MPJD provided an important opportunity for relatives of disappeared people to gather, share their stories, and organize together to demand justice for their loved ones.

⁴¹⁸ Bejarano, 2002, 2013.

⁴¹⁹ Name in Spanish: Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.

⁴²⁰ Sicilia & Vásquez Martín (Eds.), 2016.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

For Alicia and other mothers that I interviewed, the MPJD was a fundamental part of their own transformation as human rights defenders—a topic I discussed in Chapter 2. According to Alicia, the MPJD also played a fundamental role in the emergence and strengthening of many of the collectives of relatives of disappeared people that exist in Mexico today,

si el Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad no hubiera nacido, nosotros no hubiéramos tenido voz y el Movimiento es quien le da voz a miles de familias. El Movimiento es quien nos da la fuerza de no tener miedo y gritar, salir a las calles con mantas y pancartas a gritar. Y después de ahí nacen los demás colectivos o [sic] organizaciones.

If the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity would not have been born, we would not have had a voice and the Movement gives voice to thousands of families. The Movement gives us strength to not be afraid and to cry out, take to the streets with banners and posters to cry out. And after that is where the other collectives or organizations are born.

As Marta describes in the epigraph to this chapter, the peer support that emerged through the MPJD and in other collectives of relatives of disappeared people has become an important source of strength and sustenance for mothers of disappeared people. It has also become a powerful way of facing the social isolation that they experience in the aftermath of the disappearance of a loved one.

In this chapter, I will explore how the collectives that mothers of disappeared people form and join provide support to mothers in a number of different ways. First, I will briefly discuss the social isolation that mothers of disappeared people face in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons. Then, I will highlight the three types of support that women identified: guidance navigating the legal-administrative process, emotional support, and material support. Finally, I will discuss

tensions within these collectives that mothers of disappeared people underlined. Despite these tensions, the support that mothers access through involvement in collectives is an important component of resilience and a source of strength, in some cases becoming their new family.

SECTION 1. *NOS AISLAMOS COMPLETAMENTE*⁴²⁴: SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE AFTERMATH OF A DISAPPEARANCE

After the disappearance of her son in 2009, Margarita describes how she became isolated from her extended family as they grew distant and “they left us. So we stopped going to the movies, we stopped doing things that made us happy. We became completely isolated from everyone.”⁴²⁵ Unfortunately, Margarita’s case is not unique among the women who shared their stories with me. Social isolation in the aftermath of the disappearance of a child was a recurring theme in interviews with mothers of disappeared people. While the disappearance impacted their connection to people in general, the women who shared their stories with me reflected on how their relationship with their extended families was particularly impacted.

Social isolation in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, such as the disappearance of a loved one, is not an uncommon experience for many people. In particular, research on the impacts of human rights violations has highlighted social isolation as an important consequence in the lives of victims and relatives of victims. In a study on the experiences of victims of serious human rights abuses—including enforced

⁴²⁴ English translation: “We became completely isolated.”

⁴²⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “se fue. Entonces dejamos de ir al cine, dejamos de hacer cosas que nos alegraran. Nos aislamos completamente de toda la gente.”

disappearance—in the Western Sahara region, researchers found that social isolation and social stigma were one of the main psychosocial consequences in the aftermath of violence.⁴²⁶ Similarly, relatives of disappeared people in Sri Lanka,⁴²⁷ Argentina,⁴²⁸ and Uganda⁴²⁹ report experiencing social isolation and stigma after the disappearance of a loved one. Recent scholarship on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people in Mexico since 2006 has also highlighted the challenges of social isolation that relatives of disappeared people face.⁴³⁰

In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, it became clear that the criminalization of victims of violence in the context of the Drug War contributed greatly to the stigmatization of their disappeared daughters and sons, and—by extension—to their own isolation. Sociologist Dawn Paley discusses the impact of criminalization in her analysis of the response from relatives of disappeared people to the issue of disappearance in Coahuila, Mexico.⁴³¹ Paley argues that the lack of clarity regarding the perpetrators of the violence creates the conditions for the criminalization of victims of said violence.⁴³² According to her, the official narrative that the State has fostered regarding the Drug War serves to criminalize disappeared people. Paley describes how this is carried out, writing that “in most cases of disappearance, the social identity of the direct victim is questioned in terms of their possible involvement in drug trafficking or

⁴²⁶ Arnoso-Martínez, Beristain & González-Hidalgo, 2014.

⁴²⁷ Robins, 2010.

⁴²⁸ Bosco, 2006.

⁴²⁹ Hollander, 2016.

⁴³⁰ Amnesty International, 2016; Fundar, 2018; Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁴³¹ Paley, 2018.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

their connections with people who have links to illicit businesses.”⁴³³ This serves to lessen the pressure on the State to investigate the disappearance of people and to blame victims for their disappearance, as it is implied and sometimes explicitly stated that they are criminals who seemingly deserved their fate.

Other researchers have also argued that the narrative concerning the links between people who have been disappeared and organized crime is widespread and supported by mass media in its coverage of violence in contemporary Mexico.⁴³⁴ In her work on the experiences of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Tijuana, Baja California, sociologist Carolina Robledo Silvestre also explores the links between official discourse and the criminalization of victims of disappearance.⁴³⁵ According to Robledo Silvestre:

La forma de interpretar el fenómeno de la desaparición en Tijuana, como hemos visto, se ha configurado bajo un marco simbólico hegemónico que vincula a la desaparición con el tema del narcotráfico desde por lo menos los años 90, pero más especialmente a partir del año 2007.

The interpretation of the problem of disappearance in Tijuana, as we have seen, has been configured within a hegemonic symbolic framework that links disappearance to drug trafficking since at least the 1990s, particularly since the year 2007.⁴³⁶

Scholars and researchers have underscored the links between the criminalization of victims of disappearance and the social isolation of their families.⁴³⁷ Paley argues that the challenges this brings include “not only the criminalization of the victim, but also the

⁴³³ Original quote in Spanish: “en la mayoría de los casos de desaparición, la identidad social de la víctima directa es interpelada con respecto a su posible involucramiento en actividades del narcotráfico o sus conexiones con personas quienes tengan nexos con negocios ilícitos.” Paley, 2018, p. 79.

⁴³⁴ Gibler, 2011; Muehlmann, 2017; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 244.

⁴³⁷ Amnesty International, 2016; Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

isolation of their family as a result.”⁴³⁸ Similarly, Robledo Silvestre describes how the official discourse that criminalizes victims of disappearance also leads to social isolation:

En una sociedad como Tijuana, en donde se culpa al desaparecido por el acto del que fue víctima, el miedo colectivo que implica este tipo de hechos lleva a la sociedad a mantenerse al margen de las personas recién identificadas como enemigos públicos, condenándolas al olvido y a la indiferencia. Por eso la tarea de sus familiares es aún más solitaria...⁴³⁹

In a society such as Tijuana, where the disappeared person is blamed for the act of which they were a victim, the collective fear that this type of event implies makes the society maintain some distance from the people who have recently been identified as public enemies, condemning them to oblivion and indifference. That is why the work of relatives is even more solitary...

This is not unlike the experience of mothers of disappeared and murdered women in Ciudad Juárez, whose daughters were criminalized and blamed for their own deaths and disappearances.⁴⁴⁰

Several mothers who I interviewed discussed the criminalization of their daughters and sons in the aftermath of their disappearance. According to Diana, whose son was disappeared in 2009 in Coahuila when he was 25 years old, both officials and society in general do this. Diana stated that, “a lot of people criminalizes your boys like the authorities.”⁴⁴¹ Similarly, Estefanía, whose son was disappeared in Veracruz in 2014 when he was 19 years old, stated that other people “always think, ‘Oh no, that happened to you because you were involved in something.’”⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “no solamente la criminalización de la víctima pero también el aislamiento de su familia como consecuencia.” Paley, 2018, p. 80.

⁴³⁹ Robledo Silvestre, 2012, p. 245.

⁴⁴⁰ Bejarano, 2002, 2013; Orozco Mendoza, 2017; Wright, 2007.

⁴⁴¹ Original quote in Spanish: “muchacha te criminaliza a los muchachos como las autoridades.”

⁴⁴² Original quote in Spanish: “siempre piensan, ‘Ah no, es que te paso porque en algo estaban metidos.’”

Sofía, whose son was disappeared when he was 19 years old while attending a rave in Hidalgo in 2013, has also faced this criminalization. Sofía describes how her son was blamed for his own disappearance by investigators:

Mi hijo fumaba marihuana. Y pues sí, el mismo Ministerio Público me dijo, “Pues es que su hijo anda en la fiesta. Su hijo se fue al *desmadre*.” Y le dije, “A ti no te consta. El que mi hijo tenga un vicio o algo que le guste como el cigarro, la cerveza o el vino no te da derecho a decir ‘No lo voy a buscar porque es drogadicto, porque fuma marihuana.’ Finalmente yo no vengo a denunciar a un delincuente porque mi hijo trabajaba.”

My son smoked marijuana. And the public prosecutor himself told me, “Well, your son went to a party. Your son went to the *desmadre*—craziness.” And I said to him, “You do not know that. The fact that my son had a vice or that he liked cigarettes, beer, or alcohol does not give you the right to say, ‘I will not look for him because he is a drug addict, because he smoked marijuana.’ Ultimately, I am not here to report a criminal because my son worked.”

Like many other mothers and relatives of disappeared people, Sofía not only denounces the criminalization of her son, but also sees the need to defend him and assert that he was not a criminal. Other researchers have also found that in addition to searching for their daughters and sons and demanding justice, relatives of disappeared people must also take on the responsibility to defend their loved one’s reputation.⁴⁴³

One important example of mothers confronting the criminalization of their children is the case of Luz María Dávila. Both of Luz María’s sons—Marcos, 19, and José Luis, 16—were murdered by an armed convoy of men along with thirteen others at a birthday party in the working class neighborhood of Villas de Salvárcar in Ciudad Juárez on January 31, 2010.⁴⁴⁴ The brutal murder and attack on dozens of people—primarily

⁴⁴³ Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁴⁴⁴ Ainslie, 2013; Herrera Beltrán, 2010.

high school and university students—garnered national and international attention as it highlighted the crisis of violence that Ciudad Juárez faced in the aftermath of the militarization of the Drug War.⁴⁴⁵ Addressing the massacre, then-President Felipe Calderón called the victims gang members and stated that the violence was a struggle among cartels for control of the city—effectively criminalizing the young people and blaming them for their own death.⁴⁴⁶ Two weeks later, Luz María publicly confronted President Calderón about the criminalization of her sons during an event while he was visiting Ciudad Juárez, stating, “My sons were called gang members. One was in high school and the other one was in university and they did not have time to be out on the street. They studied and worked. And what I want is justice.”⁴⁴⁷ Her defense of her sons and her condemnation of the President’s efforts to criminalize them was powerful and it received international and national media coverage. To this day, Luz María continues demanding justice for her sons.⁴⁴⁸

Given the criminalization of victims of violence, relatives of disappeared people—especially members of the extended family—become concerned that any connection to the disappeared person and their immediate family could lead to their own disappearance or that of their own children. One common response to this fear is to distance themselves from the immediate family of the disappeared person. In this way,

⁴⁴⁵ Ainslie, 2013.

⁴⁴⁶ Herrera Beltrán, 2010.

⁴⁴⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “Les dijeron pandilleros a mis hijos. Es mentira. Uno estaba en la prepa y el otro en la universidad, y no tenían tiempo para andar en la calle. Ellos estudiaban y trabajaban. Y lo que quiero es justicia.” As quoted in Herrera Beltrán, 2010.

⁴⁴⁸ Castro, 2019.

the criminalization of disappeared people and the fear that it engenders in their relatives is a key cause of the isolation of mothers of disappeared people.

Over and over again, the mothers who told me their stories described the impacts of their relatives' fear on their relationship with them. According to Marta, other relatives withdraw from relationships with the immediate family of the disappeared person out of fear,

Miedo a que les llegues a lo económico. Miedo a que ya que te pasó a ti esto, te relacionen con la familia y miedo a que te pudiera pasar. Miedo a lo que se está viviendo entre la sociedad. Miedo a que tú en algún momento les digas, “Ven, acércate, acompáñame.” Yo creo que es un temor a muchas cosas. Son muchos factores los que se unen ahí.

Fear that you will impact them financially. Fear that since this happened to you, they will associate you with the family and fear that it could happen to you. Fear about what is happening in society. Fear that at some point you will tell them, “Come, come close, walk with me.” I think it is fear about many things. There are many factors that come together there.

Estefanía also experienced something similar when her older son was disappeared and her youngest son was murdered in 2014. She recounted how her family had gathered for a party near her house in Veracruz on the same day of her son's disappearance. Although she informed her relatives about her son's disappearance right away, they did not reach out to offer help. According to her,

Los únicos que se acercaron fueron mi papá, mis papás y sus papás de mi esposo...O sea viajaron inmediatamente para poder estar con nosotros pero sus tíos y toda la familia que estaban a 10 minutos de ahí en la fiesta, no fueron. No fueron por el temor.

The only ones that came to us were my dad, my parents and my husband's parents...They traveled immediately to be with us, but [my son's] aunts and uncles and all the family that was only 10 minutes away at a party, they did not go. They did not go because they were scared.

Mothers also described how this fear leads to stigma and social isolation, likening it to the stigma that people living with AIDS face. Sofia explained:

Pues te aíslas. Te aíslas porque nadie lo ve igual que tú. Es como cuando alguien te dice, “¡Híjole! Él tiene SIDA”—vamos a poner un ejemplo burdo. Nadie te quiere besar, nadie te quiere saludar, nadie quiere estar cerca de ti porque no quiere contagiarse.

Well, you isolate yourself. You isolate yourself because no one sees it like you. It is like when someone says, “Oh man! He has AIDS”—to give you a rough example. No one wants to kiss you, no one wants to say hi to you, no one wants to be close to you because they do not want to contract it.

Stigma and social isolation also emerged as important impacts of disappearance on the lives of parents of missing people in Northern Uganda. In a qualitative study of the experiences of parents of disappeared people, Theo Hollander found that families experienced stigma in their community about the potential conscription of their disappeared sons to the Lord’s Resistance Army, which in turn contributed to their isolation.⁴⁴⁹ Research on the experiences of the parents of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa who were forcefully disappeared in Guerrero in 2014 also highlights the links between criminalization, stigma, and social isolation. A psychosocial study conducted in 2018 about the impact of the mass enforced disappearance of their sons found that criminalization created intense feelings of guilt and social isolation for parents of the disappeared students.⁴⁵⁰

Although some mothers discussed feeling isolated, they also talked about the ways in which their extended family had also provided vital support. For example, other

⁴⁴⁹ Hollander, 2016.

⁴⁵⁰ Fundar, 2018.

relatives—cousins, siblings, aunts, nieces and nephews—supported them in a variety of ways, including helping with the searches, leafleting, and investigation. Others also provide vital financial support for these efforts. However, this support lessens overtime, leaving mothers unsupported and isolated, especially as many years pass since the disappearance. For example, Sofia described how she initially had the support of people in her family who helped her to flyer and to search for her son in the city where he was disappeared and nearby towns. They also supported her financially, helping her pay for copies of flyers or with the money for gas to travel to the state where her son was disappeared. Nevertheless, Sofía said that, “as time passes, you lose even that—that type of help.”⁴⁵¹

Although other relatives may continue to be concerned about the disappearance of their family members, it is clear that the initial level of support provided by the extended family in these cases may not be sustainable—especially as the search lasts years, and in some cases decades. Because of this, relatives of disappeared people—particularly the mothers that shared their stories with me—seek support from their peers.

SECTION 2. *YA SOMOS UNA FAMILIA*⁴⁵²: SUPPORT WITHIN THE COLLECTIVES OF RELATIVES OF DISAPPEARED PEOPLE

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the support that mothers receive from their peers in collectives of relatives of disappeared people is an important source of support. In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, they described three different types of

⁴⁵¹ Original quote in Spanish: “conforme va pasando el tiempo uno va perdiendo hasta eso, esa clase de ayuda.”

⁴⁵² English translation: “Now we are a family.”

support, which I will explore in the following section. These include support through the legal-administrative process, emotional support, and material support. However, although their peers are an important source of strength and a key component of their coping mechanisms, mothers also discussed challenges and tensions within collectives that may also be sources of stress.

A. Support through the legal-administrative process

One of the key types of support that mothers of disappeared people receive as part of collectives of relatives of disappeared people is direct support for their individual case. This type of support focuses mainly on helping mothers and other relatives of disappeared people access and navigate the legal-administrative process to report the disappearance of their relative. This section focuses on the main forms of support that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people including accompaniment, increased visibility, and leveraging personal contacts and networks.

Accompaniment through the legal-administrative process

One of the main ways that mothers of disappeared people support their peers is by guiding them through the legal-administrative maze that relatives of disappeared people have to navigate in order to report the disappearance of a loved one. Having a disappeared relative is a situation that most, if not all, people are unprepared to experience. In particular, mothers of disappeared people described initially feeling at a loss about whom to turn to for help to find their daughters and sons. Furthermore, the legal-administrative process—that is, the process of officially reporting the disappearance of a person in order to spur an investigation into their fate and whereabouts and holding

the authorities accountable to do this—requires engagement with a multitude of State officials including *ministerios públicos*, police, investigators, and attorney generals. This process in particular takes up a majority of mothers’ time, as impunity and lack of thorough investigations means that mothers spend much of their time demanding that the State actually look for their daughters and sons. Most mothers of disappeared people who shared their stories with me described in detail the many different challenges and roadblocks they have encountered while navigating the legal-administrative process. A 2016 report by Amnesty International highlighted State officials’ indifference to actually searching for the disappeared and their poor treatment of the relatives of victims of disappearance. According to the report, “The treatment of families by officials responsible for carrying out the investigation is wholly inadequate. In general, families feel that officials have no interest at all in their cases.”⁴⁵³ As detailed in Chapter 1, the State has a vested interest and engages in disappearing cases through the use of what journalist John Gibler calls “legal-administrative disappearance.”⁴⁵⁴

In response, mothers and other relatives of disappeared people spend much of their time supporting one another in navigating the legal-administrative process. In particular, mothers of disappeared people discussed leveraging their personal experience engaging with the State in this way and the lessons they learned about the process with other relatives in their collectives in order to support their search efforts. Estefanía, whose son was disappeared in 2014 in Veracruz, and her husband and daughter spend so

⁴⁵³ Amnesty International, 2016, p. 19.

⁴⁵⁴ Gibler, 2017.

much time helping others navigate the legal-administrative process that she now feels that they “lives in the institutions.” According to her:

Ya ahorita nos dedicamos a ayudar a muchas personas que llegan igual como nosotros—que no saben como, ni donde acudir, ni nada de lo que debes hacer...Y pues les aconsejamos que es lo que deben de pedir y que deben de hacer y que es lo que no deben de hacer también.

Now our focus is helping many people who are like us—they don’t know how, or where to go, or anything that they have to do...And we counsel them about what they have to request and what they have to do, and also what not to do.

This type of guidance and mentorship is carried out in person while physically accompanying other mothers of disappeared people to State agencies, as described by Estefanía. Others also described providing this type of support over the phone or simply sharing their experience of the steps needed to file an official report without necessarily going with the relatives to these agencies.

At the same time, some of the women who I spoke with were also explicit about the limits of their ability to provide this type of support while also struggling against the legal-administrative disappearance of their own relatives. For example, Sofía, whose son was disappeared in 2013 in Hidalgo, expresses this by asking the rhetorical question: “If I cannot handle my own issue one hundred percent, how am I going to be able to carry yours or the problems of others?”⁴⁵⁵ Recognizing this, she encourages other mothers of disappeared people to use the knowledge shared through the collective to “empower themselves.” She describes what the balance between relying on the support of the other mothers and “empowering herself” looks like within her collective:

⁴⁵⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “¿Si yo no puedo con lo mío al cien porciento, cómo voy a poder con lo tuyo o con lo de otra persona?”

Yo no puedo trabajar por otros casos. Yo te empodero a ti. Ese es el lema del grupo del colectivo, que tu misma te empoderes de tu caso...Yo te empodero, yo te doy los pasos a seguir. Si algo se te atora, te impulso, te ayudo a que se desatore.

I cannot work on other cases. I can empower you. That is the motto of the group of the collective, that you have to empower yourself of your own case...I empower you, I give you the steps to follow. If you get stuck, I push you forward, I help you get unstuck.

However, mothers are also aware of the limits of this kind of support in the face of the State's legal-administrative efforts to disappear their relative's case. Alicia, who has been looking for her son since he was disappeared in Michoacán in 2009, knows all-too-well the struggles to hold the State accountable for looking for her son. Because of this, when she provides guidance to other relatives of disappeared people, she is deliberate about conveying realistic expectations. She knows that although filing an official report of the disappearance is important, "that is not going to necessarily solve their problem because it is a very difficult problem and also the authorities themselves have collapsed and become involved."⁴⁵⁶ Alicia's experience and concern about the lack of progress and thoroughness of investigating cases of disappearance is also echoed by other human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch⁴⁵⁷ and Amnesty International.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁶ Original quote in Spanish: "no por eso se les va a solucionar el problema porque es un problema muy difícil y además las mismas autoridades se han colapsado involucrándose."

⁴⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2013.

⁴⁵⁸ Amnesty International, 2016.

Greater attention from officials to their cases

Given the real limits of the legal-administrative process, mothers of disappeared people have found that being a part of a collective is often the only way to be able to make their cases legible before State officials. According to mothers, one of the main benefits of belonging to a collective is in actually being able to get assistance from the authorities. Lorena, whose son was disappeared in 2013 in Veracruz, is the founder and leader of a collective of other relatives of disappeared people, primarily mothers. She discusses the difference between the kinds of attention members of her collective receive now compared to before they were affiliated with the group. According to Lorena, the difference is stark,

Todas traemos un gafete, entonces [las madres] se ponen su gafete, entran a las oficinas y ellas nos dicen, todas, que nada que ver. Que antes llegaban y no las pelaban, no las recibían, les daban largas. [Les decían] “Venga otro día.” Y ahora, “¡Uy! Es del [colectivo]. ¡Aguas!” Entonces sí, sí les cambia y ella lo dicen, “Solas no nos atendían.”

We all have a badge, so [the mothers] put their identification badges on, they go into the offices and they tell us, all of them, that it’s nothing like it was. Before they would go and they would not pay attention to them, they would not meet with them, they would blow them off. [They would tell them] “Come another day.” And now, “Oh! She is from [the collective]. Careful!” So yes, it does change and they say, “On our own they would not pay attention to us.”

Diana’s experience echoes that of Lorena’s *compañeras*. Diana, whose son was disappeared in Coahuila in 2009, discusses how being part of a collective has meant that her case has greater visibility before State authorities. Before she joined the collective, she had not been able to speak to higher-level officials about her son’s disappearance. However, that changed once she met Monica, another mother whose son was disappeared in the same town as hers, and later when they both joined a collective,

Ya todos juntos en grupo, pues como que te hacen más caso que solos. Solas le batallamos. Yo sola, Mónica sola, cada quien por su cuenta, fue difícil. Pero ya simplemente juntarnos ella y yo, pues ya por lo menos te digo logramos esa vez la reunión con [el procurador].

Together as a group, well they sort of pay more attention to you than being alone. Going on our own is difficult. Me on my own, Monica on her own, each of us on our own, it was difficult. But just getting together her and me, well at least then we were able to meet with the [prosecutor] that one time.

Collectives of relatives of disappeared people have also joined forces through networks and as a movement in order to make their demands for justice for the disappeared more legible before the State. Marta, the mother of four men who were disappeared in 2008 and 2010, is a nationally recognized leader within the movements for the disappeared. She and her family have been instrumental in bringing together 63 different collectives of disappeared people from across Mexico into a national network. Among other things, the network has coordinated several national searches for disappeared people in various parts of the country. She discusses the importance of coming together as collectives to amplify each other's efforts. According to her, "it is very different saying I am Marta—well, who knows me and who is going to know who I am or who cares? But if we show up as a group and we say, we are collectives from all over Mexico with this problem, with the same situation"⁴⁵⁹ then she believes their efforts will be more successful.

Coming together as relatives of disappeared people as a strategy to make their cases more visible and strengthen their demands of their State is a strategy that other

⁴⁵⁹ Original quote in Spanish; "es muy diferente decir soy Marta—pues, ¿quién me conoce y quién va a saber quien soy o a quién le puede importar? Pero si nos presentamos como grupo y decimos, somos colectivos de todo México con este problema, con la misma situación."

mother-led groups have used in Latin America. Reflecting on the work of CO-MADRES, a group of mothers organized to search for their daughters and sons that were disappeared during the civil war in El Salvador, anthropologist Lynn Stephen highlights the role of identifying as mothers in making their demands more legible before the State.⁴⁶⁰ As Stephen writes, “grassroots political organizing that interfaces regularly with the state in Mexico and El Salvador requires a homogeneous identity, a strategic essentialism, a constituency that is visible and capable of being counted.”⁴⁶¹ In this way, the collectives, by coming together as groups of relatives of disappeared people—often led by mothers—seek to make their demands more legible before the State.

Although being part of a collective—or a network of collective—entails greater visibility for individual cases and for the demands of relatives of disappeared people more generally, this does not automatically mean that the State will actually thoroughly investigate disappearances. In many cases, this greater visibility does mean that mothers will actually be treated with dignity and paid attention to when they meet with officials. Unfortunately, this does not always translate to meaningful progress on the investigation of the whereabouts and fate of their disappeared love one.

Leveraging their connections and networks

Another way in which mothers of disappeared people support each other in collectives is by leveraging their own connections with State officials and other leaders in the movements for justice for the disappeared. Estefanía’s case is a prime example of

⁴⁶⁰ Stephen, 2001.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, p. 66.

what this looks like. After her son's disappearance in Veracruz in 2014, Estefanía was unsure where to turn to find her son. A chance encounter with another mother of a disappeared person helped her connect to other leaders in the movement for the disappeared and to ultimately escalate her case all the way to the federal Attorney General's office.

Estefanía recounted how she met Lorena, another mother interviewed as part of this thesis, while she was at the Anti-Kidnapping Special Unit in Veracruz. It was Lorena that recommended that she reach out to the leader of another collective in Veracruz that had lots of experiences supporting relatives of disappeared people with cases in the state. This person, in turn, connected her to Marta, as she could perhaps help Estefanía so that her son's disappearance would be investigated federally, as opposed to at the state level where it had stalled. Two days later, Estefanía met Marta in Veracruz and Marta agreed to help her bring her case to the Assistant Attorney General's Office for Special Investigations on Organized Crime (SEIDO for its initials in Spanish).⁴⁶² Nevertheless it was not an easy process, as Estefanía explains, "SEIDO did not want to meet with us even though [Marta] already had the doors wide open, they didn't want to. So we had to go to the Attorney General...and it was him then that gave the order for them to open our case at SEIDO."⁴⁶³

Like Estefanía, other mothers of disappeared people get support from their peers who leverage their personal connections with authorities and other leaders in the

⁴⁶² Name in Spanish: Subprocuraduría Especializada en Investigación de Delincuencia Organizada.

⁴⁶³ Original quote in Spanish: "SEIDO no quería recibirnos. A pesar de que [Marta] ya tenían las puertas abiertas, no querían. Y pues ya nos tuvimos que ir con el procurador...y ya fue él quien dio la orden para que nos abran el caso en SEIDO."

collectives of disappeared people in order to bring greater visibility and attention to their case. As with the other forms of support that I have highlighted above, having access to these connections does not guarantee that the State will conduct a comprehensive investigation into the disappearance of their relative.

B. Emotional support

Perhaps one of the most important types of support that mothers of disappeared people access as part of collectives is emotional support. Given the social isolation that many mothers experience in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons, finding support in a community of others who are experiencing the same thing is crucial to their process of coping with the pain of disappearance. For some mothers, the emotional support they receive from their peers in collectives of disappeared people has made them feel that they are their new family. This is the case for Saraí, who founded a collective in Coahuila in 2013 after many years of searching for her daughter on her own and, at times, with the support of NGOs. Discussing her feelings about her *compañeras* and *compañeros* in her collective she said, “We are now a family. When [a *compañera*] is sick, we are all there...this is our new family. I do love my family, but when I found out something is going on here [with my *compañeras* and *compañeros*], I am there.”⁴⁶⁴

Research on the experiences of other relatives of disappeared people around the world also highlight the importance of coming together with others as an important emotional coping strategy. A study on the impacts of serious human rights violations—

⁴⁶⁴ Original quote in Spanish: “Ya somos una familia. Una [compañera] está enferma, y ahí estamos todos... Esta es nuestra nueva familia. Sí amo a mi familia, pero me entero algo de aquí [con mis compañeras y compañeros] y ahí estoy.”

including enforced disappearance—on Sahrawi refugees from the conflict in Western Sahara found that one of the coping strategies of direct and indirect victims concerned “reporting the human rights violation and the organization of the defense of such rights.”⁴⁶⁵ A recent study on the experiences of the parents of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa that were disappeared in 2014 also highlights the importance of emotional support from other relatives of disappeared people as a coping mechanism for the pain and uncertainty that accompany the disappearance of a loved one.⁴⁶⁶ According to a team of psychologist, researchers, and doctors that provided psychosocial accompaniment and medical attention to these parents, “the organization of the parents and relatives represented a source of mutual aid and psychological support in the face of the enforced disappearance of their sons.”⁴⁶⁷ This was echoed by research on the experiences of relatives of disappeared people in Nepal, where women whose husbands had been disappeared found gathering with other women in their similar situation to be the most helpful coping mechanism.⁴⁶⁸

Components of emotional support

Finding others going through the same experience, feeling understood, physical affection through hugs, and *apapacho*—a Spanish word derived from Nahuatl that means a loving caress⁴⁶⁹ are components of the emotional support that mothers of disappeared

⁴⁶⁵ Arnoso-Martínez, Beristain & González-Hidalgo, 2014, p. 564.

⁴⁶⁶ Fundar, 2018.

⁴⁶⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “La organización de los padres, madres y familiares representa una fuente de apoyo mutuo y soporte psíquico frente a la desaparición forzada de sus hijos.” Ibid, p. 411.

⁴⁶⁸ Robins, 2010.

⁴⁶⁹ Real Academia Española; Gómez de Silva, 2001.

people receive as part of the collectives to which they belong. Together, they are an important source of strength that mitigates the challenges that relatives of disappeared people face in their efforts to search for their loved ones including uncertainty and social isolation. In interviews with mothers of disappeared people, it became clear that they felt most understood by others who had experienced the disappearance of a loved one, which facilitated an emotional connection that Marta described as *apapacho*.

As I discussed in the first section of this chapter, mothers of disappeared people experience social isolation in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons. For many, this also includes a sense that they are the only ones going through this experience. That is why meeting other relatives of disappeared people gives these women an immediately feeling of being understood. This was the case for Alicia after she joined the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (MPJD) in 2011. She described feeling “more protected, *cobijada*—sheltered—not alone...I realize that I am not the only one, that there are thousands of families that are going through this issue of generalized disappearances.”⁴⁷⁰ In Estefanía’s case, having a disappeared son has often made her feel as if she speaks a different language than her family. However, she states that joining a collective means that “you speak the same language because we have the same feelings. So, you feel good with those people.”⁴⁷¹

Other mothers who shared their stories with me also remarked upon this sense of intuitive understanding that they feel when they are in the company of other relatives of

⁴⁷⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “más protegida, más cobijada, no sola...Me doy cuenta de que no soy la única, de que son miles de familias que están viviendo este suceso de las desapariciones generalizadas.”

⁴⁷¹ Original quote in Spanish: “ya hablas ese mismo idioma, porque son los mismos sentimientos que tenemos. O sea, se llega uno a sentir bien con las personas.”

disappeared people—even if it is their first time meeting them. For example, Diana described her experience attending a meeting of a collective of relatives of disappeared people in Coahuila for the first time, explaining how she felt as if she had already known the other women and felt that she belonged immediately,

Yo ahí solamente me presenté diciendo, “Soy mamá de Julio y está desaparecido desde hace tiempo.” Yo no ocupé decirles [más] porque yo sé que lo que ellas sienten es lo mismo que lo que yo siento y lo que ellas quieren es lo mismo que yo quiero. Entonces yo les dije, “Yo aquí en este momento, me siento como pez en el agua. Aquí me siento en mi lugar.” O sea porque sé que es el mismo sentir, saben de que estoy hablando.

There I presented myself, only saying “I am Julio’s mom and he has been disappeared for a while.” I did not tell them [more] because I knew that they also felt the same thing that I felt and that we wanted the same thing. So I told them, “Here in this moment, I feel like a fish in water. Here I feel at home.” Because I know that it is the same feeling, they know what I am talking about.

The sense of feeling understood is particularly important to mothers in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons, when—as I discussed in section one—they become isolated from others.

For Marta joining collectives and organizations of relatives of disappeared people has made her feel, “the hugs, the *apapacho*, the solidarity of so many people that also has the same goal, that is also in the search.”⁴⁷² Marta highlights hugs, *apapacho*, and solidarity as important components in the emotional support that she has received from her peers. Hugs are a particularly powerful way through which this emotional support is communicated by other relatives of disappeared people,

⁴⁷² Original quote in Spanish: “el abrazo, el apapacho, la solidaridad de tanta gente que desde luego estaban buscando el mismo fin, que también estaban en la búsqueda.”

Esos abrazos los siente uno tan bonitos, se transmite esa, como esa energía. Nos transmitimos el dolor, sí, pero a la vez, como que decimos “¡Ánimo! Tenemos que ser fuertes. Tenemos que seguir luchando” y es un abrazo de solidaridad también, de entendimiento. Es algo muy bonito. En medio del dolor, es algo muy bonito y muy fuerte.

Those hugs, they feel so nice, they pass on that, like that energy. We share the pain, yes, but at the same time its as if we told each other “You can do it! We have to be strong. We have to continue fighting” and it is also a solidarity hug, of understanding. It is something very beautiful. In the midst of the pain, it is something beautiful and powerful.

As with hugs, *apapacho* is a way to convey support non-verbally. For Marta, *apapacho* is an important source of strength for her that helps sustain her search efforts,

si tu vinieras el día que hacemos la reunión, todo ese cariño, todos esos apapacho, todas esas cosas que no las decimos porque la verdad no son ni siquiera necesarias. El decir, te quiero, estoy contigo, te apoyo. Te repito, no necesariamente tiene que haber palabras.

If you could be here when we have the reunion, all of that love, all of those *apapachos*, all of those things that we do not tell each other because, really they are not even necessary. To say, I love you, I am with you, I support you. I repeat, they do not necessarily need to be spoken.

Marta also discussed the powerful and healing power of this emotional support, stating that she feels as “if I spread an ointment on this wound that we carry inside.”⁴⁷³

Healing through mutual support

Supporting other relatives of disappeared people emerged as a very important source of strength and healing for mothers of disappeared people. As I previously discussed in this chapter, mothers of disappeared people accompany each other through the legal-administrative process. Mothers repeatedly pointed to engagement in this type

⁴⁷³ Original quote in Spanish: “si yo solita me untara un unguento en esta herida que llevamos adentro.”

of support as healing and as a coping mechanism. Alicia clearly articulates this when she states, “that gives me a lot of gratification, a lot of joy—being able to help other families. It has been my therapy, my psychological therapy.”⁴⁷⁴

Similarly, Lorena discusses how supporting others is an important source of strength for her, “I feel that what I have been able to do for other humans I am doing it and that gives me peace of mind...I feel as if my existence is justified. It is not just being a living being.”⁴⁷⁵ Other mothers have also found that the process of supporting other relatives of disappeared people helps them cope with their own emotional pain. For example, Sofía states, “what I have learned from them is to focus one’s pain on helping, on trying to help others.”⁴⁷⁶

Limits of emotional support

Although giving and receiving emotional support from their peers is an important source of strength for mothers of disappeared people, mothers may not always be able to provide this type of support. Connecting emotionally with another person that is going through the same painful experience may also overwhelm mothers and other relatives of disappeared people at times. Sofía describes how her own emotional challenges in the face of disappearance take up all of her resources and leave her depleted and unable to

⁴⁷⁴ Original quote in Spanish: “a mi eso me da mucha satisfacción, muchísima satisfacción--el poder ayudar a otras familias. A sido mi terapia, mi terapia psicológica.”

⁴⁷⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “Yo siento que yo lo que puedo hacer por el ser humano lo estoy haciendo y eso me ha dado tranquilidad...yo me siento como que ya mi existencia tuviera una justificación. No es solamente ser un organismo vivo.”

⁴⁷⁶ Original quote in Spanish: “lo que yo he aprendido de ellos es enfocar el dolor en ayuda, en tratar de ayudar a los demás.”

provide this type of support to other mothers, which is why she also does not seek this type of support from her *compañeras*,

Las mismas compañeras luego nos dicen, “Pues aquí estamos para que platiemos.” Yo al menos soy de las personas que no lo hago. Yo no lo hago. No me siento capacitada. ¿Por qué? Porque yo traigo lo mío. Cada una trae lo suyo y si yo todavía le voy y le recargo lo mío pues no. Entonces yo normalmente cuando tengo necesidad de desahogarme, me desahogo yo sola en mi casa y pues no involucré a nadie.

The *compañeras* themselves tell us, “Well we are here to talk.” I am one of those people that does not do it. I don’t do it. I don’t feel that I am trained. Why? Because I am carrying my own issues. Each person has their own issues and if I go and burden them with mine, well, no. So, normally if I feel the need to let out my feelings, I let out my feelings at home and I do not involve anyone.

Sofía raises a good point about placing the responsibility to provide mutual emotional support on mothers’ already emotionally full plates. Sofía’s statement also highlights the potential need for psychosocial training for members of collectives and other people in solidarity with relatives of disappeared people so that they may provide this support instead of expecting their overwhelmed peers to support them.

C. Material support

As I discussed in Chapter 2, engagement in search efforts can often imply financial challenges for mothers of relatives of disappeared people. A report by Amnesty International documented a number of these,

Disappearances cause serious material difficulties for people. Often the person who disappeared was the breadwinner and their absence means the relatives left behind have to make changes in the way they live...It can also mean quitting their jobs or stopping other income-generating work to search for the disappeared person. Some families have even had to move house for fear of reprisals from those who carried out the disappearance.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁷ Amnesty International, 2016, p. 21.

Collectives of relatives of disappeared people help mitigate these financial stressors by providing access to funding to support search efforts and providing direct support to meet basic needs—including housing and clothing.

Marta, who founded a collective of relatives of disappeared people, described the ways in which the collective is able to subsidize travel expenses for relatives of disappeared people through individual donations or, if they do not have any funds available, “we secure them from one of the donors,”⁴⁷⁸ such as non-governmental organizations that provide technical and financial support to collectives. Sofia also described how the collective serves as the facilitator for requesting funds from the local attorney general’s office stating that when she travels with the collective to search for her son. Research on a collective in the north of Mexico has also highlighted the important role of this type of support in helping individual members access state and federal funding for victims of disappearance.⁴⁷⁹

Other times, individual collective members agree to support other members in need by consuming the goods they sell through their small-scale businesses. For example, Lorena discussed how the collective that she is a part agreed to purchase crab meat from one of the members who was having a hard time making ends meet financially. The collective also supported this woman with clothing for her young grandchildren—the children of her disappeared daughter—who she was raising on her own since the disappearance of their mother.

Another important type of material support that mothers of disappeared people access through involvement in collectives is housing. Like hundreds of thousands of forcefully displaced people in Mexico, Estefanía had to abandon her hometown after the

⁴⁷⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “se lo conseguimos con alguien de los benefactores.”

⁴⁷⁹ Paley, 2018.

disappearance of her oldest son and the murder of her youngest son in 2014 because she was concerned about her safety. Seeking a thorough investigation into her son's disappearance, she traveled to Mexico City to bring the case before the federal Attorney General. This entailed spending a lot of time in Mexico City, where she was able to stay at Marta's home. According to Estefanía, Marta and her family housed her and her husband and daughter for almost a month and later helped her find a more permanent apartment. When I interviewed her, Marta discussed how she provided housing to many other relatives of disappeared people,

En el pequeño departamento que estuvimos rentando ahí, yo llegué a tener...hasta 23 víctimas ahí. Acostadas en el piso. Sí, porque no había donde acostarse...ahí se acomodaban como se podía y ahí todos contentos. Ya no digo que felices porque la verdad la felicidad ya nos la arrebataron, pero toda esa gente se veía contenta y agradecida.

In the little apartment that we rented there, I had...up to 23 victims there. They were lying on the floor because there wasn't anyone else to lay down...They would get comfortable there however they could and they were all content. I cannot say they were happy because happiness was taken from us, but all of those people looked content and grateful.

D. Tensions within collectives

An exploration of the impacts that collectives of relatives of disappeared people have on the lives of the women I interviewed would be incomplete without discussing the tensions that they explicitly mentioned. Sociologist Jodi O'Brien calls on scholars to engage with the tensions that emerge from their research, reflecting that the "most engaging work—that which has the greatest impact—reflects a bold confrontation with the messiness of human social life, and this necessarily includes our personal experience

of this messiness.”⁴⁸⁰ Conducting research about the experiences of a group of mothers of disappeared people in Mexico was personally challenging for me on many levels—as I discuss in the introduction and conclusion of this thesis. One important way in which it challenged me was ethically, especially as I questioned the role and utility of including a discussion of tensions within social movements that are already marginalized, fragmented, and targeted by the State as part of my thesis. At the same time, presenting the experiences of mothers of disappeared people within their collectives in Mexico without mentioning the tensions that they disclosed would *also* be unethical and would not honor the full complexities of the lives of the women with whom I spoke. After considering this issue, I also realized that not engaging with the tensions that some mothers highlighted would effectively silence some voices and experiences. Informed by O’Brien’s call to engage with the *messiness* and the hope that this engagement will be useful to strengthening the work of collectives of disappeared people, I will briefly discuss some of the tensions within them that emerged from interviews with women who are part of them.

While many of the mothers that shared their stories with me found involvement within collectives of their peers and the movement for the disappeared to be a refuge and a new family, others did not feel the same affective connection. Furthermore, even those who found collectives to be important sources of legal-administrative, emotional, and material support also discussed tensions within them. Among the most salient tensions that mothers of disappeared people discussed were issues related to leadership. In

⁴⁸⁰ O’Brien, 2009, p. 8.

particular, mothers mentioned that at times only the voices of those in leadership positions within the collectives are acknowledged, effectively silencing others. There also appears to be distrust among some relatives of disappeared people about the perceived financial gains of their peers that emerge as leaders. According to Marta, cooption by the State was another source of distrust that ultimately played a major role in the disarticulation of the MPJD. According to her, “the government figured out a way to disintegrate the group that at one point had been very big. Very few of us remained because they started to offer jobs in government institutions and many, or several, went there.”⁴⁸¹ Discussing tensions within the movement for victims of disappeared from Mexico’s Dirty War, Sylvia Karl highlights the same dynamics writing,

For one victim’s group, demanding money for the disappeared equaled eating up their relatives. The others in turn argued that some victims who had gained power and influence within the state system or in political parties during the struggle for recognition the disappeared (sic)...had already eaten them up.⁴⁸²

Another important source of tension concerns the criminalization of victims even within collectives. For example, multiple women alluded to the idea of innocent victims and guilty victims—that is victims that were involved in organized crime in some way. Others discussed how collectives have sometimes rejected relatives of disappeared people who sought their help because their loved one was considered to be a “guilty victim”—*víctima culpable*. This division of victims into guilty and innocent echoes the State’s efforts to criminalize all disappeared people—something against which mothers are

⁴⁸¹ Original quote in Spanish: “el gobierno se las ingenió para desintegrar ese grupo que en su momento fue muy grande. Haz de cuenta que quedamos algunos cuantos porque nos empezaron a ofrecer trabajos en las instituciones de gobierno y muchos, o varios, se fueron para allá.”

⁴⁸² Karl, 2014, p. 738.

actively fighting. Finally, another important source of tension within the movements for the disappeared in contemporary Mexico stems from disagreements about the involvement of relatives of disappeared people in exhumation efforts. This issue particularly brings up concerns about the contamination of crime scenes and evidence, which some fear may lead to the disappearance of human remains through the legal-administrative apparatus. Recent scholarship on collectives of relatives of disappeared people has documented these tensions concerning the strategy of searches for human remains.⁴⁸³

Multiple mothers of disappeared people with whom I spoke described the internal challenges that led to the dismantling of the MPJD, often highlighting the role of the State's efforts to coopt members in this process. Given this reality and the important role that collectives of relatives of disappeared people play in demanding justice for the disappeared, finding ways to address these internal tensions is vital to their continued success and effectiveness in providing crucial support to their members.

SECTION 3. CONCLUSION

Social isolation and collective support are two powerful forces that impact the lives of mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico. Many of the mothers who shared their stories with me described feeling isolated from friends, family, and people in general since the disappearance of their loved one. However, other mothers discussed family support as an important source of encouragement, while also stressing

⁴⁸³ Paley, 2018; Schwartz-Marin & Cruz-Santiago, 2016.

how this type of support tends to wane as the years pass. In many ways, joining collectives of relatives of disappeared people is a strategy for dealing with this social isolation. Membership and engagement with these collectives offers relatives of disappeared people at least three types of support: guidance through the legal-administrative process, emotional support, and material support. Nevertheless, collectives are not perfect spaces of collaboration and coexistence as tensions regarding a range of issues arise within them.

One of the main reasons why mothers feel isolated from their friends and family is largely due to the State's efforts to criminalize victims of disappearance. In an effort to distance itself from its responsibility to thoroughly investigate cases of disappearance, the State seeks to portray all victims of the violence that has emerged in Mexico since the militarization of the Drug War as criminals. The mothers of victims who are portrayed as "criminals" refuse to be silent, however, as in the emblematic case of Luz María Dávila. Luz María courageously confronted former President Felipe Calderón in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Regardless, the stigma associated with the assumption that their daughters and sons are criminals instills fear in the extended families of many of the mothers with whom I spoke. They described how their family withdrew from them in the aftermath of the disappearance because of the fear that they or their own children could be disappeared next. However, other mothers reported that the support of their extended family was an important source of strength and noted the different forms of help they have received from them since the disappearance of their daughters and sons. At the same time, these

women also discussed how this support diminishes over time, leaving them less supported as the years pass since the disappearance of their loved one.

One important way in which mothers of disappeared people deal with social isolation is by joining collectives of relatives of disappeared people. These collectives are vital sources of support and understanding. Importantly, belonging to a collective provides important resources and support in navigating the legal-administrative apparatus that mothers must engage with in order to demand that their disappeared daughters and sons are found. Many of the women who shared their stories with me described the ways in which they leverage their personal experiences of navigating State agencies and institutions to provide guidance to other parents and relatives of disappeared people. Others discussed the importance of belonging to a collective in order to make their cases visible and to be treated with dignity and respect by State officials. According to mothers of disappeared people, they also often use their own personal connections with State officials and other leaders in the movements for the disappeared in Mexico to support other relatives in their search for their loved ones.

Beyond the practical assistance that they provide and receive from their peers within the collectives of disappeared people to which they belong, mothers also highlighted emotional support as an important component of membership within these groups. This emotional support was often expressed through less tangible and non-verbal means, including an intuitive sense of being understood, not feeling alone, hugs, and what is known in Mexico as *apapachos*. Supporting their peers in collectives has also served as a source of strength and healing for some mothers of disappeared people.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the limits of providing emotional support when the affective resources of relatives of disappeared people are already taxed.

Finally, engagement with their peers as part of collectives of disappeared people also provides important material support to mothers of disappeared people. For example, collectives serve as the intermediaries in helping relatives of disappeared people access funds from the State or private donations. Also, members of the collective may also help individual members who are having financial difficulties by supporting their small-scale businesses. Help with housing is another important component of material support, especially as relatives of disappeared people are forcefully displaced from their homes due to concerns about their safety. Although collectives are an important source of support for relatives of disappeared people, there are also tensions within collectives that may limit their effectiveness. Nevertheless, engagement with their peers and the forms of support that they receive through it play a crucial role in the resilience of mothers of disappeared people.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this thesis is based on ten in-depth interviews with mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico. The findings presented in the previous chapter emerge from their reflections about their experiences in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons. This thesis sought to highlight the strength and resilience of this group of women, while also discussing the incredibly difficult and painful emotional challenges that they face. It is my hope that these findings will be helpful to all mothers of disappeared people as they search for their daughters and sons and struggle to end disappearance in Mexico.

SECTION 1. OVERVIEW OF MAIN FINDINGS

A. Key Characteristics of Uncertainty

The first chapter in this thesis discusses uncertainty, a major force in the lives of mothers of disappeared people. Three key characteristics of this uncertainty that emerged from interviews with mothers of disappeared people are:

1) The uncertainty surrounding the disappearance of a child affects their emotional well-being: this experience is a form of chronic trauma that impacts mothers emotionally and physically in a number of ways;

2) The uncertainty mothers constantly face regarding the fate and whereabouts of their daughters and sons shapes their cognition, shaping in turn *la lucha y la búsqueda*: mothers of disappeared people develop the ability to think of their loved ones as both alive and dead—a concept that Pauline Boss calls *both-and thinking*⁴⁸⁴; and,

⁴⁸⁴ Boss, 2007.

3) The uncertainty that is promoted *by* and *through* the State: The Mexican State uses its vast resources to avoid investigating disappearances in an effort to perpetuate uncertainty. Given this, the uncertainty is deeply rooted as one more form of State violence.

The first characteristic of uncertainty that mothers of disappeared people identified concerns the traumatic nature of not knowing the fate and whereabouts of a loved one. This can be understood as a form of chronic trauma as the disappearance and uncertainty lasts years and, in some cases, decades. Mothers described experiencing a whole range of emotional challenges and physical health issues in the aftermath of the disappearance of their loved ones. Emotional pain emerged as an important outcome of uncertainty, as did the torment of imagining the possible fate and current hardships that a disappeared daughter or son could be facing. At times, mothers also discussed experiencing a lot of guilt and self-judgment about experiencing joy in their lives. Even when these two are not present, mothers discussed difficulties enjoying things that they otherwise would have in their lives—particularly family gatherings—due to the emotional challenges of uncertainty. In other words, some mothers feel that life has “lost its zest.” All of these emotional impacts led some mothers to feel that they are *muertas en vida*—living dead.⁴⁸⁵ Mothers also describe the physical challenges and health problems that they have experienced in the aftermath of the disappearance, which they link to the emotional challenges of uncertainty. Trauma research has shown the physical impacts of traumatic events on the physical body, particularly on memory.⁴⁸⁶ Mothers of disappeared people reported experiencing a range of physical ailments including rapid weight loss or gain, memory loss, and strokes.

⁴⁸⁵ de Oliveira Rocha, 2012; Smith, 2016a, 2016b.

⁴⁸⁶ van der Kolk, 2014.

Faced with uncertainty regarding what happened to their daughters and sons, mothers of disappeared people develop a flexible understanding about their fate that goes beyond the dichotomy of life and death. Displaying what senior psychologist Pauline Boss describes as *both-and thinking*, mothers of disappeared people demonstrate a remarkable emotional and cognitive flexibility when grappling with the uncertain fate of their daughters and sons.⁴⁸⁷ This makes it possible for them to simultaneously believe that their daughters and sons are alive, while also acknowledging the possibility that they may be dead. Nevertheless, other scholars have highlighted the ways in which other relatives of disappeared people navigate this question, pointing to the unequivocal demand of certain groups of relatives that their daughters and sons be returned alive.⁴⁸⁸

Finally, another important component of uncertainty concerns its use as a form of State violence. According to journalist John Gibler, whose work has focused on the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa in 2014, the legal-administrative stage of disappearance involves the State's "attempt[s] to disappear the truth—any and all verifiable knowledge about the events—along with the bodies of those being disappeared."⁴⁸⁹ Mothers of disappeared people argue that the State's lack of investigation into the disappearance of their daughters and sons is an attempt to disappear the truth, thereby maintaining the uncertainty about their fate and whereabouts. In this way, the uncertainty that characterizes disappearance is not simply an individually traumatizing event, but rather a form of State violence

⁴⁸⁷ Boss, 2007.

⁴⁸⁸ Gibler, 2017; Karl, 2014; Paley, 2018; Robledo Silvestre, 2012.

⁴⁸⁹ Gibler, 2017, p. 238.

B. Searching as a Coping Mechanism

Participating in the search for their disappeared daughters and sons—broadly defined as taking any proactive action that has the goal of finding them—is an important component of mothers’ resilience. In particular, *la búsqueda*—the search—serves as a method for coping with uncertainty and the emotional challenges that accompany it. There are a number of factors that motivate mothers to search for their daughters and sons. However, there are a number of important ways that they are impacted by such search efforts—in positive and negative ways.

Mothers are motivated to search for their daughters and sons for a number of reasons. One of the main motivators is the hope of finding their loved ones—whether dead or alive. Once again, mothers demonstrate their ability to engage in *both-and thinking* as they voice their wish to find their daughters and sons alive, while also acknowledging the possibility of finding their dead bodies. Another important motivating factor is mother’s *compromiso de amor*—commitment born out of love—to their daughters and sons. Furthermore, the women that shared their stories with me discussed a strong sense of duty to prevent future disappearances and to work so that other families will not have to endure what they are experiencing. This entails involvement in *la lucha*—the struggle—to end disappearance and sharing their stories, even when they cause them emotional pain.

Another motivation to be involved in *la búsqueda* is embracing the search *for all* disappeared people. Mothers expressed a commitment to not just search for their own daughters and sons, but to search for others. Two reasons in particular were at the root of these women’s intense motivation to stay actively engaged in this search: knowing that some mothers may be too overwhelmed by the emotional pain to search themselves or, in the worst case scenario, knowing some mothers may have died before they found their

loved ones. This responsibility is also expanded to finding human remains in an effort to identify them and bring certainty about their fate to other relatives of disappeared people—a concept that sociologist Dawn Paley calls the collectivization of pain.⁴⁹⁰ Finally, many women are motivated to search for their daughters and sons as they see this as an extension of their role as mothers. Furthermore, the gendered divisions of work in and outside the home often translate directly to the search, meaning that it is often mothers who take on the majority of the search efforts even when they have the active support of the father of the disappeared person.

Involvement in *la búsqueda* has had important impacts on the lives of the women who shared their stories with me. Among the most important is their transformation into human rights defenders. Mothers of disappeared people described their experience of becoming a human rights defender in the process of searching for their loved ones, often highlighting it as a source of strength and empowerment in their lives. However, they also have experienced negative impacts of being engaged in this type of advocacy. In particular, their relationships with their other children and their male partners have suffered—at times causing them to sever the relationship. It seems that mothers struggle to navigate their gendered responsibilities as mothers—balancing their desire to be involved in the search while still spending time with their other daughters and sons. Even when they do have the support of their male partner, some mothers also described feeling responsible for supporting for them emotionally, a task which presents a challenge as mothers themselves are already experiencing a range of emotional challenges—as I discuss in Chapter 1. Another important challenge that mothers face due to their involvement in the search concerns increased safety risks as they become targets of

⁴⁹⁰ Paley, 2018.

threats and, at times, are forced to leave their homes due to fear. Finally, searching for a disappeared loved one entails material costs for mothers of disappeared people and can also become a serious source of stress.

C. Social Isolation and Collective Support

Mothers of disappeared people in contemporary Mexico discussed facing social isolation in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons. One main reason for this social isolation concerns the State's efforts to criminalize victims of disappearance. The criminalization of the disappeared often creates stigma about their possible involvement in organized crime. In turn, this stigma creates fear in other extended relatives of the disappeared person who withdraw from mothers of disappeared people out of concerns about the impacts of said disappearance on their own safety and wellbeing. Although this is the experience of many mothers, other women described support from their extended family as an important source of strength, although this support also may decrease as time passes.

Coming together with other relatives of disappeared people is an important way to counter the social isolation mothers experience and has also become an important source of support. In particular, mothers described three forms of support that they receive from their peers in collectives of disappeared people: support in navigating the legal-administrative process, emotional support, and material support. For some women, the collectives to which they belong have become their new family. Many times, relatives of disappeared people do not know what to do in the immediate aftermath of the

disappearance of their loved ones. Mothers of disappeared people described the ways in which they accompany other relatives in this situation, sharing their own personal experiences of navigating State institutions and explaining the step-by-step process of demanding an investigation of the disappearance of their loved one. Furthermore, belonging to collective means greater visibility for individual cases and actually being paid attention to by authorities. Finally, women discussed how they leverage their own personal connections with State officials and other leaders in the movements for the disappeared in order to help their peers.

Emotional support from their peers also emerged as an important source of strength for some mothers of disappeared people. Some of the women that I interviewed discussed that they felt an immediate sense of being understood by their peers in collectives of relatives of disappeared people. They also pointed out the importance of the affective connections forged in these spaces, expressed through hugs and *apapachos*. It is clear that this emotional support is a key aspect of mothers' ability to be resilient in the face of disappearance. For some other mothers, providing support to their *compañeras* is also an important component of healing. However, it is important to think critically about the challenges that providing this type of support may present for some women, especially when they themselves are already very emotionally overwhelmed. Finally, mothers of disappeared people interviewed for this study discussed the material support that their collectives provide to members, including acting as intermediaries to access funding from the State, non-governmental organizations, or private donations.

Although belonging to collectives of relatives of disappeared people is often a source of strength, several mothers interviewed for this thesis mentioned tensions within these spaces. These tensions concern issues of leadership, distrust, the criminalization of victims by other relative of disappeared people, and the strategy of searching for and exhuming human remains.

These collectives are not alone in their internal struggles and tensions: LGBTQ and feminist organizations—in Mexico, the United States, and other countries— for example, have similarly experienced these challenges. But the opportunity to grow is always a promise and may emerge at the intersection of these tensions and conflicts. My hope is that the research study presented in this thesis may contribute to future conversations on these issues, and may facilitate potential transformations and collective healing.

SECTION 2. REFLECTIONS ON TRAUMA EXPOSURE IN THE FIELD

The process of conducting interviews, analyzing data, and writing this thesis has been an emotionally challenging one for me. This is perhaps unsurprising as engaging with the topic has entailed listening to traumatic stories as well as bearing witness to the pain of having a disappeared daughter or son—experiences of what Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, a social worker and expert on the topic, calls “trauma exposure.”⁴⁹¹ Although my training as a clinical social worker has been an enormous asset in this process, I have often felt overwhelmed, and at times paralyzed, by my emotional reactions to being a witness to the trauma of disappearance. Despite the emotional challenges of pursuing

⁴⁹¹ van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009.

research on the subject of disappearance, I am aware of the great privilege of listening to these important stories and I am grateful for the trust and candor of the women who I interviewed.

Before beginning fieldwork, I was aware that the process of conducting interviews with mothers of disappeared people would be an emotionally challenging one and prepared as best I could by discussing self-care practices with my advisor, preparing a list of mental health resources to share with informants, and thinking through how I would make the interview as safe as possible for participants. However, I was still very surprised by how painful this experience was in practice for me. During the months that I conducted interviews with mothers of disappeared people I had nightmares, insomnia, and became hyper vigilant about my own safety, issues that did not subside until after I went back to the United States. I also found myself emotionally exhausted after each interview and grappling with the purpose of my thesis and the responsibility to tell these stories in a way that honored the courage, strength, and resilience of the women I interviewed while acknowledging the deep pain that they described. There were also specific interviews that were particularly difficult to conduct, especially those where it was clear that the pain of disappearance was very raw.

Although some of the more acute impacts of being exposed to trauma dissipated after I returned to the United States, I still found myself avoiding transcribing the interviews because it was too challenging to listen to them again. Another exacerbating factor was my simultaneous involvement in another human rights project that also dealt with issues of disappearance.⁴⁹² Research for the resulting report entailed reading through court transcripts that included graphic descriptions of violence, including the horrific

⁴⁹² See the Executive Summary of the report “Control...Over the Entire State of Coahuila”: An analysis of testimonies in trials against Zeta members in San Antonio, Austin, and Del Rio, Texas in Appendix C.

methods that criminals used to disintegrate human bodies. Furthermore, the visibility of the report and its findings in Mexico also made me concerned about my personal safety while traveling through the country—concerns that were distressing and unnerving.

Friendship, community, and further training as a clinical social worker have been crucial to my ability to face and navigate these challenges. One of the main things that helped me while conducting fieldwork in Mexico was to have biweekly check in sessions with fellow colleagues from my department who were also conducting fieldwork outside of the United States. These sessions served as spaces to connect back to my support systems in Texas, helped me think through challenges that were arising through the process, and served as a space to process the affective experience of interviewing mothers about trauma-leaden topics. Once back at the University of Texas, connecting to my communities in the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and the School of Social Work was immensely helpful. Later, my experiences interning as a therapist in training at a local organization that provides services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault helped me further develop professional skills as a clinician to care for myself while connecting to a person who has experienced trauma. The guidance and support of the team of experienced therapists that I received was a key part of this learning. And of course, going to my own therapist was also immensely helpful.

While the experience of conducting research on disappearance was very challenging, my emotional connections to the topic and the women I interviewed has enriched my understanding of the experience of having a disappeared child. Writing about conducting research on incest in Mexico, sociologist Gloria González-López discusses the possibilities of producing knowledge from a wounded place—what she calls “epistemologies of the wound”—through a process of connecting intellectually,

emotionally, and spiritually to informants.⁴⁹³ She underscores how this connection exposes her “to new possibilities to generate sociological knowledge with the aim of benefiting others, communities beyond borders in collective struggles for social change.”⁴⁹⁴ Similarly, Rebecca Campbell, a psychologist and researcher focused on the experiences of survivors of sexual assault, calls for an “emotionally engaged research” through which feelings are considered data and knowledge is produced “through careful attention to the affective experiences of the researcher and the participants.”⁴⁹⁵ In this way, the emotional challenges that I encountered while conducting research on this topic are intertwined with my intellectual reflections of the experiences of the mothers of disappeared people.

SECTION 3. LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

The analysis presented in this thesis has a number of important limitations that should be considered. Importantly, the research study only involved interviews with ten mothers of disappeared people who are actively engaged in advocacy on the issue of disappearance in Mexico. Their perspective is informed by their experiences of *la búsqueda*—the search—for their daughter or son—and *la lucha*—the struggle—for justice for the disappeared. Thus, the analysis presented in the previous chapters cannot be generalized to all mothers of disappeared people—especially those who are not actively engaged within the movements for the disappeared—given its small sample size and the specific focus on those involved in advocacy efforts. The experiences of other mothers of disappeared people in Mexico are diverse and may differ from those of the women interviewed for this project. Furthermore, the small sample size meant that the

⁴⁹³ González-López, 2006.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 22.

⁴⁹⁵ Campbell, 2002, p. 123.

focus of my findings was on the individual and subjective experience of these women. Although my analysis also incorporated the role of collectives, this was framed through the individual experiences of mothers involved in them. Recent research on traumatic experiences has begun to move towards explorations of the impacts on collectives and communities as a whole. For example, indigenous scholars in North America have used the “historical trauma” framework to shift the focus of their research from individual psychosocial impacts to collective, cumulative, and intergenerational impacts.⁴⁹⁶ As disappearances continue and become more widespread within a context of a militarized Drug War in Mexico, further research on this topic should also explore the collective impacts that exposure to this form of violence has not just on relatives of disappeared people, but on people in Mexico more broadly.

The group of women that I interviewed had a wide range of experiences in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons, which were impacted by their class status, education level, geographic location, and how long ago the disappearance happened. Although I documented two of these components—location and date of disappearance—I did not ask informants about their class status or their education level. In general, the analysis presented did not delve into these factors or their implications in the lives of mothers of disappeared people in too much detail, which is another limitation. Research has suggested that the time that has elapsed since the disappearance of a loved one has an important impact on the emotional response and coping mechanisms of their relatives.⁴⁹⁷ In addition, the group of mothers that I interviewed belonged to seven different collectives, each with their own dynamics, priorities, and forms of organizing. Currently, there are dozens of collectives of relatives of disappeared people in Mexico

⁴⁹⁶ Gone, 2013.

⁴⁹⁷ Fundar, 2018.

with a large diversity of experiences. As this was not the specific focus of my research, it was not an aspect I discussed, but it does merit further exploration.

Furthermore, the women who I interviewed identified as *mestizas*, had a variety of phenotypic characteristics, and spoke Spanish as a first language. However, as Mexico is a multilingual and multiethnic country, the experiences of indigenous and mothers who are *afrodescendientes*—and who may speak a language other than Spanish—have not been included in the analysis presented here, and should be considered in future studies. Given the deeply rooted and complex expressions of racism that exist in Mexican society, that is of utmost relevance. An important examination of the experiences of indigenous women is included in the report “Yo Sólo Quería que Amaneciera: Impactos Psicosociales del Caso Ayotzinapa,” written by a team of psychologists, researchers, and doctors that have provided psychosocial accompaniment and medical care to the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.⁴⁹⁸

Another important limitation of this study concerns the temporality of the data collected. As I have previously mentioned, I conducted the interviews that inform this thesis between June and August 2017 and in January and April 2018. I also conducted preliminary work to prepare for this research during Summer 2016. Although the ten interviews with mothers of disappeared were rich in detail, they were also conducted during a specific moment in their lives and thus represent their experiences at that precise moment. As I was unable to conduct follow up interviews with these women, I cannot know if their perspective has changed since we last spoke. Similarly, there are important limitations that a person who does not have a disappeared loved one has to fully understand the complex experiences of mothers of disappeared people. A longitudinal

⁴⁹⁸ Fundar, 2018.

study on these issues, for example, has the potential to explore these relevant dimensions in more depth.

Another important component of the experiences of the women that I interviewed that I did not delve into concerns their experiences of revictimization at the hands of the State. Several of the participants of this study mentioned being shown graphic photos or videos allegedly of the bodies of their daughters and sons. Others also discussed being incorrectly told that a body of their loved one had been identified. These experiences can be traumatic for mothers. In one instance, Paulina attributed investigators showing her a video of the supposed beheading of her son as the reason for her memory loss, suggesting a trauma response. Further research should further investigate these type of experiences and explore their connections to State violence and the legal-administrative stage of disappearance.

Finally, an important limitation concerns the sensitivity of the topics discussed during interviews with mothers of disappeared people. In some cases, I had met the women who I interviewed on previous occasions, but in some other cases I had only had a brief interaction, phone call, or text correspondence with them where I invited them to participate in this research study. This meant that in some cases, I did not have much rapport with the women that I interviewed before the interview took place. Although my training as a clinical social worker was very helpful, my questions involved very sensitive and painful issues. While interview participants were willing to discuss these issues and I made sure to reiterate that they could skip over any question or stop the interview all together, it is possible that they may have not disclosed issues or components of their experiences that they may not have felt comfortable sharing with a researcher without explicitly telling me. I am grateful to the mothers for their candor and trust in sharing their thoughts with me about this challenging experience that they continue to grapple

with every day and I honor their agency in wishing to share whatever part of that experience they felt comfortable disclosing. Therefore, there may be elements of the experience of mothers of disappeared in contemporary Mexico that are perhaps too painful to express and, thus, are not included in this analysis.

SECTION 4. AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One aspect of the experiences of mothers of disappeared people that I did not discuss in this thesis was their experiences and perceptions about professional mental health providers. Half of the women who I interviewed mentioned accessing therapeutic services through a psychologist or psychiatrist in the aftermath of the disappearance of their daughters and sons. Surprisingly, they highlighted other aspects of their experience—namely those that I have discussed throughout this thesis—as crucial to their ability to face the emotional challenges of uncertainty and disappearance. Often, psychological support from a therapist was not mentioned as an important source of support.

In fact, many mothers expressed concerns, negative perceptions, and—alarmingly—negative experiences concerning professional psychotherapy to navigate the emotional impacts of disappearance. Most of these concerned interventions from mental health professionals that focused on finding closure and “moving on” from the disappearance, which angered and frustrated mothers. However, some mothers did highlight helpful support from mental health professionals, particularly those with previous training and experience working with relatives of disappeared people. Future research should further delve into this issue and other barriers to accessing this type of support with the goal of making disappearance-informed mental health access available to relatives of disappeared people.

Another issue that some mothers mentioned that merits further research concerns the impacts of disappearance on children—especially the daughters and sons of disappeared people, as well as other young relatives such as siblings and cousins. Marta and Diana both mentioned concerns about the impacts of the disappearance of their sons on their grandchildren who were all young children at the time of the disappearance. Furthermore, both Diana and Angélica discussed their concerns about the impacts of the disappearance on other young children in the family, including Diana’s youngest daughter and Angélica’s grandson who was close to his disappeared aunt. Scholars have focused on the implications of disappearance for the now-adult children of people disappeared in Mexico in the context of the Dirty War⁴⁹⁹ and the disappearances of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa.⁵⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch also briefly discussed this issue in its 2013 report “Mexico’s Disappeared: The Enduring Cost of a Crisis Ignored.”⁵⁰¹ Other researchers have also discussed the impacts of disappearance on the children of the disappeared in Argentina⁵⁰² and the importance of providing psychosocial support to children in the context of disappearance in Sri Lanka.⁵⁰³

This thesis, like most scholarship on relatives of disappeared people, focuses on the experiences of mothers. However, through my research I also learned about the active involvement of fathers in the search for their disappeared daughters and sons. Four of the women who I interviewed discussed the different ways in which their male partners were active within collectives of disappeared people and in efforts to find their daughters and sons. Further research should discuss the impacts of uncertainty, searching, and collective

⁴⁹⁹ De Vecchi Gerli, 2018; Karl, 2014.

⁵⁰⁰ Fundar, 2018.

⁵⁰¹ Human Rights Watch, 2013.

⁵⁰² Albin & Sfiligoy, 2013.

⁵⁰³ Salih & Samarasinghe, 2017.

support on the lives of these men and their motivations to search. In addition, the field would benefit from explorations about the reasons why a lot of other fathers do not become involved in these efforts.

Finally, another important area for future research concerns the experiences of mothers whose loved one's body has been found years after their disappearance. For example, Estefanía one of the mothers that I interviewed had been notified of the possibility that her son's body had been found. When I spoke to her, she shared the emotional challenges that she was facing, which were new and different than those she faced before she received this news. It is also worth noting that due to Mexico's lack of resources and political will, many human remains that have been found in mass graves or other sites have yet to be identified. In other cases, such as the case of Estefanía, lack of trust in the State leads to a form of forensic uncertainty as relatives are not sure whether or not the DNA identification is legitimate. This also happened with the case of the parents of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa.⁵⁰⁴ Further research on the impacts of this forensic limbo and the aftermath of identification can provide useful information to adequately accompany these families.

SECTION 5. CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN MEXICO

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was sworn in as Mexico's new president on December 1, 2018. His election has inspired hope for deep political change within Mexico, which President López Obrador has termed *la Cuarta Transformación* and compared to other historical moments such as the country's independence from Spain, the separation of church and State under President Benito Juárez, and the Mexican

⁵⁰⁴ Fundar, 2018.

revolution of 1910.⁵⁰⁵ Elected with broad support, a strong mandate, and under an anti-corruption platform, President López Obrador is well placed to deliver on his campaign promises. Since becoming president, his government has taken important steps to address the issue of disappearance. In particular, he called for the creation of the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case, which was established in January 2019 to investigate the 2014 enforced disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa.⁵⁰⁶ Furthermore, his government recently presented a plan to implement the General Law on Disappearances, which prioritizes efforts to search for the disappeared.⁵⁰⁷ Such actions inspire cautious optimism and hope about a future without disappearance in Mexico. However, the implementation of these proposals still remains to be seen.

While there are some reasons for hope, there are also some concerning policies that represent a continuation of previous practices. In particular, President López Obrador is in the process of forming a National Guard, which will recruit 21,000 members of the army and the navy and will be in charge of national security in the country.⁵⁰⁸ For some, this signals a continuation of the militarization of the Drug War that began under President Calderón and continued under President Peña Nieto.⁵⁰⁹ Although it is too early to tell if the current government of President López Obrador will truly deliver on its promise of deep political transformation, the struggle of mothers to search for their disappeared daughters and sons continues undeterred.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁵ Fernández, 2018.

⁵⁰⁶ Aguirre, 2019.

⁵⁰⁷ Arteta, 2019.

⁵⁰⁸ Cruz Aguirre, 2019.

⁵⁰⁹ Paley, 2019.

⁵¹⁰ Red de Enlaces Nacionales, 2019.

SECTION 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the challenges of finding the disappeared and ending disappearance in Mexico are overwhelming, I offer a few recommendations that may support these goals. In the first place, the Mexican State must thoroughly investigate all disappearances in Mexico and search for the disappeared. Comprehensive efforts to do this must prioritize the thorough implementation of the General Law on Disappearances and must include the full participation of relatives of disappeared people. Furthermore, efforts to find the disappeared must also include full funding for the National Search Commission and local search commissions throughout the country. The directors of these commissions must be fully vetted by relatives of disappeared people and have significant experience on the issues.

The Mexican State must also increase its capacity to properly identify all human remains found and exhumed from mass graves and other sites by relatives of disappeared people. Special attention should be paid to the psychosocial needs of relatives of disappeared people when the remains of their loved ones have been identified. Finally, mental health professionals working with relatives of disappeared people must be fully trained and knowledgeable about the impacts of disappearance on relatives of disappeared people in order to be able to provide the appropriate support to these families if they seek it.

SECTION 7. CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Throughout this thesis, I sought to illustrate the indescribable strength of the women who shared their stories with me, while also highlighting the especially difficult challenges that they face. Engaging with the stories of these ten mothers of disappeared

people has been an important and humbling lesson about their resilience and courage. In closing, I share a quote from Alicia that illustrates this,

El aprendizaje que yo he tenido es de reivindicación, de avance, de resiliencia, de aprender a través del dolor. O sea, yo digo que yo no nací siendo defensora de derechos humanos. El camino, los tiempos y el dolor me llevaron a ese aprendizaje de ahora convertirme en defensora de derechos humanos, de tener bastantes reconocimientos pegados en mi pared que son brindados a [mi hijo]. Él ha sido mi maestro de sentir ese gran amor por él que no me deja parar.

I have learned about making demands, about advancing, about resilience, about learning through pain. In other words, I say that I was not born being a human rights defender. The road, the situation, and pain led me to those lessons of now becoming a human rights defender, of having lots of certificates hanging on my wall that are given out to [my son]. He has been my teacher for how to experience this great love for him that won't let me stop.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Study Participants

Informant	Age	Location	Disappeared relative	Age when disappeared	Occupation of disappeared	Location of disappearance	Year of disappearance
Margarita	67	Mexico City	Son	32	Engineer	Coahuila	2009
Marta	67	Morelos	4 sons	19, 24, 25, 28	Small business owners	Veracruz and Guerrero	2008 and 2010
Lorena	60s	Mexico City	Son	29	Event organizer	Veracruz	2013
Angélica	59	Undisclosed for security reasons	Daughter	20	Student	Estado de México	2004
Alicia	54	Mexico City	Son	23	Federal Police Officer	Michoacán	2009
Paulina	49	Mexico City	Son	23	Federal Police Officer	Nuevo León	2011
Saraí	53	Coahuila	Daughter	16	Student	Coahuila	2004
Estefanía	45	Undisclosed for security reasons	Son	19	Student	Veracruz	2014
Sofía	51	Estado de México	Son	19	Construction worker	Hidalgo	2013
Diana	53	Baja California	Son	25	Import/Export Expert	Coahuila	2009

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction:

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today and for your interest in participating in this research project. The purpose of this project is to illuminate some of the ways in which activist mothers are socially and emotionally impacted by disappearance in Mexico. Your answers to the following questions will be indispensable in understanding how it is that you are able to continue this work in the face of some of the challenges you face. It is my hope that the information I gather will be helpful in developing better ways of supporting you and other activist mothers in your work. As I mentioned before, you can skip any questions, stop the interview at any time, and it is advised that you refrain from providing identifying information about yourself and individuals about whom you choose to speak given the risks previously mentioned.

Opening Questions:

1. Where were you born and raised?
2. Where do you live?
3. May I ask you your age?
4. May I ask you your marital status?
5. Do you have children? How many? What are their ages?
6. Do you have a disappeared relative or relatives? Where and when did they disappear?
 - a. How old was your relative when they disappeared?

Key Questions:

7. Describe what you did when you found out that your son/daughter was disappeared
 - a. Did you look for your son/daughter yourself?
 - b. How did you/do you seek help, information, support while looking for them?
 - c. With whom have you spoken to about the disappearance?
8. In what specific ways has your life changed after the disappearance of your son/daughter?
 - a. Can you please give me concrete examples?
 - b. How do you feel about these changes?
9. How do you feel after the disappearance of your son/daughter?
 - d. Who do you turn to for emotional and social support?
 - e. Do you talk to your family and friends about the disappearance of your son/daughter?
 - f. If you do not talk to your family and friends about this, what are some barriers to talking to them?
10. Tell me more about how you became involved in activism.
 - g. How did you join the collective that you are a part of?
 - h. When did you join?
 - i. Are other members of your family involved?
 - j. How did you learn about their organizing work before joining?
 - k. Have you been involved with other groups?

- l. What kinds of activities do you all do as part of this group or other groups you have been involved with?
 - m. What about the activism that you are involved in do you think is important?
 - n. How did you/do you feel about being a part of this collective?
 - o. What kind of support do you get from the group that you are a part of?
 - p. What have you found to be helpful in the process of becoming involved in this group?
11. What challenges have you faced in the aftermath of the disappearance of your son/daughter?
- q. How have you been able to continue searching for your son/daughter and involved in this type of activism despite these challenges?
 - r. What kinds of support would make those challenges easier to face?
 - s. Who do you think should provide that support?

Closing Questions

- 12. What would you tell other mothers of disappeared people in your position?
- 13. Is there a question that I did not ask you that you think I should have?
- 14. Where there questions that were particularly difficult for you to answer during this interview?
- 15. Are there other things that you would like to share with me about your experience that we have not discussed yet?
- 16. Do you have any questions for me about this project or how I will use the information you shared with me?
- 17. Is there anything we have not explored, something that I might be missing and that you think it is of relevance in this study?

Appendix C



April 16, 2016, Mexico City. Metodia Carrillo Lino, mother of Luis Ángel Abarca Carrillo, one of the forcibly disappeared 43 Ayotzinapa students, marches in Mexico City with the families of the other disappeared students, demanding truth and justice in the case.

“To die little by little”

Disappearance and Ambiguous Loss in the

Lives of Activist Mothers in Contemporary Mexico

by MORAVIA DE LA O

M

MARGARITA¹ has spent the last nine years looking for her son, Mauricio. She keeps a manila folder with photos and articles about his case that she brings when I interview

her in June 2017. In one of the photos that she shows me, a young man in glasses is dressed in a winter coat and stares at the camera with a big smile. “This one is from when he went to learn English in Canada,” Margarita tells me, clearly proud of her son. She flips through newspaper clippings about Mauricio’s case and the different national and international advocacy efforts in which she has participated. She is meticulous in documenting her nine-year search for her beloved son—the manila folder serving as an archive of the pain of his disappearance.

I interviewed Margarita as part of the fieldwork I conducted for my Latin American studies master’s thesis. In total, I interviewed ten mothers of disappeared people in Mexico between June 2017 and April 2018 about their experiences in the aftermath of their children’s disappearance. All of the women I interviewed had a son or daughter who was disappeared in or

after 2004 and they were deeply involved in activism on the issue of disappearance. I had known some of the mothers since 2012 through previous work I had done on human rights issues in Mexico. I also recruited interview participants at events on disappearance held in Mexico City and through my contacts with human rights activists and journalists in Mexico.

Conducting this fieldwork was at times heart-wrenching, yet I was also inspired by the resilience and courage of the mothers with whom I spoke. This article explores some preliminary lessons that I have learned from interviewing these mothers. In particular, I will discuss the impact of uncertainty in their lives, and the ways in which Margarita has come to understand and cope with the daily doubt and ambiguity surrounding her son’s fate and whereabouts.

A Disappeared Son

Mauricio disappeared while driving alone on a highway in the northeastern Mexican state of Coahuila on January 25, 2009. Since Mauricio’s disappearance, Margarita has been determined to find him and to seek justice. As is the case with many other families of disappeared people in the

country, Margarita and her husband took on the search efforts themselves—traveling to Saltillo, the state capital, to report their son’s disappearance to state authorities and advocate for a thorough investigation. Nine years later, the authorities have done little to meaningfully investigate Mauricio’s disappearance and have failed to locate him, despite arresting two people suspected of being involved in the case.

For Margarita, this process has been emotionally and physically challenging. She has developed many health problems over the last nine years, including suffering a minor stroke within the first year of Mauricio’s disappearance. She also struggles with the daily pain and sadness of the disappearance. Nevertheless, Margarita works tirelessly to demand action in her son’s case and that those responsible be brought to justice. In the process, she has become a source of support for other families of disappeared people—sharing her lived experience with these families and helping them navigate the complicated and convoluted administrative and legal processes that searching for their loved one entails.

Activist mothers—mothers involved in grassroots organizing to find their disappeared children—struggle daily to find



May 25, 2016, Mexico City. Librada Arnolfo, sister of disappeared Ayotzinapa student Felipe Arnolfo, protests outside of the attorney general's office.

their loved ones and to prevent the state from disappearing them through legal and administrative means. Like Margarita, other activist mothers live with unending uncertainty about the fate of their sons or daughters, which they experience as a form of chronic trauma. Despite the challenges that come from searching for truth and justice, activist mothers find strength in their love for their children and their steadfast commitment to finding them.

Unfortunately, Margarita's case is not an isolated incident in Mexico. Since 2006, and with the financial support of the United States, Mexico has waged a militarized drug war that now extends to nearly every corner of the country. According to government figures, at least 35,000 people have been disappeared and more than 222,000 people have been killed over the last twelve years, a much higher rate than during the previous decade—all while drug trafficking continues unabated.² Impunity is rampant and, in the vast majority of cases of disappearance, very little has been done to investigate or to find the disappeared.

The Two Stages of Disappearance

Margarita's son was physically disappeared nine years ago at the age of 32. She continues to work every day to find him, yet most of her days are consumed with stopping another type of disappearance: the state's legal-administrative disappearance of Mauricio.³ John Gibler, an investigative journalist who covers disappearances in Mexico, describes two interconnected stages of disappearance: the material stage and the legal-administrative stage. The material stage refers to the physical abduction of a person. During the

legal-administrative stage of disappearance, the state "attempt[s] to disappear the truth—any and all verifiable knowledge about the events" surrounding the disappearance.⁴ In this second stage, the entire administrative apparatus of the state is put into the service of maintaining the disappearance of individuals by not investigating their physical whereabouts. Examples of the legal-administrative stage of disappearance range from the mundane, such as filing the wrong paperwork, to the more serious—destroying important evidence in a case. Although she is affected by both stages, it is the second stage that consumes a disproportionate amount of Margarita's time and energy.

Activist Mothers

Historically, activist mothers have been at the forefront of movements for justice for the disappeared throughout Latin America. Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are a famous example; their white headscarves continue to symbolize the struggle to find victims of disappearance by the state. Other activist mothers have also gained visibility for seeking justice for victims of state violence, including COMADRES in El Salvador and Mães de Maio in Brazil. In Mexico, there is also a rich history of mother-led movements for the disappeared. One of the most prominent organizations is the Comité Eureka, which was founded in 1977 by the mothers of activists who were disappeared by the Mexican army during the country's Dirty War (1964–1982). To this day, the Comité Eureka continues to demand justice for victims of state disappearance from that period.

The dramatic increase in disappearances in Mexico since 2006 has also been met by extraordinary political organizing led by activist mothers. As was the case during Mexico's Dirty War, collectives of relatives of disappeared people—mostly made up of and led by mothers—have demanded state action to find the disappeared through public protests, marches, hunger strikes in front of government buildings, and legislative advocacy efforts. Although there are many parallels between the previous mother-led groups and those that have emerged more recently, there are also important differences in the strategies they use to search for their disappeared children. Among the major differences has been the organization of search brigades by these collectives to physically look for the bodies of the disappeared. Unlike previous movements for the disappeared in Mexico, collectives formed since 2006 regularly organize searches in several states throughout the country—often in remote parts of the desert or the

mountainside. These efforts have led to the discovery of hundreds of clandestine graves, including one of the largest clandestine grave sites in the country at Colinas de Santa Fe in the capital city of Veracruz, found in 2016. Actively searching for clandestine graves entails engagement with the material stage of disappearance, even while the state seeks to keep activist mothers preoccupied with the legal-administrative stage.

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss, a term coined by Pauline Boss, describes the psychosocial experience of families of disappeared or missing people. Boss defines ambiguous loss as a “loss that remains unclear” because the whereabouts and fate of the disappeared person are unknown.⁵ The ambiguity itself is a traumatizing event—a chronic trauma, especially as the disappearance continues unresolved. Margarita's experience—and that of countless other activist

mothers—illustrates the ways in which ambiguity or uncertainty can often be one of the hardest parts of the disappearance.

Margarita described this clearly when talking about the everyday experience of having a disappeared son. “Unfortunately my son has not been found, just as no one else has been found because the state does not want to find them. It doesn't want all the disappeared people to come to light because they have imposed a state of terror on us,” Margarita said in an interview in Mexico City. “Because to live in uncertainty is to die little by little. It is to die little by little.”

Margarita spoke of the daily anguish she experiences when thinking about where her son might be. “I can tell you that I suffered a lot by tormenting myself, [wondering] whether they were mutilating him, whether he was suffering, whether they had hit his head and he was in a psychiatric hospital,” she said.

In the absence of knowing the fate and



May 10, 2016. Ana María Maldonado Chávez, mother of disappeared Carlos Palomares, marches in Mexico City on Mother's Day, demanding the return of her son and truth and justice in his case.



May 10, 2016. María Elena Salazar, mother of disappeared Hugo González Salazar, marches in Mexico City on Mother's Day.

whereabouts of her son, Margarita tried to make sense of Mauricio's disappearance by imagining the terrible things that could be happening to him—an experience she describes as a torment. Yet the lack of clear answers has also motivated her to find Mauricio and to demand that his case be investigated. Margarita clearly articulates the connection between the uncertainty she experiences and the state's strategy of terror. She asserts that the state's legal-administrative disappearance of her son is an intentional effort to impose terror, and uncertainty is an important mechanism of this strategy. Thus, the ambiguity that characterizes disappearance is not simply an individually traumatizing event, but rather a form of state violence. "We face a system of terror from a state without rule of law, and the uncertainty of living this way [with the disappearance], well, it is forever," she said.

Despite living with this uncertainty and facing this system of terror for over nine years, Margarita persists in her search for Mauricio. One strategy she has employed to manage the ambiguity of her son's disappearance is "to think that he is dead, but that I must find him." However, she

also continues to have hope that she may find him alive—a hope that is symbolized by maintaining his bedroom in the same state as he left it before his disappearance. This approach, described by Boss as "sociological ambivalence, caused by an external social situation," is a characteristic of ambiguous loss as people attempt to make sense of an uncertain situation in ways that vacillate from pragmatic to hopeful.⁶ Other mothers I interviewed also insisted that their children are alive and continue to demand that they be returned home. Nevertheless, this insistence does not preclude activist mothers from looking for the disappeared in clandestine graves or in the country's morgues.

Although the fate and whereabouts of their children may be uncertain, Mexico's activist mothers are clear about the main motivation for continuing their search. Asked about where she finds the strength to continue, Margarita responds, "I think it is our love for my son that moves my husband and me." For Margarita, as for countless other activist mothers, the search is a "commitment of love," one that will only end when she finds Mauricio. ✨

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Notes

1. Names have been changed to protect the identities of those interviewed.
2. For more in-depth analysis of Mexico's drug war, see D. Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2014).
3. J. Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzinapa* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2017).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
5. P. Boss, "Ambiguous Loss Theory: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners," *Family Relations* 56(2), p. 105.
6. P. Boss, "Resilience as Tolerance for Ambiguity," in *Handbook of Family Resilience*, ed. D.S. Becvar, pp. 285–297 (New York: Springer, 2013).

Appendix D

3

Executive Summary

THE HUMAN RIGHTS CLINIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SCHOOL OF LAW, IN cooperation with the Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios from Coahuila, Mexico, has compiled a report based on analyzed witness testimonies from three U.S. federal trials. Between 2013 and 2016, Zeta members were put on trial in Austin, San Antonio, and Del Rio for crimes of homicide, conspiracy to import drugs and weapons, and money laundering. These trials brought new information to light and corroborated information that has already been documented about Zeta operations and human rights abuses. First-hand testimonies of ex-Zeta cartel members and victims provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dire situation in Coahuila and offer a glimpse into the Zeta structure, members, and nexus with state officials and institutions.

After reviewing the witness testimonies, the Clinic has determined two major findings: (1) the Zeta cartel committed numerous human rights abuses in Coahuila with impunity; (2) public institutions and officials played a role, by actions or omissions, in the commission of these abuses.

Testimonies describe the nature and degree of Zeta influence over state and municipal officials and institutions. The Zetas paid bribes and integrated police officers into their hierarchy to ensure the cartel would be able to continue their illicit operations without resistance. However, the Zetas did not only influence low level state or municipal police; witnesses described a level of Zeta control which extended to city police chiefs, state and federal prosecutors, state prisons, sectors of the federal police and the Mexican army, and state politicians. Multiple witnesses described bribery payments of millions of dollars to Humberto Moreira and Ruben Moreira, the former and current governors of Coahuila, in exchange for complete control of the state. According to the testimonies, the Zetas' influence over Coahuila government operations at all levels allowed them to conduct their business throughout the state with impunity and often with direct assistance from state officials and police officers.

The report also documents the human rights abuses discussed in the witness testimonies, including the large-scale disappearances and killings in March and April of 2011, during what is known as the Piedras Negras and Allende Massacres. These crimes were perpetrated in response to information that three former Zeta operatives had begun to cooperate with U.S. authorities. In retaliation, the Zetas kidnapped, killed, and disappeared over 300 people who they believed to be associated with the former Zeta operatives.

According to witnesses, this brutality was not unique to these massacres. The report documents a pattern of kidnappings, killings, torture and disappearance, targeting anyone whom the Zetas believed posed a threat to their illicit operations. In order to exercise control, Zetas also targeted innocent civilians who were completely unconnected to the cartel. Witnesses described the callous manner in which the Zetas stripped victims of their humanity, killed, and disposed of their bodies. The Zetas maintained a tight grip on Coahuila through violence and intimidation tactics such as

death threats and through the forced recruitment of Coahuila residents, including the recruitment of minors. It is also clear from the testimonies that witnesses were being threatened even when members of the Zetas were already in custody in the United States.

The testimonies also highlight the transnational nature of drug trafficking and the violence associated with this. In particular, witnesses discussed how weapons purchased in the United States were imported to Mexico and drugs produced in Mexico were trafficked into the U.S. Zeta operations extend to various cities in the United States, including San Antonio, Houston, Austin, Eagle Pass, Chicago and Atlanta, as well as to other states, such as New Mexico, California, and Oklahoma.

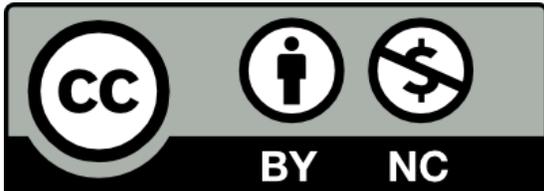
The Zetas supported this transnational operation through a large network of businesses, which they used to launder money and fuel their operations in the trafficking of people, guns, and drugs. The Zetas owned ranches, race tracks, and breeding facilities in the U.S. and Mexico as a part of an elaborate horse racing scheme. Aside from owning properties connected to the horse racing scheme, the Zetas also exploited numerous businesses in Mexico, such as stores, casinos, restaurants, gyms, and carwashes. These enterprises were used as safe houses, as meeting points for drug and money trafficking operations, or instruments of the money laundering operations. Witnesses explained how the Zetas paid bribes and contributed to the campaigns of governors and political candidates to secure the free continuation of their illegal operations. These bribes also ensured that Zeta-owned companies received government contracts and building permits.

Further, as has been made clear from the three analyzed trials, the U.S. government possesses valuable information regarding killings, disappearances, threats, and other violations perpetrated by the Zetas. Witness testimonies and the investigations carried out for these trials include key information, such as the location where disappearances and murders occurred. This indicates that the U.S. government may currently have undisclosed information that could lead to the clarification of murders and disappearances perpetrated in Mexico. However, witnesses made clear that the Mexican state has not conducted investigations into these murders, even when the U.S. government has directly shared vital information.

Mexican State officials have willfully refused to pursue justice despite having knowledge of countless human rights abuses carried out by members of the Zeta cartel. Both the Zetas and the State are responsible for the violence in Coahuila. At best, the State turned a blind eye to the widespread corruption and grave human rights abuses committed by the Zetas in Coahuila, and at worst, directly participated in the perpetration of these abuses.

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Vita

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