

ARTICLE

Territories that deafen cries of forced disappearance: Vulnerability, resilience and social work?

Territorios que ensordecen gritos de desaparición forzada. Vulnerabilidad, resiliencia y ¿Trabajo Social?

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Abstract

The disappearance of people in Mexico, over the course of a little more than fifteen years, has grown in a worrying way; currently there is a register of more than 115,000 missing persons. This phenomenon has serious consequences for the relatives of those who have disappeared, as it generates a psychic disarticulation due to the ambiguous loss and the impossibility of going through the mourning process. This article presents an analysis that arises from the qualitative research

Keywords:
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² This study was carried out thanks to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), under the support of the Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme at UNAM, where I was a fellow at the Regional Centre for Multidisciplinary Research (CRIM) and advised by Dr. Roberto Castro.

work³, developed during the years 2019-2020, with relatives of disappeared persons in the states of Guerrero and Veracruz, which aimed to deepen the resilience alternatives in individuals, groups and collectives during the searches for those who have disappeared under the constant vulnerability of those who live in these territories. The findings discussed here allow us to analyse the various challenges for developing relevant Social Work based on the needs oriented towards the construction of alternatives for resilience in the face of the phenomenon of disappearance, in territories where impunity and serious human rights violations are a constant; in this direction, an analysis is presented based theoretically on the processes of resilience in the face of constant vulnerability, as well as on the pending exercise of Social Work. Various situations that the families of disappeared persons face in territories of violence and impunity are presented, as well as the bases that support the opportunity to develop Social Work aimed at strengthening processes of resilience in cases of enforced disappearance.

Resumen

La desaparición de personas en México, desde hace poco más de quince años, ha crecido de forma preocupante, actualmente existe un registro de más de 115 mil personas desaparecidas. Este fenómeno genera consecuencias graves para familiares de quienes han desaparecido, ya que genera una desarticulación psíquica a causa de la pérdida ambigua y la imposibilidad de vivir un proceso de duelo. En este artículo se presenta un análisis que surge del trabajo de investigación cualitativa, desarrollada durante los años 2019-2020, con familiares de personas desaparecidas en los estados de Guerrero y Veracruz, la cual tuvo como objeto profundizar en las alternativas de resiliencia en personas, grupos y colectivos durante las búsquedas de quienes han desaparecido bajo la constante vulnerabilidad de quienes viven en estos territorios. Los hallazgos que aquí se discuten permiten analizar los diversos desafíos para desarrollar un Trabajo Social pertinente y sustentado en las necesidades orientadas a la construcción de alternativas de resiliencia frente al fenómeno de desaparición, en territorios donde la impunidad y las violaciones graves a los derechos humanos es una constante; en esta dirección, se presenta un análisis sustentado teóricamente en los procesos de resiliencia ante la constante vulnerabilidad, así como en el ejercicio pendiente del Trabajo Social. Se exponen diversas situaciones que las familias de personas desaparecidas enfrentan en territorios de violencia e impunidad y las bases que fundamentan la oportunidad de desarrollar un Trabajo Social orientado a potenciar procesos de resiliencia en casos de desaparición forzada.

Palabras Clave:
Desaparición resiliencia; vulnerabilidad; territorios; Trabajo Social

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Introduction

In Mexico, the phenomenon of forced disappearances dates back to the 1970s; however, in the last 16 years it has increased dramatically (approximately 94%); as of April 2024 there is a record of 115,694 disappeared persons according to the National Register of Disappeared and Missing Persons (from now on RNPDNO). The violent environment that led to this humanitarian crisis in the country is related to the security policies developed by former President Felipe Calderón, which were seconded by the government of former President Enrique Peña Nieto (Gutiérrez, 2016; Trejo and Ley, 2016), which opted for the militarisation of the country by implementing operations to combat drug trafficking groups. The Mexican state has been overwhelmed, the systematic inefficiency of the institutions in charge has led to the searches for missing persons being driven and developed mainly by collectives and families of missing persons, where the greatest representation is made up of women in territories where vulnerability is a constant in the face of violence and impunity (Almanza et al., 2020).

During the fieldwork carried out for this research, on a day of distribution of missing persons search forms in a town in the north of Veracruz, Mexico, through the V National Brigade for the Search for Missing Persons (organised by various collectives of relatives), a woman was interviewed who had come forward to offer help in solidarity. She was a social worker who had resigned from her job⁴, which dealt with cases of disappearances. She gave an interview for the development of this study and commented:

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...they didn't teach me how to solve these problems, nor did I receive training to solve so much suffering, no, no, you can't carry it! It's not only the relatives who suffer for the disappeared, do you understand me? I don't want to compare; I would never do that! But, when you are on the other side, the families want answers, they want you to give yourself totally, you can't do that. The bosses put pressure on me, they made commitments and then they threw the file at us, one after the other, "file it" they said, then another new official arrived and I had to answer for why things were done like that, they even blamed you [...] You find out things that put you in danger, you live here, you know who is wrong, if you work there you are always under surveillance, they know who your family is and everything, that's why I resigned. But I can't help feeling bad, I feel guilty for not having been able to do my job, from the outside I want to help, that's why I come to⁵.

⁴ Her work was carried out in a judicial institution in the region where cases of disappearance are followed up. The specificity of the data is omitted in order to respect anonymity and to guarantee the security of the participants in this study.

⁵ There is no identification, as the testimony is only used as a preamble to the study.



Faced with an unstoppable spiral of violence linked to criminal groups related to drug trafficking and security institutions, crimes against humanity, such as the forced disappearance of people, have disrupted the lives of thousands of people. Many professions have been surprised by the lack of disciplinary expertise to address these types of problems, which are located in areas of violence and vulnerability. However, the diverse needs of the victims of this phenomenon cannot be subject to the procrastination of the professions, in particular Social Work. The role of this profession, in this case focused on the accompaniment of people with disappeared relatives, is an unfinished task that is not free of complexities and that has to be developed in territories of impunity and violence. But how can social work be developed under these circumstances? Insisting on conscious accompaniment and the recognition of professional biases become relevant and cannot be overlooked.

Among the consequences that affect the relatives of missing persons we can observe disorders in mental health and physical health, transformations in private and public life, alteration in economic situation and family dynamics (Manríquez et al., 2019; Salazar, 2018; 2022). The disappearance of a family member produces an incessant uncertainty related to the lack of knowledge about the whereabouts of the loved one, knowing whether they are alive or dead; the trauma generated can be aggravated because there is a before and after in the lives of family members where, despite the time elapsed, pain is a feature of the present (Giraldo et al., 2008; Salazar, 2018; 2022).

Cases of enforced disappearance are the violent expression that has the greatest disarticulating power over those who suffer the disappearance of one or more loved ones (Gatti, 2011). The ambiguous loss caused by disappearance in families causes prolonged episodes of stress and confusion about the meaning of life (Manríquez et al., 2019); the high level of ambiguity produced by the phenomenon of disappearance increases psychological distress in the families of missing persons, being greater than for people who suffer the confirmed death of a loved one. This is intensified by the permanence of a context of violence, corruption and impunity (Almanza et al., 2020; Salazar and Castro, 2020). There is also a worsening of the problems generated by gender issues, due to the fact that it is mostly women who carry out the search for missing persons and the actions in search of judicial follow-up (Autor, 2021).

² The research project and its respective instruments were submitted for evaluation to the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Alberto Hurtado.

In various territories where impunity and violence are a constant and where the vulnerability of those who have been affected is exacerbated, resilience processes have been identified through different studies carried out with victims of extreme violence⁶, which explain the possibility of experiencing recovery alternatives. The accelerated increase of human rights violations in Mexico, coupled with an evident impunity, generates a feeling of vulnerability among the general population, which, under an oxymoron effect, influences the development of various coping strategies that allow interpreting and finding a sense of understanding in the face of this new reality (Castro and Erviti, 2014; Autor, 2022). Similarly, through the studies developed by the Author (2018; 2020a; 2022) and Autor (2020b; 2021), alternatives for generating resilience in women who have suffered violence and the disappearance of one or more family members in Mexico are observed. This article analyses and exposes the needs that arise in the context of disappearance, highlighting the need for Social Work to focus on the generation of resilient alternatives for people who have suffered and continue to suffer the disappearance of their loved ones, considering that they are also searching for their relatives in territories where their vulnerability is a constant.

Vulnerability, Resilience and Social Work? Necessary clarifications

In order to understand the constant vulnerability in which people who have disappeared/missing family members live, it is important to point out the meaning of vulnerability in this work. According to Osorio (2017) and Ochoa and Guzmán (2020), vulnerability refers to the disadvantaged condition in which a person, a community or a system finds itself in the face of increased threats or risks and the lack of necessary resources, or weakening of coping mechanisms, to overcome the damage; from its etymological root it refers to being exposed to a wound. Vulnerability has been used with different connotations, either from addressing the internal characteristics of an individual or social group, or from the risks that exist in different environments (Barahona, 2006; Liedo, 2021).

In much of the world, experiences of vulnerability are closely linked to perceptions of insecurity (Pérez, 2005; Adger, 2006; Kanashiro et al., 2018). According to Perez:

...vulnerability refers to the notion of insecurity, whether it manifests itself as a weakness, or exposure to disadvantage, a possibility of harm to the physical, psychological or moral integrity of the person, or even exposure to a rule of law that violates fundamental rights and guarantees. (2005, p.850).

⁶ See studies by Aisenberg and Herrenkohl (2008); Barudy and Marquebreucq (2005); Cyrulnik (2001; 2014); Flores (2007); García and Domínguez (2013); Hoyos (2014); Torralba (2013).

Vulnerability can be perceived in potential victims of criminal violence in a symptomatic way: they make changes in their itineraries, seclude themselves in private spaces and invest resources in protective devices; fear is considerably represented in their daily lives (Bustamante, 2017; González et al., 2013; Hopenhayn, 2001). For direct victims of violent crime, vulnerability can be present even after these experiences, due to the emotional situation they experience, as it causes them to be unable to use the usual psychological resources; the emotional fragility can be a determinant for being vulnerable even to other crimes (Echeburúa et al., 2002; González et al., 2013; Macleod and Duarte, 2019). A characteristic of vulnerability is its changing dynamics, which responds to different temporalities and to the different social contexts in which the daily lives of those who have been violated are framed.

Likewise, resilience is understood as a process that requires the dynamic balance of various internal and external factors that facilitate a development to overcome adversity and overcome traumatic episodes, in such a way that a transformation can be achieved and a life project can be realised (Cyrułnik, 2001; Author, 2020). After having suffered a violent event, a key element to develop resilient processes is to give meaning to a negative experience through the understanding of the event, under an interpretation that allows the development of attitudes that facilitate the individual to emerge from the trauma, which is favoured by social support (Cyrułnik, 2001; Martínez and Peñata, 2023). Support from at least one other person is essential for resilient reconstruction (Torralla, 2013).

Advances in the study of resilience have influenced the relational paradigm, in which the ties that bind people and systems together allow them to move towards a shared trajectory (Gómez and Kotliarenko, 2010). Relational factors respond both to identity and to different contexts and circumstances, so it is necessary to discern and understand strategies according to the logic and situation of people when they have to face difficult situations (Estrella, 2020; García and Domínguez, 2013).

There are some factors that impede resilience: isolation (social interaction is needed for the construction and exchange of stories that allow for the representation of oneself) and culture (the stigmatisation and re-victimisation that develops against victims in some regions or social circles) (Cyrułnick, 2014). Generating processes that facilitate resilience is not a work free of complexity; the trajectory of resilience is far from a linear process, and resilience is inscribed in a temporality that determines its meaning and constantly modifies its form (Pourtouis, 2014).

Studies related to violent acts and environments should favour the exploration of the understanding and promotion of resilience at the individual, group, family and community level; in this way, it can have an impact on motivating the understanding of risk factors and protective factors and use such knowledge for the development of relevant social programmes (Aisenberg and Herrenkohl, 2008). Resilience becomes an opportunity for Social Work, it is a field of action that will allow diverse actions on complex situations related to the phenomenon of enforced disappearance of persons.

Social advocacy actions aimed at the families of missing persons must start from a clear reflection on their scope; such actions can be built from the understanding of the main transformations that the phenomenon causes on families and the knowledge of the main processes that allow them to cope and overcome the various adverse situations that disappearance generates. This positions Social Work professionals in a reality that needs to be addressed in an immediate, rigorous and well-founded manner.

According to Villalba (2003), in a social intervention the resilience approach is closely related to the constructs of risk and protection. From the author's perspective, the focus on strengths should not underestimate the potential of risk, so that, by considering it, coping strategies have a better chance of development and effectiveness. For Bello (2005), it is very important to avoid giving fragmented, residual and disjointed attention to the interests of people with disappeared relatives; on the contrary, the author insists that actions should be sought that are part of the reparation of rights, the guarantee of judicial follow-up and search, the recognition of the diversity of needs that arise with the disappearance, the right and recognition of the political status of the families; In addition, it must be considered that achieving professional accompaniment and social advocacy actions is complex, as within territories where violence and insecurity persist there are tensions and contradictions around emerging demands and needs; in cases of survival there are constant threats and risks, and attention focused on the victims and not on the phenomenon that causes the victimisation has an impact on the permanence of the phenomenon.

Method

The research was conducted using a qualitative paradigm and a phenomenological approach. The selection of participants responded to the rapport achieved with people during the accompaniment in actions of denunciation and search brigades for missing persons between 2019 and 2020. The inclusion criteria responded to a careful selec-



tion based on the object of the study, the ethical rigour⁷ with which the research was carried out and the following characteristics: having one or more relatives who have disappeared in the states of Guerrero and Veracruz; belonging to collectives of relatives searching for their missing persons; being of legal age; and agreeing to participate in the study. Thus, there were 24 participants in the research (19 were women), with an age range of 24-75 years. In addition to this selection of participants, and based on the information gathered during the fieldwork, an interview was added of a 37-year-old female social worker who participated in solidarity with the members of collectives formed by relatives of disappeared persons.

The collection of information was carried out through in-depth interviews developed during the fieldwork implemented in 2019 and 2020; they lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with the approval of each participant, transcribed and subsequently a content analysis was made considering the phenomenological approach of the study, which involved an analysis of the meanings that the participants give to their experiences linked to the phenomenon of disappearance. MAXQDA version 12 software was used. The main ethical aspects that were considered for the research were: willingness to participate in the study; providing informed consent; taking care of confidentiality and guaranteeing anonymity; prudent treatment of the topic, respecting and taking care of the overflow of emotions of each participant; with regard to the latter, professional guidance and support was provided by colleagues with experience in the mental care of indirect victims of disappearance.

Results and discussion

The findings discussed here are aimed at analysing the different challenges for promoting assertive Social Work based on the construction of alternatives for resilience in the face of the needs linked to the phenomenon of the disappearance of persons in territories characterised by impunity and serious human rights violations. In this way, two main sections have been organised to facilitate an understanding, on the one hand, of the experiences lived by people with disappeared relatives (in a thematic order based on the relevance and intensity with which the participants narrated their experiences) and, on the other, of the bases that argue for the development of Social Work aimed at strengthening resilience processes in cases of forced disappearance in Mexico. In this sense, an analysis is presented on the experiences lived in terms of the emotional impact experienced, the deteriorated health, the priorities re-established, the precarious institutional care, the family transformations and their relational nature with processes

⁷ The ethical aspects of this research were discussed and reviewed collegially with the research group overseeing the study at institutional level.



of resilience in which Social Work can have an effective impact from three dimensions: personal, family and territorial.

Cries in the desert: The preamble for the professional action of Social Work in the face of the permanence of vulnerability under territories of violence and impunity

The emotional impact of the disappearance on the participants was acute during the first months; they experienced feelings of fear, anguish, helplessness, despair, hopelessness, anger and rage; in some cases, they were unable to stop crying, sleeping or feeding; the latter has been pointed out as characteristics of those who live through a traumatic experience (Duarte and Olivas, 2020; Echeburúa et al., 2005). The case participants in this study show that disappearance generates similar consequences. The main ones are summarised in the following table:

Table 1. Main consequences of disappearance

Physical illnesses	Mental illnesses	Family impacts	Economic disruption	Social disorders
Diabetes	Depression	Family reconfigurational	Reduction of income due to disappearance of main supplier or job abandonment	Stigmatisation
High pressure	Anxiety.	Role reversal		Reduction of share capital
Hypertension	-Stress			
Fibromyalgia	Sleep disorders	Family fragmentation	Increased expenses related to legal and search processes	Social isolation
Nervous colitis	Eating disorders	Addictions in family members		Loss of trust in others
		Loss of communication between family members		

Source: Own elaboration

Attending to physical and mental disorders is not a priority for those looking for their relatives; they let many months, even years, go by before making the decision to attend to their health. Their physical and mental exhaustion has a major impact on their quality of life and their very existence:

My priority is to find my daughter; they tell me “control your blood pressure” but how to control it? Months went by before I realised that I had high blood pressure. What I want is to find her, the truth is that I forget to take the pill, they tell me I need tests, the other time I had 180/110, I was looking for her, I don’t even feel it high. (P7)

Among the narratives it was possible to observe that even when they were aware of the deterioration of their health, they showed more concern and occupation for their relatives than for themselves, thus postponing their care and treatment:

Yes, I have high blood sugar, but him? They don’t complain, you have to pay attention and monitor them, it hurts my heart more, I take insulin and that’s it, but him? (P16)

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There are situations that increase vulnerability, which they assume without resistance, putting affection for those who have disappeared first. Most of the participants are the ones who carry out the searches in life and in the field⁸ for their relatives. The following account exposes the territories that place them in constant vulnerability, that put their physical and mental integrity at risk and that they have to deal with during the searches:

It doesn’t matter if you are accompanied by authorities, if you go with other family members or if you go alone, they watch you, they tell you where to look and where not to look, they have power, I have already confronted them, but my partner who was suborned had her house burned down, and I had to take her down a little bit, then I go back, where they told me not to look, there I go back. (P12).

The territories where the disappearance of family members of participants occurred are characterised by their diversity and complexity; each case is staged by adverse, violent situations of clear vulnerability. For example, in one of the cases the disappearance occurred in the workplace of the disappeared person, which was later the scene of multiple homicides and burned down along with other commercial establishments

⁸ This refers to searches for bodies or skeletal remains in places where clandestine graves are presumed to exist.



in the area; another case occurred under an informal curfew imposed by the leading criminal group in the town where access to representatives of security institutions was nil; another case was reported in a town where the ministerial authorities refused to register the report of disappearance when it came to women who disappeared under suspicion of a crime of trafficking.

The common factors identified in the cases of those who participate in this study are: the disappearances occurred in the states of Guerrero and Veracruz; they have not received adequate accompaniment or treatment from the Social Work profession; the attention provided by the institutions is insufficient and/or limited. The latter is represented by participants P1, P3 and P14 who share:

...to ask for help, to find hands that could, that could help, to look for justice, to look for protection, it was, it was like shouting in the desert, every time I shouted I saw myself being destroyed in a, in a mountain, a mountain without echo, where you no longer knew who was who (P1).

The Social Worker said to me: “look, I am only here to take data, you come with me, you are the ones who bring the missing children”, I told her the data while shouting. (P3).

She said to me: “I am a social worker, not a psychologist, take your granddaughter to one”, I knew she was not a psychologist, I answered her: “my granddaughter is being bullied because her mother is missing, how come she is the one who needs a psychologist? What she needs is for you to do something with those children at school”. (P14)

The above experience reflects the lack of assertiveness in the institutional attention of countless cases; not only are the requests and demands related to the search for their relatives and procedures to achieve justice met with indifference and incompetence, but there is also little attention and initiative to generate appropriate intervention models, in accordance with the particular needs of each case; in addition, the lack of social interventions aimed at generating a social culture sensitive to the phenomenon that avoids stigmatisation, violence and re-victimisation is evident.

In many of the cases there are different actions of intimidation under a territory of impunity, with the knowledge of those who have been in charge of security and justice, as reflected in the following account:

Outside the prosecutor's office, who tells us: "Why are you coming? You'd better take care of those who are still with you, stop fucking around" all the employees realised this, including the officials, but they became assholes. (P11)

The emotional situation of the families is also affected by living under a constant state of alert, fear and vulnerability that the search territories provoke. For Guevara and Chávez (2018), in Mexico there is a complex panorama in which impunity has become structural and, consequently, there is a lack of punishment for these actions, which has an impact on the repetition of serious crimes, especially the disappearance of persons. Among other adversities, it is observed that the judicial follow-up of their cases is subject to constant changes of officials and public servants, which has an impact on an inefficient knowledge of their cases and exposes them to re-victimisation and delays a correct judicial follow-up:

They changed my MP again⁹, that's three times in two years, and again the same thing! To tell him the whole story, all the details, that's re-victimisation, I told them! They tell me, we are going to integrate your file, and what had already been formed? They didn't have it anymore! There was only the complaint (P6).

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Yes, she was the social worker, who tells me "does she help me or not with the information? I only follow instructions, if you have a complaint tell him, he is new, maybe he does listen to you" nobody is responsible, do you know how many times I have been changed from MP? Four times, every time it happens many things are lost from the file. (P8).

In addition to the procedural complications they face, they also deal with the family transformations that disappearance generates. Family spaces change according to the new roles that are assumed and obligations that are transferred to other family members. In nine of the cases, the participants acquired responsibility for their grandchildren after the disappearance of one or both parents, and this has had an impact on care, upbringing and financial responsibility. There is a return to a life cycle that they thought was already closed, where the care of the children (in the midst of generation gaps) is among their main concerns. In families that are made up of older people, the acquisition of new responsibilities for the maintenance and upbringing of their grandchildren has an impact on the family dynamics and there are complex limitations to generate economic resources to meet their needs.

⁹ MP: Public Prosecutor's Office.



In families where one or more members are missing, there are constant feelings of pain, guilt, fear, frustration, among others. Each member, according to the links with the disappeared person and the role assigned within the family space, will have a different way of responding to the event in their daily lives. In any case, it is possible to observe that these families experience ambiguous mourning; according to Cabodevilla (2007), in this case people perceive the person as physically absent, but psychologically present, and these are usually long and difficult processes to close.

The reconfiguration of families after a violent event is far from a mechanical process, as daily life and their sense of coexistence is permeated by various behaviours that refer to feelings of fear, vulnerability, confusion, frustration, among others (Palacio, 2004). In this study it was possible to identify that in the participating families there are reconfigurations that show changes in authority figures, assigned roles, family size and structure, economic responsibility and parenting dynamics.

The phenomenon of disappearance has implications for families that must be analysed from a gender perspective. Although in a family with one or more disappeared members, all members are affected, as months and years go by, it is mostly women who do not give up their search and demand for attention and justice, which has different implications on their lifestyles, state of health and continuous exposure to risk, all of which increases their vulnerability (Autor, 2021).

Strengthening a path in resilience: An opportunity to influence for Social Work

Resilient development occurs through a process of transformation, which challenges linear determinisms assigned to those who experience an adverse situation. Among the primary characteristics of resilience is the capacity to rebuild and resist. It is the individual who expresses his or her capacity for coping, strength and struggle in the face of destruction, i.e. he or she recovers from the pain, despair, anguish, depression and other sequelae of the traumatic event, to emerge stronger (Hoyos, 2014). It is essential to consider that the experience of traumatic experiences has an impact on the increase of tension and anguish in people; the memory of what happened will always be part of their lives and will not be erased from their memory (Sanz, 2014). Care actions should be oriented towards accompanying them under the recognition of latent vulnerability, ambiguous loss and the impossibility of closing a mourning process.



The process of resilience tends to occur in a differentiated manner and each individual may have different reactions to the same event, which responds to the need for more or less time to process the experience. It is also related to variables such as age, personal history or the meaning given to the experience (Quiñonez, 2007). It is important to recognise resilience as a dialectical process and not as a condition or state, which will allow us to understand it as an evolutionary progression that responds to new vulnerabilities, contexts or conditions.

Within social work, three fundamental qualities are required to generate resilience-oriented processes: 1) understanding and accepting reality; 2) believing that life has meaning; and 3) the ability to generate strategies or alternative solutions. The ability to discern the real dimension of the problem and to take proactive actions that allow for the development of mechanisms and strategies to address it are essential elements to promote resilience. Quiñonez (2007) specifies that within the resilient process it is substantial to know the capacity of recognition that the subject achieves of him/herself in three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and attitudinal. In agreement with the author, it is proposed that the practice of Social Work, in territories of violence and impunity, should be oriented towards users recognising not only the different aspects of the problem in its right dimension, but also the opportunity offered by the re-signification of the adversities to be faced. In this regard, the following story is shared:

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I knew that the rest of my family was in danger after my son's disappearance, that half of my wife's life had been taken away from her and now we had to take care of her other half. We had to organise ourselves so that they wouldn't take more than they had already taken, we had to take care of ourselves and defend ourselves. Our daughter had already reproached us that we had also disappeared with Gerardo, so we had to make agreements as a family, organise new responsibilities, give each other space and support, this, this fucked us up yes, but it has also brought us closer together. (P16)

Recognising the emotional dimension allows for the experience of a wide range of emotional states that accompany the experience, where alternatives arise that allow manifestations such as support, solidarity, understanding, support, loyalty and strengthening of ties with other people suffering similar situations (Quiñones, 2007). It is fundamental for Social Work management to provide spaces that allow people with missing relatives to share emotions, both in terms of relief and catharsis, as well as emotions that support empathetic actions with their peers that allow them to generate co-resilience¹⁰. In this regard:

¹⁰ It is understood as the generation of personal resilience through influencing the resilience of another person or persons.



It is difficult for people who have not lived through this to understand you, there is no way, they have to be in your shoes to be able to do so, and I don't wish that on anyone else. But you need to cry, shout, get angry, get hugs, it's fucking hard! That's why we unite, that's why we're here, because between us we know what it's like to carry your disappeared on your back, you know, you know that the dates hurt, that the searches are not easy, but you see? Here we understand each other, we don't judge each other, we walk as a family, we gain brothers, sisters, you help, they help you, and that's how we walk (P21).

The attitudinal dimension, mentioned by Quiñonez (2007), gives rise to the immediate construction of alternatives for the survival of themselves, the people who make up their family nuclei or the people in the environment who are present. It allows them to seek information or help of an instrumental nature in order to construct alternative solutions:

...then I looked at my daughter, she was heartbroken, crying, I approached her, I told her: "you are not going to let them take away the rest of your life, you have to embrace your life, nobody here is going to stop looking, but nobody is going to stop living either". Look at her now, she just got her degree, and here she is in the brigade, embracing her life, lifting others up. (p.18)

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Resilience is not an automatic process; a person can be destroyed by a badly managed adversity. A resilient process allows a development under a management role of the experience away from victimisation, which promotes the possibility of representing and organising the situation one is suffering with strategies and the identification of one's strengths in the face of events. It is forged in situations of adversity, which is why it is necessary to recognise it, and this implies integrating the experience into individual, family, group and community identity. It is woven relationally and through narrative reasoning where there are spaces for listening, and the possibilities for self-restoration and growth are discovered (Cyrułnik, 2001). Resilience gives way to a relational paradigm in which the relational ties that bind people and systems together allow them to move towards a shared trajectory (Gómez and Kotliarenco, 2010). A series of communicational capacities are promoted that allow the sharing of beliefs and narratives, which foster feelings of coherence, collaboration, efficacy and confidence to face difficulties (Quiñonez, 2007).



The resilience that is generated in community has a close relationship with collective intelligence, which is understood as the generative capacity to produce new social practices and protective environments that minimise chaos in the face of adversity and offer environments of trust, so as to generate an interweaving of knowledge oriented towards the use of knowledge for the resolution of problems and collective care (Granada, 2018). Social Work should emphasise in its practice solidarity actions aimed at understanding emotions, strengthening relationships and care, fostering self-esteem and self-concept, the ability to attribute meaning or new meanings to life, self-help and mutual aid, influencing the development of greater group capacities for resilient processes (Villalba, 2006), thus recognising the paths built by collectives made up of relatives of missing persons, favouring their reproduction or permanence.

The relational sense of resilience originates when there is a joint recognition of the possibility of transformation, resistance and growth under adverse conditions, where there is a recognition of culture and context under the expectation of finding resources and strategies that favour processes that prioritise the analysis of group strengths and focus on their empowerment, thus reducing weaknesses. In terms of the phenomenon of disappearance, it involves not only the victims, but also the organisations and institutions that work in its attention and prosecution.

Socially influencing in territories of violence and impunity requires an openness to the professional reconstruction of identity, which allows for self-evaluation, the evaluation of professional praxis and the carrying out of diverse analyses that facilitate the recognition of the general and particular needs that can be addressed in each context, and the possibilities of influencing transformation processes that allow family members a process of reconstruction in resilience in order to give continuity to their life projects. The families affected by the disappearance are a source of knowledge about the different circumstances that afflict them, which is why the accompaniment from Social Work should be proposed, discussed and designed horizontally with the same people who are searching for their disappeared. In this way, the profession would recognise the need to visualise the human condition from the sentiments of those who suffer from humiliation, as a cornerstone for its intervention, linked to social justice and dignity, under an exhaustive search for methods, tools and resources that can have an impact on dynamic, reflexive and ethical interventions (Letelier and Norambuena, 2021). A preamble for action is identified through three dimensions: personal, family and territorial.



Figure 1. Dimensions for resilient social work with relatives of missing persons



The people who can provide accurate knowledge about the needs and challenges surrounding disappearances are those who are searching for their disappeared; in this sense, in order to elaborate social advocacy actions that facilitate spaces for resilience, it is necessary to walk and build together with them. In this way, it will be possible to work on awareness-raising processes, generate awareness and knowledge, propose and rethink actions of accompaniment and produce solidarity actions that allow for reconstruction through adversity.

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Reflections not to conclude

In Mexico there are several structural factors that generate violent territories where impunity and vulnerability are a constant, and resolving them is a complex challenge for the State. In this country, every person is vulnerable to disappearance and people who have already been vulnerable due to the disappearance of a family member continue to be exposed, considering the threats, exposure to other violent acts and re-victimisation. The scarce social policy aimed at victim families and the permanence of conditions that make the territories hostile exacerbate and complicate the various situations they face.

It is recognised that attention to persons with missing relatives, from a social policy perspective, implies profound changes at a structural, legislative and judicial level; nevertheless, there are various possibilities of influencing processes and spaces that facilitate the generation of resilience and co-resilience when interventions characterised by understanding, listening and planned collective actions are generated. Although people with missing relatives experience complex situations and considerable

vulnerability, the social support they receive facilitates processes that help to resolve their emerging needs and influence resilience processes.

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of detailed information regarding professional work with children who are victims of parental disappearance, which allows us to sustain how Social Work is also noticeable by its absence. In this sense, going deeper into the social interventions from Social Work aimed at children under such conditions becomes an invitation, an invitation to continue to follow up this line of research and to promote new studies that generate knowledge with social impact.

Finally, highlighting the impunity and violence that characterises the territories around disappearances will allow us to understand the different contexts that are faced; in this way social mechanisms of solidarity can be activated. The main challenge for Social Work consists of knowing how to walk alongside those who are searching for their disappeared, jointly identifying their needs and resources, assessing the environments for the development of activities and safeguarding, managing spaces for coexistence and listening, carrying out actions that reduce social resistance marked by stigma, to know and influence the knowledge of accompaniment in situations related to field search processes, exhumation processes and identification processes; but above all, it requires a conscious accompaniment of their trajectories, in which they demand to meet their families, truth and justice.

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For Social Work to be relevant, the relatives of missing persons must be listened to at all times; given the diversity of their stories, it is necessary not to ignore their needs and to recognise their complexity. Intervening, influencing and acting from a meshing of knowledge built with families and collectives is a latent need. In this sense, Social Work aimed at generating spaces for resilience in the contexts of disappearance in Mexico is a pending debt.

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