

# Contributions of women searchers to peacebuilding

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Enforced disappearance is a serious violation of human rights with an enormous impact, both on the people directly affected and on the community and society as a whole. In some countries, the practice is so widespread that it has become one of the biggest hurdles in transitions to peace and in the consolidation of conditions conducive to coexistence and reconciliation.

Although the vast majority of disappeared persons are men,<sup>1</sup> disappearances have a great gender impact that can be understood from at least these four perspectives:

1. Causes: Disappearances of women due solely to the fact that they are women.
2. Aggravating circumstances: Additional human rights violations against disappeared women.
3. Impacts: Consequences of the disappearance of a family member for women.
4. Response: The mobilization of women in the search for their missing relatives.

In this concept note, we intend to reflect on the fourth of these dimensions: the fact that in practically all contexts, and in spite of cultural, social, religious or economic plurality, it

is mostly women who undertake the search. Searching is a difficult and, in many circumstances, dangerous task. It usually begins in solitude and without sufficient training or resources and eventually becomes a collective endeavor. It originates with the need to find a missing family member and very often becomes a broader struggle against disappearances and for the right to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.

Their demands, based on human dignity and expressed from an unquestionable legitimacy, challenge discourses that normalize violence, promote the most unexpected dialogues, catalyze mobilizations of nonviolent struggle, and contribute to social, political, legislative or judicial transformations that prove to be crucial to peace.

However, the human rights of these women searchers are often grossly ignored. The additional difficulties they face simply because they are women are not recognized and the necessary measures to address their specific needs in compliance with international human rights law and, in particular, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, are not implemented.

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<sup>1</sup> The disappearance of women and girls is suspected to be under-documented.

Moreover, their strength and resilience, their social and political agency, and their particular capacity to contribute to social transformation and peacebuilding are not sufficiently recognized.

In dialogue with women searchers, ICIP has set out to deepen the understanding of the link between the struggle against enforced disappearances and peacebuilding; to highlight the contributions of victim and family groups in peacebuilding; and to provide knowledge and tools that can enhance their work.

This concept note is to be presented for the first time at the World Congress on Enforced Disappearances (January 2025), specifically in the session entitled “Impacts of Enforced Disappearances on Women,” organized by ICIP. It is inspired by the reflections that women searchers from different parts of the world shared during a meeting organized by ICIP in Barcelona in November 2023. It is also based on the work on this matter carried out by Maider Maraña, from the Baketik Foundation, and published by ICIP in December 2024.<sup>2</sup> These reflections have also been enriched by other previous activities and publications<sup>3</sup> promoted by ICIP.

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## 2. HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN SEARCHERS

In 2013, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances published a General Comment on women affected by enforced disappearances.<sup>4</sup> A couple of years later, as part of a collaboration with UN Women, the ICTJ published a detailed report on the impact of disappearances on women. These and other documents shed light on the needs and human rights of women who are victims of disappearance, either because they have experienced it themselves or because of the consequences of the disappearance of a family member.<sup>5</sup>

When the breadwinner of the family is the man and he is subjected to disappearance, women are usually left on their own to provide for the basic needs of the household and care for the family. This is on top of the resulting emotional trauma and related health problems, and the fear, anxiety and depression they experience. In many cases, they also have to cope with the social stigma attached to the disappearance. The greater the gender discrimination in a society, the greater the social, economic, legal and domestic challenges women face. These challenges can be so daunting that they hinder their human rights, as well as those of their dependents. In extreme cases, the levels of exclusion of women are such

that they do not even have the right to file a complaint about the disappearance of their relative.

Faced with these obstacles, undertaking the search for a missing person is a particularly difficult task. Not all women have the possibility or the capacity to do it. In this regard, it is important to remember that the legal responsibility to prevent, investigate and prosecute an enforced disappearance does not fall on them, but on the state.

Even so, in the absence of action on the part of the competent authorities, many families do not hesitate to carry out the search themselves, often in precarious conditions and assuming significant risks to their own emotional, social and economic stability, and even to their personal safety.

Years of monitoring the phenomenon of enforced disappearances have shown that the vast majority of family members who mobilize to search for their disappeared relatives are women. This observation can be variously explained according to the socio-cultural context, but one reason that is repeated in most circumstances has to do with traditional gender roles that attribute the responsibility of care and

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2 Mañana, Maider, *Conversaciones con mujeres buscadoras. La lucha contra las desapariciones forzadas y la construcción de paz*, “ICIP Reports,” ICIP, 2024.

3 ICIP. “Where are the missing? Truth and justice for the consolidation of peace,” *Peace in Progress* magazine, issue 38, May 2020.

4 United Nations, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, General comment on women affected by enforced disappearances, A/HRC/WGEID/98/2, 2013.

5 Dewhurst, Polly and Amrita Kapur, *The Disappeared and Invisible: Revealing the Enduring Impact of Enforced Disappearance on Women*, ICTJ, 2015.

protection of life to women. Many women searchers explain how undertaking a search despite pain and risk is a strong instinct for them, especially if it is to find a son or daughter.

Women searchers face other serious threats and human rights violations in addition to the gender-related difficulties mentioned above, both as victims and as human rights defenders. Women who, in the search for their disappeared relatives, bring to light uncomfortable truths or carry out advocacy work that upsets violent actors are exposed to the risk of being killed or disappeared themselves, or subjected to human rights violations with a clear gender component: harassment, sexual assault, threats against their children, etc.

In fact, pre-existing gender inequalities contribute to their re-victimization. For example, many women searchers have not had the same educational opportunities as the men in their families. Their limited education can be an initial obstacle when it comes to knowing which institution to turn to or

strategically deciding what steps to take. There are places where, simply because they are women, they will not be treated with the same consideration as a man.

In many cultural contexts, women who speak out on behalf of their disappeared relatives challenge social norms that would want them silenced. This disruption can result in scorn and ostracism, or even physical attacks. Devoting their time to searching for their missing relatives and not exclusively to caring for the rest of the family may also cause them problems at home.

In fulfillment of their obligations, states must adopt the necessary measures to ensure the human rights of women affected by a disappearance, including and with particular attention to women searching for missing loved ones. To this end, it is essential to recognize not only their rights as victims, but also their agency and their potential as peacebuilders and human rights defenders.

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### 3. VICTIMS AS PEACEBUILDERS

Peace is a multidimensional concept that accepts a great plurality of visions depending on one's experience and expectations. While taking into account this plurality of perspectives, at ICIP we understand peace as the absence of violence, whether direct, structural or cultural. With this broad view of the concept of peace, we assume that building peace is a process that requires a long-term perspective of the future, in-depth work to understand and recognize the past, and concrete actions in the present. Peacebuilding requires addressing the structural causes of conflict and all underlying inequalities, taking into account the uniqueness of each place and prioritizing the agency and participation of local actors in all their diversity, especially those affected by conflict and victims of serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Historically, peace processes have left victims on the sidelines of negotiations and decision-making. At best, they have been considered passive actors, worthy of attention and solidarity, but without participation or agency of their own.

However, with the development of transitional justice and thanks to their enormous coordination and mobilization efforts, victims have become actors with a voice and an agenda, not only to tell their stories, but also to demand their rights to truth, justice and reparation and to demand guarantees of non-recurrence, which are key elements of peacebuilding.<sup>6</sup> Their participation has not only contributed to the legitimacy, transparency and sustainability of peace processes; it has also proved essential for the consideration of legislative or institutional proposals that have had a positive impact on society as a whole.

Despite these advances, the victims, including women searchers, still do not have the social and political recognition they should have as agents of transformation and peacebuilding. Public recognition of the contribution these women make to society as a whole would undoubtedly cushion the enormous difficulties they face and help to reinforce their work.

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6 Barton-Hronešová, Jessie. "Roles of Victims in Peacebuilding." *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*. Edited by M-A Deiana. Springer, 2020.

## 4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN SEARCHERS TO PEACEBUILDING

The work undertaken by women searchers often coincides with the aims and paths of other solidarity-based collective struggles such as the promotion of human rights, feminism, environmentalism or even pacifism. In fact, many women searchers have identified with these social movements and have established remarkable alliances with them. But this does not mean that slogans and demands that may not be their priority should be placed on their shoulders. The exploitation of their search and pain to strengthen other ends, however legitimate they may be, can result in additional re-victimization. On the other hand, victims' groups are as heterogeneous as society, and their strategic political vision may be different in each case. Therefore, caution should be exercised against possible generalizations or idealizations of their role.

That said, it is interesting to highlight the various connections that exist between the objectives and methods of women searchers and peacebuilding.

### 4.1. Culture of peace

A culture of peace is understood as a set of values, attitudes, traditions and modes of behavior and ways of life based on, among other things, “respect for life, ending of violence and promotion and practice of nonviolence through education, dialogue and cooperation” as well as “full respect for and promotion of all human rights and fundamental freedoms” and “adherence to the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, cultural diversity, dialogue and understanding at all levels of society and among nations; and fostered by an enabling national and international environment conducive to peace.”<sup>7</sup>

Many of the approaches, demands, actions or methodologies of the women searchers are aligned with this culture of peace. Their struggle is made up of elements that break completely with the culture of violence: love and tenderness as an engine of change, solidarity and networking, the dignity of victims, the ability to connect the family environment with the political and social dimension, the ethics of care, etc.

In this commitment to the practice of care, psychosocial support makes it possible to deal with feelings of fear, pain, guilt or dread. These women's commitment to offer comprehensive support contributes to transcending from individual to collective experiences, to healing wounds and to generating more resilient processes and symbolic reparation, both at the individual and collective levels.

### 4.2. From the personal to the collective: creation of networks

Women searchers mobilize in order to react to an extremely violent event that affects a loved one and, by extension, the entire family. Gradually, the initial reaction tends to become more intense, concerted and politicized. As time goes by, the coordination with other women searchers is strengthened and even formalized in the constitution of organizations.

In fact, peacebuilding requires the creation of these networks and relationship spaces. They allow for the sharing of perspectives and generate connections and interdependencies that strengthen resilience and foster creativity in the face of conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Together, women searchers – with their moral and symbolic burden – have managed to create these strategic peacebuilding networks basing their essence on the value of life and the memory of their loved ones.

### 4.3. Truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence

Progress towards a just and sustainable peace cannot be made without addressing the needs for truth, justice and reparation of the victims and of society as a whole. In its individual dimension, the right to truth has to do with the right to know what happened and why. It is a fundamental element in the process of mourning and healing. In its social dimension, the achievement of the right to truth allows us to understand what has happened in the country, to recognize

7 “Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace,” Resolution 53/243, United Nations General Assembly, 1999.

8 On the importance of networks and relationships, see Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York, 2005; online edition, Oxford Academic, 20 Apr. 2005, accessed 5/12/24.

the seriousness of these events and to perceive what, on many occasions, society has not wanted to attend to or see.

In many contexts it is the families of the disappeared themselves who make it possible to advance in truth processes: investigating on their own, visiting detention centers and hospitals, searching for graves, digging, collaborating with the exhumation of remains and forensic analysis, and also in the documentation of cases. This documentation of cases, done with rigor and perseverance, becomes an invaluable tool when, sometimes years later, the necessary justice mechanisms are established.

The corollary of truth, justice and reparation is the right to guarantees of non-recurrence, a key element for putting an end to cycles of violence and preventing new human rights violations. This is a recurring demand of the women searchers' movement. "May no other mother have to go through this living hell" is an idea repeated over and over again by the women we spoke to.

These guarantees of non-recurrence often involve the strengthening of democratic institutions and the adoption of new legal norms that create social conditions in which enforced disappearances and other human rights violations are strictly prohibited and their perpetrators prosecuted, and the rights of victims are guaranteed. These guarantees of non-recurrence also include the forging of a citizenry that does not forget the past or normalize violence. Women searchers – with their extraordinary tenacity and legitimacy – have inspired and catalyzed many demands and processes of social transformation.

#### **4.4. Memory**

Fighting against oblivion and honoring the memory of their disappeared relatives – and, by extension, that of all victims

– is crucial for collectives of women searchers. Women's efforts to preserve the memory of their loved ones also contribute to preserving the memory of the events that occurred and of the conflicts.

Memory also plays a central role in building peaceful societies. Knowledge of the events and recognition of the suffering experienced must endure over time in order to prevent their recurrence. In turn, memory exercises also contribute to the creation of new narratives and to de-stigmatize victims, including victims of enforced disappearances.

#### **4.5. Commitment to dialogue**

In conflict management and peacebuilding, dialogue is a tool that is as difficult as it is crucial. It allows for a more comprehensive understanding of what happened, of the damage caused, of the demands and needs, and of the idea of justice and reparation. At the same time, it allows for a reconciliation of positions, mutual recognition of pain, generation of empathy, and identification of common ground from which to begin to reach agreements.

Women searchers have been able to engage in dialogue with a wide variety of actors, including those they distrust the most. In several countries there have been recent experiences of rapprochement and dialogue between victims from different sides, as well as between victims and perpetrators. Survivors of disappearances or their relatives have also participated in these processes. In addition to the restorative effect that these encounters can have on a personal level, these experiences can have a healing effect on society as a whole: if those who have suffered most are able to talk, and even coexist, with those who have made them suffer, the rest of the population should also be able to overcome the mistrust and hostilities of the past.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Searching for a disappeared person is a state obligation and a right for those affected by the disappearance.<sup>9</sup> However, there are still many states that do not meet this obligation and the search for missing persons by their families and communities remains a difficult and dangerous endeavor, especially for women, who make up the majority of searchers. Their struggle for the truth is often ignored or discredited and, when it becomes too uncomfortable, it is silenced. This reality is a violation of the human rights of searchers. It also disregards the collective dimension of the search. Finding missing persons is not only important for those closest to them; it is also a healing and restorative measure for society as a whole. In this sense, women searchers must be recognized as actors for peace and the defense of human rights.

The struggle against enforced disappearances and in favor of truth, justice and reparation has numerous links with the culture of peace. It also contributes a series of elements that strengthen peacebuilding itself, in its conceptualization and practice.

We have much to learn from the collectives of women searchers that have emerged throughout the world over several generations, based on the certainty that, from their experiences, important and numerous lessons can be drawn for other movements working for inclusive and participatory processes in favor of a more just and less violent world.

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<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, *Searching Without Fear: International Standards for Protecting Women Searchers in the Americas*. AMR 01/8458/2024. 2024.

