



The Social and Economic Impacts on Women Who Search for the Forcibly Disappeared

The Case of Colombia

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1. Introduction

Enforced disappearance has been part of Colombia's recent history, as have the efforts by relatives of those who were forcibly disappeared to find their loved ones. In this process, the role of women as searchers has been crucial – not only in locating victims but also in helping to establish the institutional infrastructure that supports the search. However, the modest results in finding all those who were forcibly disappeared are not the only shortcoming; women searchers have also had to endure the consequences of the disappearance itself, along with the burdens imposed by the demanding task of searching.

In Colombia, although several mechanisms exist to assist and provide redress for victims of the armed conflict, to locate the forcibly disappeared and to prosecute those responsible, the situation of women searchers remains highly vulnerable. Many began their search already facing multiple gender-based disadvantages, which have only deepened as a result of their efforts.

This report seeks to highlight the economic and social impacts of the search process on women searchers. Our aim is to show that the harm caused by enforced disappearance extends beyond the disappearance itself, encompassing the ongoing struggle faced by women as they seek to find their relatives. In the first section, we present the context of enforced disappearances in Colombia,

¹ This report was written by Dejusticia's transitional justice team.

emphasising the role of women searchers. The second part describes the institutional mechanisms in place that are aimed at dealing with enforced disappearances and providing reparation for indirect victims. The third section presents the impacts on the economic and social rights of women searchers based on the findings of a focus group conducted in Bogotá, Colombia, in March 2025. The last section provides some recommendations based on the findings and on the existing institutional framework.

2. The context of enforced disappearances in Colombia

a. The phenomenon of forced disappearance in the armed conflict

The Colombian armed conflict, lasting from around 1964 to 2016, was a decades-long struggle involving the government, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitary groups. It was characterised by its high intensity, political motivations, territorial control, and the systematic perpetration of human rights violations. From the late 1970s until the first decade of the 2000s, enforced disappearance was used systematically in the context of the armed conflict, and was perpetrated by both illegal armed groups and the military (CEV, 2022). Armed actors, legal and illegal, resorted to enforced disappearance as a tool to punish and deter ideologies or social and political practices; to generate terror as a control mechanism; as part of a body count policy aimed at presenting false combat kills; and to conceal crimes by eliminating bodies and evidence, thus making it difficult to prosecute those responsible (CNMH, 2016; CNMH, 2018). Nowadays, enforced disappearance is still being committed; however, the patterns have changed and it is mostly used as part of organised crime. Due to the widespread use of enforced disappearance in Colombia, no distinction is made based on the perpetrator; the defining element is the act itself: murdering a person and concealing their whereabouts.

The figures on forced disappearance in the context of the armed conflict vary according to the source and methodology used²; however, despite the differences, the magnitude of this crime in Colombia is clear. At the institutional level, the Unified Victims Registry (RUV) reports 53,195 direct victims of forced disappearance (Unidad de Víctimas, 2025a)³. The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition (CEV) identified approximately 121,768 direct victims of forced disappearance between 1985 and 2016 (CEV, 2022). For its part, the Unit for the Search for Disappeared Persons (UBPD) records 126,895 missing persons in the context of the Colombian armed conflict (UBPD, 2025)⁴. Other estimates, mainly by civil society organisations, such as the figures provided by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) with the support of the Special

² The discrepancy between these figures is the result of different sources. The RUV shows the number of victims recorded in the official registry, which is affected by underreporting. The CNMH and CEV figures are the result of compiling different sources, especially human rights reports and archives. The UBPD includes not only victims of enforced disappearance, but other disappearances caused by different phenomena, such as enforced recruitment. The HRDAG figure is a statistical estimation based on different databases.

³ The Unified Victims Registry is the institutional tool that allows the identification of victims of the armed conflict in Colombia and was created for the purpose of implementing the administrative reparation policy created by Law 1448 of 2011. Regarding forced disappearance, this registry may have gaps, because, although the registry is not limited in timeframe, reparation measures are only granted to victims of acts committed since 1985 and forced disappearance had a high occurrence in previous years; as a result, many relatives of victims of forced disappearance may lack incentive to register.

⁴ This figure does not distinguish whether the person was a victim of the crime of enforced disappearance or is missing due to another crime or circumstance.

Jurisdiction for Peace and the CEV, suggest that the real number could be closer to 210,000 direct victims of forced disappearance (CEV, 2022)⁵.

The registry of the Victims Law⁶ shows that the majority of the disappeared and murdered persons are men; as a result, women, as survivors, face the consequences of this violence with particular severity. Of the 53,195 direct victims registered, 89.7 per cent are men. Those classified as indirect victims are the family members and people close to the disappeared who face the consequences of this loss⁷. In this category, 148,624 people have been identified, 60.8 per cent of whom are women⁸.

The relationship between the missing persons and the women who search for them (*buscadoras*)⁹ reflects the closeness and depth of their emotional connection. In 29 per cent of the cases, the women are searching for their siblings or brothers and sisters-in-law; in 26 per cent for their husbands or romantic partners; and in 23 per cent for their children or stepchildren. In 17 per cent of the cases, the missing person is their father or mother. The remaining cases concern other relatives (2 per cent), unidentified persons (2 per cent) and cases with no recorded information (2 per cent) (Unidad de Víctimas, 2024).

The ages of the women registered as indirect victims of forced disappearance reveal a high concentration in older age groups. 54.14 per cent are between 29 and 60 years of age, and 35.61 per cent are between 61 and 100 years old. Young women between 18 and 28 years old make up 7.33 per cent (Unidad de Víctimas, 2024). In terms of ethnicity, 12.85 per cent of the women registered as indirect victims of forced disappearance self-identify as part of an ethnic population. Of these, 8.07 per cent (7,162) are Afro-Colombian, 4.54 per cent (4,031) are indigenous, 0.15 per cent (132) identify as Raizal, 0.07 per cent (64) as Gypsy or Rrom, and 0.02 per cent (18) as Palenquero (Unidad de Víctimas, 2024).

5 Estimates for the number of people affected by different human rights violations, together with the databases, are available on the HRDAG's website: <https://hrdag.org/colombia/>

6 Law 1448 of 2011, known as the "Victims Law", is a statute that establishes extrajudicial transitional justice mechanisms, in particular regarding reparation and land restitution. It creates an instrument known as the "Victims Registry" in which each person who claims to be a victim of the conflict (after following the established procedure) is included. It helps to determine the universe of victims of the armed conflict who will receive reparation measures.

7 Article 3 of the Victims Law states that: "In cases where the direct victim was killed, disappeared, kidnapped, or suffered harm as a result of crimes against humanity or serious violations of International Humanitarian Law or International Human Rights Law, and in the absence of the above, those in the second degree of consanguinity shall be considered victims." However, there is no practical distinction between direct and indirect victims, as regardless of their condition, all of them have access to the same measures. The distinction is for registry purposes only.

8 These figures come from the Single Registry of Victims, so they do not represent the actual total number of people affected, but only those who have completed the registration process with the Victims Unit.

9 In Colombia and Latin America, it is common to refer to women who search for disappeared persons as *buscadoras*, literally "women searchers". To reflect the local terminology, we will use this translated expression throughout the document. More precisely, in Colombia, according to Law 2364 (*Ley de Mujeres Buscadoras*), women searchers are those who, individually and/or collectively, have dedicated themselves in a continuous and substantial manner to the search for victims of enforced disappearance. In some cases, these women searchers organised themselves and created organisations dedicated to searching for their loved ones and other disappeared persons in the country.

b. The relatives of missing persons: women searchers (buscadoras)

The visibility of forced disappearance in Colombia results in large part from the efforts of the women searchers and their organisations. These women have played a key role in making the phenomenon known and, in their fight against impunity, have been leading the creation of narratives that show the magnitude, causes and effects of the crime. They have achieved important advances, such as the modification of the legal framework to incorporate forced disappearance, but in the face of the state's ineffectiveness and the persistence of the crime, they continue to fight to keep this problem on the public agenda¹⁰.

A first key contribution has been the creation of a collective memory that makes the phenomenon of forced disappearance visible beyond figures and statistics. Organisations of victims' relatives, such as the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared (ASFADDES) and the Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation, have worked systematically to document cases and construct accounts of the forcibly disappeared since the 1980s. Through this effort, it has been possible in many cases to identify those responsible, both state agents and illegal armed actors. This information has also been useful for state institutions (CNMH, 2016; CNMH, 2018).

Another relevant aspect has been the use of demonstrations as a tool of resistance. Demonstrations, sit-ins and memory galleries have been effective ways to make the suffering of the victims visible, generate solidarity and confront impunity. Families have been able to organise events such as the march on 30 August, the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, to demand answers from the state and to remember the disappeared. These demonstrations have given voice to the victims and have served as an act of resistance in the face of violence and institutional oblivion (CNMH, 2016; CNMH, 2018).

The constant denunciation of the impunity that has surrounded cases of forced disappearance has also made a significant contribution. Organisations have pointed out the lack of state response and ineffective judicial processes, and have proposed changes to public policies. Through detailed reports, they have urged the government to adopt further measures for the search, clarification of the facts, and comprehensive reparation for the victims (ASFADDES, 2003; FNEB, 2015; CNMH, 2018). This effort has resulted in the creation of specific mechanisms for the search, which will be mentioned below.

A final key effect of their engagement has been the empowerment of victims' families, who have received training in legal, psychosocial and organisational issues from some of the most experienced organisations. Multiple organisations of relatives of the disappeared provide victims with the necessary tools to assert their rights and deal with complex legal processes. Through workshops, seminars and spaces for participation, these organisations have strengthened the capacity of families to advocate for justice, both nationally and internationally (CNMH, 2016; CNMH, 2018). Similarly, women searchers engage in psychosocial advocacy for more recent victims, generating support for those women who have gone through similar stories (CNMH, 2016; CNMH, 2018).

¹⁰ Some stories of women and their struggle can be found at: <https://www.dejusticia.org/tag/mujeres-buscadoras/>

While several legal and institutional measures have been implemented to locate victims of enforced disappearance, the results have been modest. Women searchers continue to participate actively in search efforts, advocate against enforced disappearances and call for all who were forcibly disappeared to be located. Throughout this lengthy process, they have faced additional challenges that compound the pain of losing a loved one.

2. Measures and mechanisms to protect and promote the search for disappeared persons led by women

Colombia has ratified key international instruments to protect human rights and combat enforced disappearance, thereby assuming obligations to prevent, punish, and remedy this crime. These instruments include the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Law 742 of 2002, in force since 1 November 2002), which classifies enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity and provides international mechanisms when national responses are inadequate; the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons (Law 707 of 2001, in force since 12 May 2005), which strengthens regional standards by mandating prevention, investigation, punishment, and guarantees for victims; and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (Law 1418 of 2010, in force since 10 August 2012), a United Nations treaty aimed at preventing the crime and fighting impunity.

This international framework, together with the tireless work of women searchers, other family members, and their organisations, has contributed to significant transformations within Colombia's institutional landscape. Thanks to their efforts, the country now has improved tools, including: (i) mechanisms for the visibility of and search for persons reported as disappeared; (ii) instruments for providing care and reparation for their relatives; and (iii) measures aimed at protecting the lives and integrity of those engaged in the search.

The Colombian state has developed two parallel routes for recourse to justice: one within the framework of ordinary justice and the other within the transitional justice system. These routes, driven by the persistent demands of the relatives' organisations, are not exclusive, but complementary. In criminal justice, a major milestone was the recognition of forced disappearance as an autonomous crime, distinguishing its specific characteristics from other offences such as kidnapping. The creation of the Commission for the Search for Disappeared Persons (CBPD) provided a platform for coordination among state institutions, human rights organisations and civil society to advance searches and clarify cases, supporting investigations by the Prosecutor's Office. Additionally, the 2016 Peace Agreement led to the establishment of the Unit for the Search for Disappeared Persons (UBPD), a humanitarian and extrajudicial body tasked with coordinating and leading searches for those who went missing in the context of the armed conflict before 1 December 2016. With an initial 20-year mandate, renewable as needed, the UBPD's scope extends beyond victims of enforced disappearance to include other cases, such as forcibly recruited or kidnapped persons whose fate remains unknown.

However, the institutional mechanisms for searching for disappeared persons do not include measures to address the impacts of the search on women searchers. While the Reparations and Land Restitution Law (known as the Victims Law) recognises that relatives of those forcibly disappeared are entitled

to reparation measures, it does not cover the economic and social rights affected as a consequence of the search process. The Women Searchers Law (*Ley de Buscadoras*) seeks to fill this gap; however, more than a year after its approval, its effect has been largely symbolic. Implementation has been insufficient, and it has had no tangible impact on the situation of women searchers.

3. Social and economic impacts on women searching for the disappeared

The impacts of the search, which will be outlined in detail below, further deepen the precarious and economically vulnerable situation of women in Colombia. According to the National Victims Registry, 18.5 per cent of women in the country are victims of the conflict (either directly or indirectly), and women represent 50.21 per cent of the total victim population (Unidad de Víctimas, 2025b). The victim population is especially affected by poverty. For instance, the monetary poverty rate among victims is 13.5 percentage points higher than the national average. Furthermore, 19.4 per cent of households headed by women victims are in multidimensional poverty, compared to 17.7 per cent of those headed by men. Similarly, women victims – consistent with the trend among women nationally – are mostly employed in informal jobs (57.4 per cent), which do not provide stable income or access to social security, compared to 42.6 per cent for male victims.

Undoubtedly, in a context where women – especially those who are victims of the armed conflict – face economic vulnerabilities, a strenuous and resource-intensive activity like searching for disappeared persons intensifies the hardships they must endure. While there may be no legal or social barriers to accessing institutional mechanisms, gender-based inequalities lead to specific consequences for women searchers, which must be addressed through public policy. As noted earlier, there is a clear feminisation of the search, as men are the primary direct victims of enforced disappearance and, as a result, women become the primary indirect victims. This gives rise to a continuum of harm that often stems from pre-existing gender-based exclusions but is significantly intensified once the disappearance occurs and continues to deepen over time. That is why making these effects visible is crucial for identifying measures capable of producing a ripple effect in improving conditions for women. For example, granting better access to formal employment can lead to improved access to housing and social security systems.

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the social and economic impacts on women who have searched for their loved ones and/or supported others in the same endeavour. We conducted a focus group with 10 participants and three individual interviews¹¹, including women searchers and members of organisations dedicated to locating disappeared persons and supporting their families. In forming the group, we sought to include four key profiles that have been instrumental in the evolution of search processes in Colombia: first, women who led the earliest search organisations and have a well-established trajectory; second, more recent searchers who are leading new initiatives; third, victims of disappearance who currently serve as public officials in agencies responsible for search efforts; and finally, representatives of civil society organisations that advocate for victims of disappearance. It is important to note that these individuals were victims

¹¹ The three interviews were conducted with participants who could not attend the focus group.

of different armed actors and are involved in cases from various regions across the country. This diversity of trajectories and experiences allowed for a broad perspective on the lessons, challenges, and transformations that have shaped the path of the search in Colombia ¹².

Through a participatory methodology, we explored the participants' personal experiences and their knowledge as supporters of other families in search processes. This allowed us to map the social, economic, health, educational, and social security impacts of searching for disappeared people. We aimed to foster a conversation in which each participant, drawing from her own experience – both in her individual search and in supporting others – could reflect on these impacts. The following sections present the main findings.

3.1 Social impacts

Enforced disappearance brings about abrupt changes in people's roles within the household and their community. Many women must take on responsibilities they did not previously have, such as becoming the main breadwinner or making decisions that were previously in the hands of others. This reassignment of roles involves a significant physical and emotional burden, but it has also given rise to processes of empowerment amid the pain, as women demonstrate their ability to lead, resist, and build solidarity networks in the face of adversity (ICTJ, 2015).

The participants unanimously reported that, as a result of the disappearance of their loved ones and their subsequent involvement in search efforts, their social and family circles were fractured. This situation stems from both external factors (related to the attitudes of others towards them) and internal ones (linked to the decisions they made as part of the search process).

Regarding external factors, the participants highlighted stigmatisation as a common experience, which was directed both at their disappeared loved ones and at themselves, as well as other family members. This was especially acute in cases of politically motivated disappearances – such as those involving left-wing activists – or when the disappearance was accompanied by a false narrative, as in the case of extrajudicial executions of civilians falsely presented as combat casualties. Stigmatisation severs community ties, damages the reputations of the disappeared, fosters extenuating discourses around their absence, and pushes women into states of fear and ongoing distrust of social circles beyond their immediate family. Participants also reported that relationships with friends and acquaintances became tense, as others were afraid of being associated with the families of the disappeared and potentially facing the same risks.

“During the search process, I felt stigmatised; people distanced themselves from me and my family. There is clear harm to the reputation of those who search – even institutions judge us for continuing to look for other disappeared persons.” (Focus group, 2025)

¹² The list of participants can be found in the annex to this document. All of them gave their consent for their names to be disclosed.

Some women pointed out that there is strong stigmatisation surrounding the role of being a woman searcher. They are labelled as “problematic” or “crazy”, and often no one wants to work with them. This perception has led to situations where, even when some women met the requirements for formal jobs within search institutions, they were rejected solely because of the social stigmas attached to being a searcher.

“I came back 12 years ago and haven’t had a single job in any of the institutions that are doing the search. Eventually, I got tired, I got fed up, because it’s really frustrating. It’s tough, and it’s that attitude of ‘oh, these people again, how annoying.’” (Interview, 2025)

In terms of the internal factors that contributed to a breakdown of their social circles, participants referred to actions taken to protect their families. Frequent relocations to ensure their safety prevented them and their children from forming lasting relationships. Many participants and their families were forced into exile due to security threats, definitively severing ties with those who had not experienced disappearance firsthand. However, this also fostered new bonds of solidarity and closeness among people who shared similar experiences.

“We had to leave the country because the threats wouldn’t stop.” (Focus group, 2025)

Family relationships were also often affected. Many participants reported that their ongoing commitment to searching for their loved ones and supporting other women in their processes caused tensions with family members who did not share their dedication. These relatives saw the search as too great a sacrifice – one that jeopardised other important aspects of life such as health, financial stability, and the future. Some women were even distanced from certain family members, such as their grandchildren, due to ongoing security concerns.

“The first impact was losing my family. They would rather I didn’t get involved in anything related to the search because they feel it puts their safety at risk. That’s why I can’t see my grandchildren any more.” (Focus group, 2025)

The experience of disappearance and the subsequent search process is so profoundly transformative for the families that participants noted intergenerational impacts which often go unnoticed. Some participants, when their family bonds were not broken, observed that the search frequently becomes a legacy, with children – and even grandchildren – eventually taking it on as their own cause. This ongoing presence of the disappearance in their lives may even influence decisions about their future. This phenomenon is especially common in cases where women have spent years, even decades, searching. The search becomes a more complex process that involves not only finding the disappeared but also pursuing justice, truth, and recognition.

“In my case, this experience has already reached the third generation. My grandchildren are increasingly involved in the search for our relative.” (Focus group, 2025)

“My children have become involved now that they’ve grown up, but I don’t want them to inherit this search, because it’s a very heavy burden – both emotionally and financially.” (Focus group, 2025)

3.2 Impacts on economic stability

This category of impacts includes findings related to access to pensions, employment, housing, and property. Pre-existing gender-based economic vulnerabilities, such as limited access to the formal job market and involvement in unpaid domestic work, compound the physically and emotionally demanding, as well as financially costly, task of searching (Vega-Salazar, 2024). In addition to facing material difficulties, such as lack of stable income or adequate access to health and education services, they must manage multiple roles to sustain a stable life (ICTJ, 2015). The experience of searching profoundly affects women's life plans. Many have to abandon their studies, jobs, or personal aspirations in order to fully dedicate themselves to this work, which is marked by uncertainty, lack of institutional support, and numerous social barriers. In many cases, the search becomes the central focus of their lives, redefining their priorities, occupations, and ways of relating to their surroundings (Ortegón Osorio, 2022).

Three aspects stand out from our interviews with women searchers regarding economic impacts: first, the economic cost of the search process; second, the demanding nature of the labour of searching, which excludes the possibility of working on something else (which is worse in the case of elder women); and third, the lack of recognition of search work as a form of labour, and of the knowledge involved as expertise that should be valued.

Regarding the first aspect, the women face the financial burdens associated with searching for the disappeared. Searching requires money not only to travel to different parts of the country and cover lodging and food expenses during these trips, but also – often – to pay for legal advice and even psychological support. In the face of limited resources, they have shown great resourcefulness and rely heavily on solidarity among themselves: they connect with other women and with other organisations of women searchers, host one another, and help each other obtain what is needed to continue their processes. All participants agreed that support from state authorities for these initiatives is minimal – or entirely absent.

“In my family, we had the resources to search, but I know that's a privilege very few families can afford. We were able to find the body because an aunt living abroad covered all the expenses.” (Focus group, 2025)

In relation to the second aspect, many of the women have spent years – sometimes decades – engaged in searching for their loved ones and supporting others in their own searches. This activity has become their main occupation or has consumed the majority of their time. Since it is unpaid, it has prevented them from contributing to the pension system. As a result, now in older age, many are unable to access a decent pension, having not made contributions during the many years dedicated to search work. This has deepened their vulnerability, especially as age and the physical and emotional demands of the search (as will be discussed further below) have led to health conditions that limit their ability to continue searching or to find alternative ways to meet their basic needs.

Finally, and closely tied to the previous aspect, although participants dedicate a large part of their time to searching and have acquired deep knowledge and practical expertise through this work, their efforts are not recognised as formal employment. Many of them had no access to professional training or specialised education in search-related fields (such as forensic sciences), which limits their

ability to obtain formal jobs within the state institutions responsible for locating the disappeared. Nevertheless, they have successfully located hundreds of disappeared persons and consistently support the efforts of state entities.

Instead of finding formal employment related to the search, women must take on other jobs in order to survive. These compete with their own searches and, when combined with caregiving responsibilities, result in a triple workday.

“Our work as searchers is not recognised, and that’s why the knowledge we’ve gained throughout this process isn’t valued. Also, we can’t hold down a regular job because most of our time is dedicated to searching for our loved ones. That means we don’t have access to a pension or to the healthcare system to treat the illnesses we’ve developed along the way.” (Focus group, 2025)

As a result of the lack of formal employment and protection in old age, women searching for the disappeared find themselves in a situation of significant economic vulnerability. This condition only worsens over time, as their ability to work declines and health conditions accumulate. Nonetheless, this deterioration does not reduce their commitment to the search for the disappeared, to justice, and to uncovering the truth.

“Sometimes I go for days eating only the snack they give us at events, because I don’t have the money for proper meals. This work is really hard, but there are no financial incentives for victims, nor any support beyond travel expenses like hotels and transport when we’re doing this work.” (Focus group, 2025)

Additionally, women and their families must take on the financial responsibilities and other commercial or legal obligations of the disappeared. Although there are legal mechanisms such as the declaration of absence that are intended to suspend these obligations, participants noted that such measures are not applied as often as one might expect. As a result, women engaged in the search process find themselves bearing yet another burden alongside their ongoing efforts.

3.3 Impacts on health

Although it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between health conditions and the search for disappeared persons, participants reported a wide range of physical ailments – such as chronic pain, retinal detachment, and high blood pressure – as well as mental health issues, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. It is reasonable to assume that searching for loved ones amid fear, uncertainty, and material hardship can have serious effects on health. One participant captured the physical and emotional toll of this experience when she stated: *“The search bleeds the body drop by drop.”* (Focus group, 2025)

“It really struck me that we haven’t been able to practise self-care. (...) Of course, that led to serious health problems. For example, she (her mother) would never eat, and that’s why she lost part of her mobility – and she never had the chance to get treatment, because that also requires resources. So you start putting your health aside, and obviously that doesn’t

give you the space to really ask yourself: How is my health? How am I doing? My sister, the oldest, started suffering from alopecia since she was little, and all of us have serious stomach issues.” (Interview, 2025).

Regarding healthcare services, participants acknowledged the existence of physical and psychosocial care services for victims – such as the rehabilitation measures established by the Victims Law – but emphasised that these do not include a differential approach for victims of enforced disappearance.

“There are no differentiated psychological treatments for us as victims and for our specific victimising experience. With the current crisis in the healthcare system, there isn’t even any real treatment available for those of us who have gone through all of this.” (Focus group, 2025)

Women searchers noted that they do not receive prioritised care, and that there are no specialised care teams adequately trained or sensitive enough to address the specific physical and emotional traumas associated with disappearance. For example, participants mentioned that many professionals fail to grasp the deep bond that exists between a mother and her son, or the impact that losing a son can have on a woman’s life – especially when he was also, in many cases, the “man of the house”. Likewise, many recount that during the search process they were treated as “crazy” or “hysterical”, which constitutes a form of psychological violence. This constant disqualification led some to doubt themselves or to witness how their fellow searchers gave up after losing confidence in what they knew or felt. Despite this, there is no specialised care available to address these impacts. As a result, they are often forced to rely on general healthcare services, where professionals frequently lack both the knowledge and empathy to adequately address their needs – or, in some cases, they must turn to private services, which they must pay for out of their own pockets.

3.4 Impacts on education

In relation to their own education, as previously noted, many participants did not have access to university-level studies, which limits their ability to obtain formal employment related to search work. At the same time, they feel that their opportunities to pursue further education were cut short. In a context of scarce resources and deepened gender-based economic inequalities, every decision about how to allocate time and material resources became crucial – and their own education was often deprioritised to put their children’s education first. This situation is compounded by the fact that they did not receive any state support to improve their training or gain access to formal educational opportunities.

Regarding their children’s educational opportunities, the search for disappeared persons has caused limitations due to the difficult material conditions they endure. In addition, participants emphasised that their children often experienced poorer educational conditions as a result of having to change schools frequently, due to relocations aimed at ensuring the family’s safety. It was common to hear from older participants that they had to move constantly, which meant repeatedly changing their children’s schools to avoid potential threats. This, they stated, negatively affected the quality of their children’s education, which was marked by instability and interruptions directly linked to their family’s forced mobility.

“So this persecution meant that we had to move houses over and over again, year after year, and each move meant changing schools, changing friends, neighbourhoods – everything. We went through so many schools, it was really chaotic, and I think that didn’t give us a solid foundation to later access university.” (Interview, 2025)

The testimonies gathered from the focus group reveal that the search for disappeared loved ones deeply impacts women’s lives across multiple dimensions – social, economic, physical, emotional, and educational. Their experiences highlight the breakdown of social and family networks, the economic vulnerability resulting from unpaid and unrecognised search work, the physical and mental toll caused by years of sustained effort, and the limited educational opportunities both for themselves and their children. Despite these hardships, the women remain committed to their search and to the pursuit of truth and justice. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, differentiated public policies that recognise and support the role of women searchers as both victims of injustice and agents of transformation.

4. Recommendations

The experience of searching for the disappeared in Colombia has allowed women searchers to identify a series of obstacles, needs, and essential lessons. Through this process, they have also developed concrete measures aimed at facilitating the search for their loved ones and, at the same time, preventing the re-victimisation that often accompanies this journey. This section presents a set of recommendations proposed by the searchers themselves, aimed at dignifying their work, guaranteeing their rights, and strengthening the conditions for an effective search process.

A broader recommendation stems from the recognition that there are already multiple legal developments that come from the Victims Law and include measures for victims – such as housing subsidies, scholarships for higher education, and legal mechanisms to protect property rights. However, these measures are often unknown to public officials and, as a result, go unimplemented. Therefore, improving training for public servants on the instruments that protect the rights of victims of enforced disappearance, and their scope, is an essential step toward overcoming the vulnerabilities these victims face.

Based on the reflections proposed by the participants, we present below some of the key recommendations to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the search for the disappeared.

4.1 Regarding social impacts

One of the central issues discussed was the need for greater social recognition of the phenomenon of enforced disappearance and its severity. For the participants, it is essential that the state acknowledges its responsibility and that educational efforts be promoted to help society understand what happened.

In particular, participants emphasised that the continued practice of enforced disappearance – as a human rights violation, even if now carried out with different characteristics by organised crime

groups – is an unfortunate reality that reflects the lack of effective prevention and guarantees of non-repetition.

To eradicate stigmatisation, truth-clarifying mechanisms and the prosecution of perpetrators have proven useful in restoring victims' good name. They have also contributed to eliminating justificatory narratives. Making legal decisions and the findings of extrajudicial transitional justice mechanisms public is crucial for restoring the reputation of both victims and those who search.

4.2 Regarding economic impacts

Economic stability: Participants propose that search work be recognised as formal labour. This recognition would allow women to engage in this effort without putting at risk their own livelihoods or that of their families. To achieve this, they suggest exploring the possibility of formal employment for searchers within judicial and extrajudicial institutions responsible for locating the disappeared. Their accumulated knowledge, community networks, and lived experience are seen as key assets for advancing the search process. One example cited was the short-term hiring of women's organisations by the Victims' Unit, with a similar arrangement in the Special Unit for the Search of the Disappeared Persons, to support and guide others beginning their search journeys. However, these contracts were not sustained over time.

Support for elderly searchers: Participants recommend that their search work be recognised through access to pensions, either via the creation of a special pension scheme or by relaxing existing eligibility criteria. Specifically, they propose that the *disability pension* – a humanitarian measure granted to victims of the armed conflict who have lost more than 50 per cent of their capacity to work or face particular vulnerability – be extended to them. While many of the women may not have lost physical capacity in a direct way, they have suffered numerous physical and mental health impacts over the years. Moreover, formalising search work as employment would enable women to access pensions in old age, helping to ensure a dignified life in later years, in contrast to the precarious conditions they currently face. We recognise that this proposal may be viewed as problematic, as it appears to "put a price" on a humanitarian activity; however, it is essential to emphasise both the labour dimension of searching and the claims made by women searchers in this regard.

Property rights: Colombia has established the legal instrument of *declaration of absence due to enforced disappearance*, which allows family members to request a judicial declaration in order to protect and manage the property of the disappeared person. This figure serves three key functions: it authorises the administration of the disappeared person's assets, suspends their civil and commercial obligations during their absence, and guarantees the continuity of their civil rights. While this mechanism allows women – or other family members – to safeguard the family's assets, in practice it remains underutilised due to lack of awareness among public officials, who are often familiar only with the *declaration of presumed death*, which is harmful for families who hold out the hope of finding their relative or refuse to accept the presumption of their death.

Housing: Women propose improving access to priority housing programmes for victims of the armed conflict. While the state has created subsidy programmes and prioritisation mechanisms to uphold the right to decent housing, their implementation has been uneven and limited. Strengthening these

programmes – ensuring coverage in both urban and rural areas – and guaranteeing comprehensive support throughout the application, adjudication, and benefit access processes is crucial for women searchers.

4.3 Regarding health

Participants recommend implementing specialised and comprehensive healthcare that addresses, in a differentiated way, the physical and mental health impacts of enforced disappearance and the prolonged search process. This should include continuous treatment, psychosocial support, and trained professional care for victims of armed conflict and enforced disappearance.

4.4 Regarding education

Women searchers recommend expanding access to scholarships and educational support for families of the disappeared. Although certain laws and public policies state that such subsidies should be granted, the women report that in practice, these benefits are not being delivered.

They also emphasise the importance of educational institutions taking into account the particularities of the search process, since many of them saw their academic trajectories interrupted when, due to security concerns or the need to relocate, they could not attend classes and were consequently required to repeat the school year, with no consideration of their situation or any offer of alternatives.

Annex

Table 1
Focus group participants

Name	Role	Organisation
Andrea Torres	Searcher, Legal Coordinator and Deputy Director	Nydia Erika Bautista Foundation
Ana Paez	Searcher and lawyer	Mothers of False Positives from Soacha and Bogotá
Luz Marina Hache	Searcher and Founder of the Searchers' Movement	Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE)
Bryan Quiroga	Lawyer supporting victims	Orlando Fals Borda
Pablo Cala	Searcher and Member of the Advisory Committee	Hasta Encontrarlos
Pilar Navarrete	Founder and Member of the District Disappearance Board	Palace of Justice Families
Teresa Botero	Searcher	Sueños de Reconciliación Corporation
Martha Ceballos	Searcher	MOVICE – Nariño Chapter
Aura Camargo	Searcher and Representative	Ruta del Cimarronaje
Gloria Mansilla	Searcher	Díaz Mansilla Family
Luisa Mansilla	Searcher	Díaz Mansilla Family
John	Searcher and lawyer	Hasta Encontrarlos
Emerson	Searcher and lawyer	Acomides

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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