“We became sisters, not of blood but of pain”

Women’s experiences of organization and empowerment in relation to enforced disappearances in Mexico

Karin Bender
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Abstract

Enforced disappearances has been used as a repressive strategy by numerous Latin American states against tens of thousands of presumed political opponents and adversaries, starting in the 1960s in Guatemala. In contemporary Latin America, Mexico holds the record for disappearances, both politically and non-politically motivated, with more than 30 000 cases reported since the beginning of the drug war in 2006. In response to the silence and impunity from the state, family members have been forced to organize in order to advance in the search for their relatives and for justice. Most of these family members are women. The aim of this study is to analyze women’s experiences of organizing as relatives to the forcefully disappeared in Mexico to explore possible connections between organization and empowerment. Empowerment is here understood from a feminist perspective, as a transformative factor that gives women increased feelings of power to, power with and power within. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women organized in four different family members’ organizations in Mexico. The results were analyzed against a theoretical framework consisting of previous research and theories on women’s organizing in Latin America, focusing on strategic and practical gender interests and theories on women’s empowerment, from a feminist and sociologist perspective. The analysis revealed that through the process of organizing, women developed a critical consciousness and access to new skills and resources that resulted in the women becoming more active, political and empowered subjects. The results also showed that despite women’s reasons for organizing being originally practical, to find their loved ones, during the process of organization, these reasons became more strategic and political, as a result of the empowerment process. The study concludes that women’s collective action is a source of empowerment even within organizations that does not have this as an outspoken aim and that the collectives of family members have provided a space for women to become active, conscious and critical citizens.

Keywords

Women’s empowerment, women’s organization, enforced disappearances, Mexico, power, critical consciousness, feminist research.
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Abbreviations

CMDPDH ñ Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos
CONAVIGUA ñ Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala
EPR ñ Ejército Popular Revolucionario
FUUNDEC ñ Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en Coahuila
GAD ñ Gender and Development
GIEI ñ Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes
HRW ñ Human Rights Watch
MPJD ñ Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad
OHCHR ñ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN ñ United Nations
WID ñ Women in Development
1. Introduction

The idea for this thesis came to me during an internship at the Mexican human rights organization Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), where I worked as a researcher for five months between 2016 and 2017. During my time in Mexico I took part in various events organized by family members’ organizations of the disappeared in the country. What struck me at these events was the strength and willpower of the women in the organizations; the mothers, daughters, sisters and wives of the disappeared. Although narrating gruesome and cruel stories of violence, incomprehensible pain and suffering, from living in limbo and not knowing whether they would ever see their loved ones again, the women also showed an admirable strength, a sense of humor, solidarity with each other, and a spirit of never giving up. I was affected by these women and their discourses and decided to write my thesis about organized women in family members’ collectives. I was interested to know what made them organize, if and how being organized had changed them, what their experiences had been.

Women have a long history of organizing as relatives to the disappeared in Latin America. During the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983), where thousands of political dissidents were disappeared by the state, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo were at the forefront of the resistance, demanding answers and that their children be brought back alive (Howe 2006; Fisher 1993). In Guatemala and El Salvador during the civil wars in the 1980s, mothers and wives of the disappeared started their own investigations into the disappearances of their loved ones, when the state would refuse to give them any answers (Schirmer 1989; 1993; Fisher 1993). Similar situations are found in contemporary Mexico as well, where disappearances have increased considerably since the start of the drug war in 2006. In response to the silence and impunity from the state, family members have been forced to organize in order to advance in the search for their family members and for justice. Most of these family members are women, struggling to find out the truth about what happened not only to their specific relatives, but to the thousands of disappeared in the country.

Previous research on women organizing as family members of the disappeared has centered on how women organize around their gendered identities as mothers or wives for example, and whether this has furthered or impeded their political analysis and mobilization (Craske
1999; Chant with Craske 2003; Schirmer 1993; Fisher 1993). Most of the research has focused on women in Argentina, Guatemala and El Salvador during the authoritarian and military regimes. However, little research has been conducted on women’s experiences from organizing as family members of the disappeared in contemporary Mexico and on the empowering effects that organizing might have on women and their lives. Women’s empowerment through organization has instead been addressed in relation to feminist organizations, social movements, labor unions and political parties, that may have an explicit agenda or outspoken aim to empower people (Brohman 1996; Alvarez 1990; Safa 1990; Jelin 1997).

The concept of women’s empowerment has in itself been subjected to a great deal of discussion and debate regarding its definitions and implications. Used by a wide array of institutions and organizations within different disciplines, there is no consensus on how empowerment is to be interpreted, analyzed and understood. A feminist perspective on empowerment begins with a constructive interpretation of the root of the concept: power. By analyzing power as ‘power with’, ‘power to’, ‘power within’ instead of the dominant ‘power over’, feminist scholars believe that empowerment can lead to a greater sense of agency and self-esteem in women, but also to a kind of group dignity and spaces for collective action, where power and democracy can be generated (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997; Eduards 2002). Important steps in the empowerment process include the development of a critical consciousness, identification with similar others and developing political skills, which constitute a promising breeding ground for successful mobilizations and possibly social change (Gutiérrez 1994, 1995; Carr 2003).

Drawing on previous research on women organizing in Latin America and theories on women’s empowerment; the research interest of this study lies in analyzing women’s experiences of empowerment through family members’ organizations in Mexico, through a qualitative study based on interviews with organized women. Hopefully this thesis can be of some use and importance for the movement of relatives and as an inspiration for further research. It also wishes to shed light upon the ongoing crisis of enforced disappearances in the country, that is lived and confronted by women every day.
1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this research study is to analyze women's experiences of organizing as relatives to the forcefully disappeared in Mexico and to explore possible connections between organization and empowerment. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with five women that are active in four different family members' organizations and part from a feminist perspective on the concepts of power and empowerment.

In order to reach the aim of the research, the following questions will be asked to my material:

1. What are the reasons for women's organization as family members to the disappeared?
2. How has being part of an organization contributed to women's empowerment process?

1.2 Disposition

Following this introductory chapter, the theoretical and conceptual framework will be presented in the next chapter, focusing on two main themes, women's organizing in Latin America and women's empowerment. This chapter contains both a literature review and a theoretical and conceptual outlining. Chapter three consists of a description of the methodological approach and scientific research method chosen for this study; a feminist research approach and semi-structured interviews. A careful review of the process of collecting data as well as a section on ethics and reflexivity will be included in this chapter. Next, the background chapter on enforced disappearances in Mexico will be presented. Chapter five is composed of a summarized description and preliminary analysis of the data retrieved from the interviews. This data will subsequently be further analyzed and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework in chapter six, followed by conclusions in chapter seven. References and an appendix with the interview guide are presented at the very end of the thesis.
2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework consists of two parts. It begins by reviewing and discussing women’s organizing in Latin America with a special focus on two main concepts, strategic and practical gender interests. A special emphasis is put on previous research on women’s organizing as relatives to the forcefully disappeared in Latin America. This section will contextualize my research and serve as a foundation to answering my first research question regarding the reasons for women’s organizing as family members. The chapter will continue by addressing the concepts of power and empowerment in order to establish a working definition of the concepts for the forthcoming analysis and discussions in chapter five and six in relation to my second research question concerning the relation between organization and empowerment.

2.1 Why women organize: strategic vs practical interests

Women’s organizing in Latin America is so vast and diverse that it is hard to venture into any generalizations (Lebon 2010:5). Nevertheless, this section will address two main concepts that have been commonly discussed by scholars in relation to women’s organizing in Latin America: strategic gender interests and practical gender interests. These concepts were first elaborated by sociologist Maxine Molyneux in 1985, when she made a distinction between the two interests. According to Molyneux, women’s strategic interests are derived from their subordinated role in society and consist of strategic objectives to overcome this subordination. Examples of strategic interests include the abolition of the sexual division of labor, political and economic equality, elimination of men’s violence and control over women, the right to abortion etc. These interests have been referred to by feminists as women’s “real” interests (1985:233). Women’s practical gender interests arise from women’s concrete position as subordinated in the sexual division of labor (as mothers, wives) and are related to immediate perceived needs like child care, access to fuel, clean water and housing (ibid; Lebon 2010:6). Practical interests are usually not related to strategic goals such as women’s emancipation or gender equality and are often the basis of collective actions for consumer- and community organizations with a high participation of poor women, that organize out of economic necessity. According to Molyneux, although the practical gender interests arise out of gender
subordination, they don’t in themselves challenge this subordination (1985:233). In her article *Mobilization without emancipation? Women’s interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua* (1985), Molyneux argues that the Sandinista government satisfied women’s more practical demands and certain class interests, but did little to further women’s emancipation and alter the gendered subordination of women.

The concepts of strategic and practical gender interests later developed into the distinction of feminist and women’s movements, where practical interests were fitted into the women’s movement and strategic interests were considered part of the feminist movement. Although Molyneux underlined the importance of the politicization of women’s practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support, her division of interests has been referred to as a binary dichotomy by most researchers, and subjected to criticism (Conger Lind 1992; Radcliffe & Westwood 1993; Schirmer 1993; Craske 1999). Henceforth, some of these criticisms will be reviewed, as they will supply a more nuanced contribution to the field of research.

Radcliffe and Westwood (1993) consider Molyneux’s distinction to be useful for commonsense understandings of transformations in political strategies for women, but argue that they do not provide a theoretical base for understanding women as political subjects and actors (1993:19). The two authors regard the division of interests as problematic because it suggests a hierarchical relationship between practical and strategic gender interests, such that women, in order to progress, must move from one to the other. They also highlight how the division ignores the critique from feminism of the distinction between public and private lives and doesn’t consider the notion that the ‘personal is political’ but rather tends to maintain this distinction, one that feminists have tried to deconstruct for a long time (ibid).

In a similar manner, Schirmer (1993) indicates that, although the division of women’s interests have helped us understand why and how women protest, women’s actions have tended to be separated into those who act out of feminist ‘strategic’ concern, and those who act out of more ‘female, pragmatic’ social and economic concerns. This division tends to assume exclusionary interests, that women can’t move from one category to another or be at once pragmatic and strategic, female and feminist (ibid:60). Schirmer has conducted extensive research on the CONAVIGUA widows in Guatemala and the CoMadres in El Salvador and is critical against the dichotomy of interests as it tends to force a hierarchically structured set of expectations, with Feminism as the final goal, that is, a feminism with a capital ‘F’ based on
Western assumptions on the nature of that feminism (1993:61). Why should we strive to translate Western feminism, developed under US and European political circumstances, into an understanding of how women in Central America make sense of their gendered worlds, Schirmer asks herself. We should be more interested to know how women themselves make sense of their conflicts, how they see themselves and others (ibid:63). In these reflections and discussions, Schirmer is arguing from a postcolonial feminist perspective, critical to the monolithic stories of women told from the perspective of western feminists. Instead, she and other postcolonial feminists like Mohanty argue that we need to understand women's experiences as fragmented. There are different forms of oppression of women globally, and these different types of oppression cannot be analyzed under universal Western gender systems: what is emancipating for one group of women, can be oppressive for others. Therefore, local perspectives and norms must always be considered in the analysis of women and their lives (Laskar 2003:11-12).

This is related to the fact that the general (Western) tendency is to view working class women's needs as practical and middle class white or mestiza heterosexual women's concerns as strategic (Lebon 2010; Conger Lind 1992; Schirmer 1989). Conger Lind (1992) is critical of the assumption that most poor women are only concerned with their daily survival and therefore cannot have a strategic agenda beyond their economic welfare. In her view, the division of interests misrepresents the struggles of poor women who do, in fact, question or attempt to change the social (gender) order and she states that: "Such categories maintain a false barrier in our thinking about political and economic strategies of survival and resistance" (ibid:145).

Both Radcliffe and Westwood (1993) and Conger Lind (1992) recognize the importance of identities in the discourse on gender and women's organizing. Radcliffe and Westwood point out that political identities are not fixed and that the contexts in which they are mobilized are diverse. Because of this, there is no need for a dichotomy between public and private or practical and strategic interests. These notions are recast in a multiplicity of spaces and times where women engage in power struggles, be it in the domestic sphere of the household or out in the public sphere and the streets (1993:19). In her work on popular women's organizations in Quito, Ecuador, Conger Lind emphasizes the contributions of organized poor women and conclude that whether or not these women are directly challenging the sexual division of labor, they are indeed transforming their identities and becoming political subjects that
develop organizing strategies, and this is at least as significant. According to Conger Lind, a ‘survival strategy’ can at the same time be a political strategy that challenges the social order (1992: 137, 145-146).

As a conclusion, we can observe that although the division of practical and strategic gender interests can be useful when discussing the reasons for women’s organizing, we should not see the division as a dichotomy but rather as a continuum or a process (Craske 1999). More recently, scholars have acknowledged the role that class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and other factors play in shaping women’s experiences of oppression and how women choose to organize¹ (Lebon 2010:6).

In the following subsection, a special focus will be put on previous research on women’s organizing as family members of the disappeared in Latin America. This specific kind of organizing has been categorized under the practical gender interests for organizing, as it focuses on women’s gendered identities as mothers or wives (for example) and consists of an indeed practical interest, to find their missing relatives. Women’s emphasis on their gendered identities as mothers or spouses in organizations has received both critique and appraisal, which this section aims to further discuss.

### 2.1.1 Women’s organizing as family members of the disappeared

Enforced disappearances has been used as a repressive strategy by numerous Latin American states² against tens of thousands of presumed political opponents and adversaries, starting in the 1960s in Guatemala. Although women were among the desaparecidos, most of the victims of enforced disappearances were men. In searching for their children, husbands and other relatives, women started to organize (Craske 1999:116-117). Although men have traditionally been most visible in trade unions, as leaders in social movements and political parties, women have always been the majority in regards to organizing as relatives to the forcefully disappeared (ibid:118). The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina is one of these organizations that has been the subject of a great deal of research.

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² For example Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico
The mothers of the disappeared in Argentina during the military regime would come across each other in morgues, at police stations or in public plazas, where they would start to converse, compare stories and experiences, give each other recommendations and emotional support. This was the start of the organization the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, henceforth referred to as the Mothers. These women emphasized their identity as mothers and saw themselves as apolitical, or above politics. Because of their accentuation on motherhood, their organization and resistance was in the beginning seen as more social than political, and not as a threat to the regime, as has been the case with many women’s organizations (Chant 2003:11). In a time of massive human rights abuses, the Mothers was one of very few organizations that dared to protest the military regime. Because of their identities as mothers looking for their lost children, they were for a long time spared of violence and repression, seeing that the military regime was built upon traditional family values and emphasized women’s moral superiority and their role as caretakers of children and the home (Craske 2003a:27). As the repression continued however, the mothers were also victims of violence and disappearances (Chant 2003:12).

The courage and persistence of the Mothers was applauded by other women’s and feminist organizations in the region and internationally. However, many feminists, especially from the West, criticized their maternal approach, as they considered it a reduction of the female subject to the role of the mother and confining her to that category, arguing that it reinforced gender stereotypes. In the 1970’s, Western, Euro-centric feminists were concerned with the exaltation of motherhood and the private; it sat uneasily with US- and European agendas for women’s liberation and the overall focus on women’s participation in the public sphere as political subjects (Howe 2006:44; Chant 2003:9). However, in Latin America, an alternative discourse was developed, where motherhood was not seen as an obstacle but rather as a source of power, a basis for political participation, identity, resistance and transformation (ibid 2003:10). Some researchers have argued that motherhood provides women with a space to act against the state in subversive ways and present some alternative views on women organizing around their identity as mothers. When women organized and resisted in the name of motherhood and the family, they extended their domestic role into the public sphere, and by doing so they transformed and challenged traditional ideas about women as apolitical, passive victims who only cared about their own families. Instead they presented society with a new politicized perspective on motherhood, as a basis of an ethical condemnation of society.
and its values (Fisher 1993:135; Schirmer 1993:57). The Mothers in Argentina didn’t demand the bodies of their relatives returned to them so that they could have a tomb to grieve by, they wanted their relatives to come back alive, as they were taken away, they wanted to know the truth about what had happened and for the perpetrators to be trialed and punished (Fisher 1993:117). The organized wives in Guatemala were far from passive victims as they took upon themselves to investigate the disappearances, when the state would do nothing. They would take photos of cadavers for identification, demand exhumations of their relatives in clandestine cemeteries and identify the perpetrators of the disappearances and killings (Schirmer 1993:57). The women confronted depictions of them as grieving, passive mothers and instead presented themselves to society as subversive and militant (Chant 2003:11; Craske 1999:17-18).

In her research on organized wives and mothers of the disappeared in Guatemala and El Salvador, Schirmer (1993) describes how the women allow us to see how in the seeking of truth and justice for their families, women can gain a gendered consciousness of political woman/motherhood and a responsibility of collective citizenry that is being passed on to their daughters and sons (ibid:61). Through the process of organizing, the women gained a political and gendered consciousness that changed the way they saw themselves and the world around them. As women organize as mothers or housewives, they create a political role for themselves based on their social status and on traditional gender roles, but it is through these roles that they might ignite new struggles for the recognition and rights as workers, residents, citizens and women (Corcoran Nantes 1993:138).

So far, this chapter has reviewed and discussed previous research and theories on how and why women choose to organize. In the following section, the concept of women’s empowerment will be examined and analyzed. The purpose of this section is on the one hand to deconstruct the concept of empowerment in order to understand its implications and apply it in the forthcoming analysis, and on the other hand to discuss how empowerment can be linked to organization, as a means to comply with the aim of this study, to explore the connections between empowerment and women organizing within family members’ collectives.
2.2 Women’s empowerment

The concept of women’s empowerment is used within a wide array of contexts and disciplines, with different definitions and implications of the term. For this specific research study, I have chosen to focus on feminist and sociologist perspectives as well as, to some extent, on the development approach to empowerment.

According to Kabeer (1994), professor in development studies, the term empowerment originated from the grassroots as an alternative, bottom-up way of viewing development, where ideas and policies are shaped out of everyday practice rather than ‘on the upper echelons of remote and rule-bound bureaucracies’ (ibid:223). Empowerment in its original meaning was a way of transforming gendered power structures through the empowerment of women at the local level, and an early usage of the concept can be found in the American Black radicalism of the 1960s and among feminist grassroots organizations in the North and South, that wanted to move beyond the WID\(^3\) focus on formal equality with men (ibid:224).

The concept then traveled beyond the grassroots and became popular in international development discourses in the 1990s as it was adopted by the United Nations (UN) as one of the main agendas for the international community in the Beijing conference in 1995 (UN Women 2016:5-6). Despite constituting a promising step towards more transformative gender politics, the adoption of women’s empowerment in mainstream development discourses proved to be a disappointment. Kabeer (1994) and Rowlands (1997) argue that the concept lost its transformative and political meaning as it was used by the World Bank and other actors sometimes as no more than a substitute word for integration or participation; the concept of women’s empowerment was used as an instrumentalist value to reach development goals. Focus was put on women’s role in production, women’s political participation and family planning, in order to meet development goals like population control and sustainable development. Thus, it failed to question existing social structures or the causes of women’s subordination and was used more to improve productivity within the status quo than to foster social transformation (Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002:3-5). Therefore, feminists have criticized the adoption of a too simplistic understanding of women’s empowerment, that lack the

\(^3\) Women in Development, an approach to development projects from the 1970’s that sought to include women’s issues in development projects. Predecessor to Gender and Development (GAD) that emphasizes on gender instead of women (Rowlands 1997:5-7).
transformative potential included in the concept as it was developed among the grassroots. To regain that transformative meaning of the concept, researchers have sought to elaborate on a feminist understanding of the term, beginning by analyzing the root of empowerment: power.

**2.2.1 A feminist perspective on power**

According to Rowlands (1997) the confusion over the definition of empowerment arises because the root concept -power- is in itself contested and has been subject to discussions within the social sciences. Traditionally, power has been analyzed as ‘power-over’, the ability of one person to get another person to do something, as lined out by Robert Dahl and Max Weber amongst others. In this view of power; domination and control are crucial, factors that are implicitly masculinist (ibid:9).

In contrast to this masculinist view on power, feminist researchers and theorists argue for a feminist approach that emphasizes the transformative potential of ‘power to’, ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ instead of ‘power over’ (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997; Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002). They argue for a reconceptualization of power that includes the capacity or ability to transform and empower oneself and others. Hannah Arendt, although not identifying herself as a feminist, clearly distinguished power from authority, strength and violence and offered a normative account in which power is understood as an end in itself and also concluded that ‘power is the human ability not just to act but to act in concert’ (1970:43).

Feminist philosopher Nancy Hartsock refers to a feminist theory of power as energy and competence rather than dominance (1983:224). Her definition of power has been used by many feminist researchers as a generative force and as a process, rather than something fixed.

Contrary to the dominating definition of power as ‘power over’, ‘power to’ is the generative or productive power that creates possibilities and actions without domination, the capacity to act, agency. ‘Power with’ has been defined as a collective power, gained through the organization with other people through alliances, networks and movements, whilst ‘power within’ could be described as a sense of self-dignity and self-awareness that enables agency and affirms self-worth. Power within has also been recognized as the capacity to imagine and

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4 It is not only feminists that have addressed this "productive" side of power, see for example Lukes, Steven (2004) Power: A Radical View. London:Palgrave; and Hearn, Jonathan (2012) Theorizing Power. London:Palgrave
to have hope. Such power cannot be given but must be self-generated (Kabeer 1994:229; Rowlands 1997:13).

Accordingly, women’s empowerment, seen through a feminist lens, includes women’s increased feelings of power to, power with, and power within. This perspective on women’s empowerment is important in that it can lead to a greater sense of agency; meaning the capacity or ability to act, but also to a kind of group dignity and spaces for collective action, which is where power and democracy is generated (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997; Eduards 2002). This perspective on power serve as an understanding of the concept of empowerment for this specific research study.

2.2.2 Critical consciousness

In the previous section, we established that the outcomes of women’s empowerment should include increased feelings of power, defined as power to, power with, and power within. This section aims to describe how this can be achieved, by highlighting the concept of critical consciousness.

Most researchers agree on the fact that empowerment is both an outcome and a process, it does not have a set start- or finish time (Carr 2003:8-9; Rowlands 1997:15). In describing the process of empowerment, many scholars draw on the previous work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire. Although not mentioning the word empowerment per se, Freire talked about conscientization in the 1970s, which has been an important backdrop to the development of the concept of empowerment and an important strategy in many Latin American organizations and movements with Freire’s extended Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Parpart Rai & Staudt 2002:5; Freire 2000). Freire’s work on conscientization centers on individuals becoming subjects in their own lives and developing a critical consciousness that is, an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment, that leads to action (Rowlands 1997:16).

Carr (2003) and Gutiérrez (1995), researchers within the field of social work, have been inspired by Freire and stress the importance of developing a critical consciousness for the empowerment process to be successful. Gutiérrez claims that a fundamental change in a person’s consciousness is necessary to engage in empowering social action. During the process of conscientization, individuals come to understand the political dimensions of their personal problems, and they become aware of how political structures affect individual and
Feminists have long shared this view and suggest that through consciousness-raising (CR), women can connect their own experiences of oppression to that of other women, and come to see the political realities of patriarchy (Carr 2003:15-16).

Furthermore, Gutiérrez recognizes three sub processes in the development of a critical consciousness: group identification, group consciousness and self and collective efficacy. Group identification implies an identification with similar others, finding areas of common experiences and concern and developing feelings of shared fate. Group consciousness involves an understanding of the differential status and power of groups in society, and through this understanding connections between personal problems and social structures can be made. Self and collective efficacy refers to beliefs that one is capable to achieve change, in one's own life and in the social order (1995:230). Thus, Gutiérrez highlight the connection between developing a critical consciousness and belonging to a group, a collective of people, which brings us to the next section where empowerment and organization will be discussed.

2.2.3 Empowerment through collective organizing
The concept of empowerment has been discussed in relation to women’s organizing in Latin America for the past decades, however mostly regarding feminist organizations and social movements. It has been argued that women’s awareness of gender subordination is gained through participation in social movements and that personal self-awareness can expand within these contexts, from the personal to the social (Alvarez 1990; Safa 1990; Jelin 1997). Since public arenas have traditionally been associated with male spaces and women have felt uncomfortable speaking out, finding a voice, or learning to speak, is a central part of the empowerment process, and is in many cases gained through organizing (Craske 2003b:69). This exemplifies the process described by bell hooks: ‘Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless - our beings defined and interpreted by others’ (hooks 1989: 63).

Eduards (2002) believes that organizing in itself constitutes an emancipating, identity-shaping force, a space for women where they can define their needs and interests. Through organization, women’s identities are transformed into political subjects, into conscious citizens, which in turn widens their democratic abilities to act, and this is what Eduards refers to as empowerment. She believes that power and democracy are generated through women’s
collective action (ibid:16-18). Kabeer (1994) asserts that when women organize and acquire access to new resources like analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength and a sense of not being alone, they develop new forms of consciousness which, as we have established, are important steps in the empowerment process (ibid:245-246). In a similar manner, Carr (2003) has reflected on the connection between empowerment, organizing and social change. She suggests that the process of conscientization mobilizes people for action, and political action leads to social change in the cycle of the empowerment process, which Carr depicts in the following circular manner: position → conscientization → political action → change (ibid:14, 18).

As we have seen in this chapter, there are a lot of aspects and concepts to consider when analyzing women’s empowerment. To sum up, this research study parts from the feminist, generative perspective of power as a foundation of the concept of empowerment but has chosen to highlight the concepts of critical consciousness and organizing with similar others as crucial factors to the process of women’s increased empowerment. These two aspects will be the main focus points in the analysis.

Parpart, Rai & Staudt (2002) make a conclusion that is valid and important for this study when they say that empowerment must be understood as including both individual conscientization (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to the politicized power with others, which provides the power to bring about change (ibid:4).

3. Methodology

This chapter will present the methodological approach and scientific method used to conduct the research study. The chapter begins by outlining the feminist research approach followed by a description of the method of semi-structured interviews, and how it was applied in this study. The process of the data collection and how the analysis of the data was carried out will follow next. After that, a section will be dedicated to ethics and reflexivity, where reflections on my role as a researcher will be made and ethical considerations of the research will be discussed. The chapter ends with a section on the delimitations of the study.
3.1 Feminist research approach

This study will be conducted using a qualitative feminist approach. A qualitative approach in social science implies an interest in how people experience their environment, and not the environment itself (May 2011:8). According to feminist researchers Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002), feminist methodology is distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experience (ibid:16).

It is important to point out that there is no universal feminist theory or methodology, different feminists part from different perspectives according to different ontologies and epistemologies and it is perhaps more accurate to talk of feminisms (ibid:11-13). However, there is still a consensus that feminist research differs from traditional social science research in several ways, above all for 1) attempting to create equal and democratic relationships between the researcher and the researched, 2) acknowledging and validating participants' own knowledge and 3) having an agenda for social change (Armstead 1995:628). What makes research feminist is not the specific methods used, but the ways in which they are deployed and the frameworks in which they are located (Letherby 2003:87).

Feminists oppose positivism and its claim of being able to produce knowledge by disconnecting the researcher from the researched and thus preventing connections between knowledge and reality being colored by the researcher's values (Armstead 1995; Letherby 2003; Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002). Instead, they argue that feminist researchers and the people who are part of the research cannot be free of their prior values and experiences and should not strive to be so either (May 2011:21). A feminist methodology connects knowledge claims with women's lived experiences and argue that knowledge cannot be separated from experiences (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002:13). By concentrating on subjectivity instead of trying to oppress it, feminist research focus on the meanings and interpretations both researchers and researched give the environment. It is not possible for the researcher to know the world independently of people's interpretation, the only thing we can know is how people give meaning to the world around them (ibid).

Because there is no unified subject of women, and because women's experiences are diverse and fragmented depending on various cultural, economic, religious and social contexts, feminist research must always be situated, contextualized and grounded in women's experiences (Mohanty 2003; Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002), this is a central understanding
that underpins this research study, and is connected to the chosen scientific method of semi-structured interviews.

### 3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Because of the research aim of analyzing women’s experiences of organizing, and the feminist perspective of this study, the method of qualitative semi-structured interviews was chosen, as it is appropriate for a study grounded in women’s lived experiences. A qualitative interview aims to obtain descriptions of the interviewee’s world in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomenon and is a useful method when wanting to highlight human experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:143).

A semi-structured interview is guided by a set of open-ended questions which allows the interviewer to enter into a dialogue with the interviewees and it gives the informants more room to develop their thoughts in accordance with their own perspective (May 2011:134, Kvale 1997). This aspect was important for me when conducting the interviews, as I wanted the interview to be relaxed and more similar to a conversation, where the women could develop their thoughts freely. I considered semi-structured interviews the best way to obtain as much information as possible but also the best method to address a sensitive topic, such as enforced disappearances of family members.

#### 3.2.1 Selection of respondents

The selection of respondents was made with help from colleagues at the organization where I was doing my internship, CMDPDH. I specified that I was interested in talking to women that were active in their organizations, and had been so for a while, as I wanted to interview women that could give me an account of their process within their respective organizations. Two women at the office were part of a solidarity- and assessment organization to the movement of relatives of the disappeared and arranged for me to come to one of their meetings where I told the two women present about my research idea and they both agreed to an interview. I contacted the other three women through the psychologist at CMDPDH. It was important for me that the women were approached by someone they knew, since it gave both them and me a sense of trust, already from the beginning. Since enforced disappearances is a delicate matter, it felt important to be able to establish trust and respect at an early stage and I think this introduction helped to do just that.
The five women that I interviewed are between the ages of 34 and 59 and come from different parts of Mexico. They are all active members of an organization, however two of them belong to the same collective, so there are five women from four organizations. The women were asked if they wanted to be anonymous, but quite the contrary, they were all very specific about wanting their real names included in the final thesis. The women that I interviewed are:

Jocelyn, 36 years old, daughter of disappeared Mario Antonio
Maricela, 44 years old, mother of disappeared Gerson
Araceli, 53 years old, mother of disappeared Luis Ángel
Nadin, 34 years old, daughter of disappeared Edmundo
Diana, 59 years old, mother of disappeared Daniel

It is important to underline here, that the research interest lies not in the different organizations that these women belong to, but rather in the experiences that they have from the process of organization in general. Therefore, no specific analysis will be made of the differences or similarities between the organizations, however a short presentation will be given in the following chapter, as a means of supplying background information and contextualizing the women’s experiences. The women and their cases will be presented in chapter five.

3.2.2 The interviews

The interviews were carried out in January 2017. The first interview was conducted at the office of the solidarity organization, with Jocelyn and Maricela at the same time, as that’s how they wanted it, to be able to support each other. The interview with Araceli took place at the office of CMDPDH, which is a familiar place since Araceli has worked with the organization for many years. I met Nadin at the office of her organization and finally I had a Skype interview (video call) with Diana, since she lives in northern Mexico and I did not have the time or possibility to travel there. It was the women that decided on the times and places for the interviews. The fact that the interviews took place in environments that felt safe and comfortable for the respondents was important, and something that encourages interviewees to share experiences of their lives (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014:170).

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one and a half hours and I conducted all of them on my own, in Spanish. I explained to the respondents that the information gathered
from the interviews would be used only in my master thesis, they could change their mind about participating at any moment and they didn't have to answer a question if they felt they didn't want to. I used a recording device during the interviews but also had a pen and paper for notes. I had written down an interview guide with semi-structured questions, and although I changed some of the questions after the first interview, they remained basically the same, however in most of the interviews the order of the questions varied as the interviews developed more along the lines of a conversation and most of the women brought up questions even before I had asked them. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3 Strategy for analyzing data
The analysis of my data was carried out with inspiration from Kvale (1997), Mason (2002) and Oliver (2008). The interview guide was structured around the main theme of women’s experiences of organizing and the questions were both of a descriptive and reflective character, for example I asked the respondents how long they had been organized but also what organization means to them. For the analysis of the data, I started by listening to the interviews once, without transcribing or taking notes, and then listened again while I made the transcriptions. This was a time-consuming process but it also allowed me to start processing and interpreting the interviews at an early stage, as I could see patterns, similarities and differences among the informants' answers during the first listenings. When reading through the transcribed interviews, I highlighted key phrases and words in the respondents' narratives which I consequently paired together in themes. The following categories were outlined as a first structuring of my data, based on the answers given by the respondents: reasons for organizing, meanings and experiences from organizing, identity and negative effects of organizing. These parts were translated into English for a further analysis of the results. The description and preliminary analysis of the data will be presented in chapter five.

In the next phase I analyzed the respondent's answers in relation to my aim, research questions and theoretical framework and could thus make out new categories around which to structure the discussion of findings, which will be carried out in chapter six. I used an interpretative and reflexive approach to my material, meaning that I was not interested in the literal content of the data, but rather in the interpretations that both the interviewees and I as a
researcher make of the data, as the study parts from the assumption that knowledge is constructed through experiences, i.e. the interviews (Mason 2002:78, 149).

3.3.1 Ethics and reflexivity

As mentioned above, the reading of my data will be interpretative and reflexive, reflexive meaning that I as a researcher am inevitably implicated in the data and need to reflect on and explore my role in the process of generation and interpretation of data (ibid). Reflexivity is a main element in feminist methodology and in undertaking feminist, qualitative research (Maynard 1994:16). I need to be constantly aware of how my experiences and baggage affect the way I conduct the research and how I analyze my results. It is not desirable to distance myself from the study as I don't think that is possible or to strive for, but instead the main importance is to reflect upon my role and be aware of how I interfere with the results all through the analysis. I am a woman that interviewed other women, but I am also European, white, feminist and at the time of the interviews doing an internship (working for free) at a Mexican human rights organization that all the women had some kind of relation to, meaning that I did not come from a neutral or independent position. However, it is also important to clarify that I have spent a lot of time in Latin America before, specifically in Mexico and Guatemala, working with women, enforced disappearances and other violations of human rights. This indicates that I did not come from a position of not knowing anything about the context before starting my internship; on the contrary I was well aware of the situation and have previous experiences of working closely with women whom have disappeared family members, which I believe facilitated both the meetings and the interviews with the respondents.

It is important to reflect on my own engagement in the research topic and my commitment to the women that I interviewed. The issue of enforced disappearances is a highly complex matter, extremely sad, uncertain and of indefinite character. Listening to my informants’ stories was sometimes very emotional, as they told me intimate stories of grief, death, break-ups and loss but also of love, respect and forgiveness. There is no use in denying that their stories affected me, and this is something that I will have to be aware of throughout the research process.
3.4 Delimitations
This study has chosen to analyze five women’s experiences of organizing as relatives to disappeared persons in Mexico and to explore how their organizing is connected to empowerment. It does not aim to make any kind of generalizations from this small research population, but is interested in understanding the world as it is experienced by these five women. It could be interesting to conduct deeper interviews with more women to be able to draw further conclusions. A use of an intersectionality approach and methodology could furthermore be of interest, to analyze women’s experiences in relation to their class, age, ethnicity or other social categories. I have chosen to focus solely on female relatives of the disappeared for his thesis, since women are highly over-represented in the organizations and follow a long history of women organizing as family members in Latin America. The inclusion of men’s experiences and perspectives would result in a totally different research study, as men traditionally have had a stronger presence in public and political arenas in Mexico and because men as a group have more power than women. The choice of focusing on empowerment is connected to the research approach as the concept itself originates from a feminist research tradition from below, that values women’s increased abilities to act and alter gendered power structures in society.

4. Enforced disappearances in Mexico
In order to contextualize the interviews and the women’s experiences, it is important to give some background to the situation in Mexico regarding enforced disappearances, which is what this chapter aims to do. There is indeed a lot of data one could present in regards to the crime of enforced disappearances, however, this chapter aims to present a general overview of the most important aspects and will not go into specific details regarding criminology or legislation. It will also give a brief presentation of the context of family members’ organizations in Mexico, before presenting the organizations that the respondents belong to.

According to the UN, the definition of an enforced disappearance entails the legal or illegal arrest, detention or abduction of a person, conducted by agents of the state or by organized
groups or private individuals that act with the direct or indirect support of the state, their acquiescence or consent. This is then followed by a rejection to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the detainee or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty (UN 1992).

Although present in repressive states and wars around the globe since the Nazi-regime and the Soviet Union in the 1930s, enforced disappearances are perhaps most associated with the authoritarian regimes and dictatorships in Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s (Brody & Gonzalez 1997:366). Historically, enforced disappearances have been used by states against political dissidents and adversaries as a way of getting rid of opponents without being incriminated and as an effective manner of scaring other activists to silence. The trajectory of enforced disappearances in Mexico began during the so called Dirty War in the late 1960s, when police and military disappeared leftist activists, members of the guerilla and other political dissidents, mostly in the southern state of Guerrero. Since then, the pattern of the crime has changed considerably, and although politically motivated disappearances have never ceased to occur and keep occurring, victims of enforced disappearances are today not limited to political activists, but extended to large segments of the general population, and to practically all the 32 states of Mexico (Open Society 2016).

To understand this new pattern of the crime it is necessary to go back to December of 2006, when former president Felipe Calderón Hinojosa started the war against drug trafficking, a strategy that openly confronted the drug cartels and organized crime. In order to win this war, Mexico underwent a significant militarization as the armed forces were given much of the policiary authorities over public security. The levels of violence in the country skyrocketed after the start of the drug war, and reports of human rights violations such as torture, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances increased rapidly (CMDPDH 2013). In 2012, the current president Enrique Peña Nieto took over the presidency and continued with the strategy of open confrontation and war on drug cartels. It is estimated that more than 150,000 violent deaths have taken place in Mexico between 2006 and 2015, and the

5 For a discussion on whether the Dirty War should be considered state terrorism, see Rangel Lozano, Sánchez Serrano (2015) México en los setenta. ¿Guerra sucia o terrorismo de estado? Hacia una política de memoria. Editorial Itaca, Mexico
government recognizes that no less than 70,000 of these are directly related to the drug war (Open Society 2016:10).

When the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Mexico in 2015 he said that for a country that is not in the middle of an internationally recognized conflict, the levels of violence in the country are simply shocking. He pointed out that some of the violence can be attributed to the powerful organized crime groups that are active in all states, however, many enforced disappearances, acts of torture and extrajudicial executions have allegedly been carried out by federal, state and municipal authorities, including the police and the Army, whether acting for their own interests or in collusion with organized crime (OHCHR 2015).

The case of the 43 teacher students from Ayotzinapa that were disappeared from Guerrero in 2014 is a good (horrible) example of how many enforced disappearances are carried out in the context of the drug war, as they were attacked and detained by municipal police officers and later turned over to a drug cartel and subsequently disappeared. The investigations carried out by independent experts also show the involvement of the armed forces, state and federal police and politicians in the assassination and disappearance of the students (GIEI 2015).

Hundreds of disappearances in the country can however be linked directly to drug cartels and other criminal groups operating throughout the country, without connections to the Mexican state being proved (Open Society 2016:40-41).

The United Nations’ working group for enforced disappearances has levelled criticism against the fact that Mexico has no integral methodologies to confront the widespread phenomenon of enforced disappearances. The government lacks resources to conduct searches, identify human remains and conduct exhumations, which further aggravates the crisis (OHCHR 2015). According to official numbers, 30 942 people are registered as disappeared since 2006 in Mexico, as of February 2017 (Martínez 2017). However, this number has received critique from civil society organizations who claim that it is a vastly underestimated figure. Many families choose not to report disappearances, because of fear of threats, further violence and misbelief, which is why the numbers could be much higher. As a result of this, family members’ organizations have conducted their own registers of documented disappearances, which they share on their Facebook pages, homepages or on private databases (Vélez & Vélez 2017).

Disappearances are causing deep agony not only to the detainees but also to their relatives. The detainees/disappeared are cut from the outside world and deprived of all protection and
rights, subjected to their captors, and the relatives of the detainees are unable to establish where their family members are being held or if they are even alive (Brody & Gonzalez 1997:366). Family members of the disappeared describe their situation as a never-ending mourning and as living in limbo - even though the victims have been disappeared for a very long time and logic and reason tell the families that their loved ones are dead; their hearts and souls keep hoping that they will return. The disappeared are neither dead nor alive (Mastrogiovanni 2014; HRW 2013).

Associations of relatives were the first to draw attention to the crime of enforced disappearances in Latin America, in the authoritarian regimes in the 1960s to 1980s as well as today; documenting the crimes, organizing searches, contacting international organizations for support and solidarity etc. In Mexico, one of the first organizations of relatives, Comité Eureka, was founded in 1977. In contemporary Mexico, and in relation to the disappearances during the ongoing drug war, it is crucial to mention the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD) and its importance for the foundation of many organizations of relatives. The movement was founded in 2011 by Javier Sicilia, a Mexican poet and writer whose 24-year old son was killed by members associated with a drug cartel in March 2011. The well-known writer confronted and questioned the government’s discourse on the victims of the drug war as collateral damage or criminals, and managed to redirect the attention of the media and the government to the victims and their families, giving them a voice (Robledo Silvestre 2015). The movement grew very quickly in 2011 and Caravans of Peace were organized in different parts of the country, where thousands of Mexicans marched demanding an end to the violence generated by the drug war. The movement also organized dialogues with the government, where direct and indirect victims of the violence sat down with president Calderón. Hundreds of family members joined the Movement and saw new hope in organizing together, and through adhering to the MPJD, smaller collectives and organizations were formed throughout the country. In continuation, the organizations of the respondents will be briefly described.

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*Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad in Spanish*
Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera

This organization was founded in 2013 by María Elena Herrera, or Doña Mary, as she is known to the family members of the disappeared. Doña Mary has four disappeared sons that went missing between 2008 and 2010. She joined the MPJD in 2013, after which she and her son Juan Carlos founded Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera. The organization consists of a small number of relatives of disappeared people, but it works as a link between other similar organizations in various states in Mexico, through the network Red de Enlaces Nacionales, that also group people that solidarize with the family members and their struggle. The organization accompanies families that have been victims of enforced disappearances, organizes workshops, meetings and search brigades in the field.

Colectivo Colibrí

Colectivo Colibrí is a collective that gathers family members of seven federal police officers and one civilian that were disappeared in the state of Michoacán in 2009. The organization focuses primarily on their own case, and most members keep a low profile due to various threats. Its spokeswoman, Araceli, one of five women that were interviewed for this study, is however a public and known figure in the community of family members of the disappeared, and was one of the victims that participated in the MPJD dialogues with Calderón in 2011.

Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos Coahuila (FUUNDEC)

This organization was founded in 2009, by five families in the northern state of Coahuila. Approximately 125 people belong to the organization that is looking for 528 people. Because most disappearances in the state of Coahuila are collective, the organization consists of less members than victims. Many of the victims are not residents in Coahuila, but in transit when they disappear, which is why the organization has members from many different states. In 2009, when the organization started, the situation in Coahuila was very violent, there were shootings all over the state, which severely limited the work of the organization. Their primary objective is to make the situation visible and put pressure on the local government.

Note on grammar: there is a difference in someone disappearing and someone being disappeared, the latter involving a subject and an object, meaning that someone doesn’t just vanish, but rather, one person is making another person disappear. Relatives say that their family member ‘fue desaparecido’ (was disappeared), or ‘desaparecieron a mi hijo’ (they disappeared my son).
They don’t conduct searches in graves, as other organizations do, but prefer to focus on presuming that the disappeared are alive, and conduct their searches accordingly.

Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos Hasta Encontrarlos

The organization was founded in 2007 by Nadin and Margarita; relatives of two disappeared men that were organized in the guerilla Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR). The organization consists of six people, but it’s only Nadin and Margarita that have a public presence. The committee Hasta Encontrarlos is accompanying and mobilizing family members of people that were disappeared because of political motives; the victims being political activists or human rights defenders for example. They are documenting these cases, organizing workshops and public events on enforced disappearances and human rights, lobbying for a new law etc. The organization is linked to many popular and indigenous organizations in the state of Oaxaca.

5. Description and preliminary analysis of data

This chapter consists of a summarized description and preliminary analysis of the data retrieved from the interviews. As outlined in the methodology chapter, the structure of the data is based on themes that were determined after the first revision of the transcribed interviews, based on the answers given by the respondents, namely reasons for organizing, meanings and experiences of organizing, identity and negative effects of organizing. The following chapter will use the findings in this section as a basis for further analysis and discussion, connecting them to the theoretical framework of this study. A presentation of the respondents and their cases will begin this chapter. Importantly, the study only depicts the respondents’ own accounts of the disappearances of their relatives and does not attempt to analyze their cases from any other perspectives.

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8 The organization will onwards be referred to as Hasta Encontrarlos
Jocelyn

Jocelyn is 36 years old and from the state of Puebla. Before the disappearance of her father Mario Antonio, Jocelyn worked at the federal electricity commission, but left her job in order to search for her father full-time. She has three children. Mario Antonio disappeared on the 17th of November 2009 and has not been heard from since then. Jocelyn says that the disappearance might have been carried out directly by organized crime, or by groups or persons that take advantage of the situation of impunity; the family doesn’t know why her father disappeared. When he first went missing, the family had to start their own search brigade, since the state police didn’t want to help them. At this point, Jocelyn and her family were not aware of the situation of enforced disappearances in the context of the drug war, and they thought they would find Mario soon. At one point the police presented the family with a body, saying it was Mario, which it wasn’t, the state government just wanted to close the case. This is when Jocelyn and her family realized that they had to go to Mexico City to federalize the case. In the capital they met families with similar experiences that helped them. People told Jocelyn to look up the MPJD, and there she was received in the Platform for Victims, and from this process Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera was formed, and Jocelyn consequently joined the collective in 2014.

Maricela

Maricela is 44 years old and from the state of Veracruz. She is searching for her son Gerson, who was 19 when he disappeared on the 15th of April, 2014. Gerson was kidnapped, and Maricela paid the ransom but still Gerson wasn’t returned. She received notice of where he was held and Maricela’s other son Alan, 15 years old and her son in law, Miguel, 25 years old went there to look for Gerson and was shot to death by the kidnappers. Shortly thereafter, armed men started following Maricela’s daughter around and the family received threats, which is why they quickly decided to leave Veracruz. They are now living as displaced, along with more than 300 000 Mexicans that have been forced to flee the violence of the drug war. The investigation of the case is surrounded by corruption, says Maricela, and although the police have recently caught some of the presumed delinquents, there is no news on where Gerson is. Maricela heard about families in Mexico City that could help her federalize her case, and she joined the collective of Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera in 2014.
Araceli

Araceli is 53 years old from Mexico City and the mother of Luis Ángel, a federal police officer who disappeared on the 16th of November, 2009 at the age of 23. Before the disappearance of her son, Araceli worked as a receptionist at a hotel restaurant, and had no education. Now she is dedicating her time completely to being a human rights defender and has finished secondary school with hopes of soon continuing to study more. Luis Ángel disappeared together with six other police officers and one civilian as they were headed to Michoacán on an assignment, but they never reached their destination. They were intercepted and later killed by a drug cartel, who also dismembered their bodies and burnt them. This information has been given by arrested members of the drug cartel in recent years; Luis Ángel was declared presumably dead in 2012, but the drug traffickers have not been able to point out the place where the assassinations took place, and Araceli continues to search for the remains of her son. She has accused highly placed politicians for being involved in the crime and has received death threats since 2009 when she began her search. She is now under protection 24 hours a day with a personal lifeguard, designated through the governmental Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists. Araceli is organized in the organization Colectivo Colibrí, that consists of the family members of the eight men that disappeared together. She is also active on her own behalf, as a human rights defender, in the wider movement of relatives. She has been organized since 2009.

Diana

Diana is 59 years old, originally from the southern state of Tabasco but residing in the northern state of Coahuila, for the last 33 years. Diana is a trained chemical engineer, but dedicated her time to the family and the home during her married life. Today she works as an administrator at a local human rights organization and is divorced. She has three children, one of them is Daniel, who was 23 years old when he disappeared on the 21st of February, 2007. Daniel had just finished his career as an industrial engineer and had recently started his first job when he disappeared together with his employer and a cousin of his, as they were headed for a job in the rural zone of Coahuila. They never reached their destination and in the hotel where they stayed, their bags and car were found. The years have gone by but there is no news about the disappearances. Diana joined the organization FUUNDEC in 2010.
Nadin

Nadin is 34 years old from the state of Oaxaca. She is a trained pedagogue and worked as a teacher in a kindergarten before the disappearance of her father, but now works full time as a human rights defender and member of the organization that she started in 2007, *Hasta Encontrarlos*. Nadin is the daughter of Edmundo, who disappeared together with his companion on the 25th of May 2007. Edmundo was a member of the leftist guerrilla EPR, although his family didn’t know this until after his disappearance. The family have always been very careful to document everything about the disappearance, and thanks to this there have been some important, albeit slow advances in the case. After Edmundo and his companion were disappeared by state police in Oaxaca, they were handed over to the military and taken to a clandestine military prison, where activists were taken during the Dirty War. This is where Edmundo was last seen. Thanks to constant pressure from the organization, they managed to obtain legal permission to search for the disappeared in military camps in 2014, however the military and the federal government lack the political will to investigate these cases, and simply won’t open the camps, despite the legal order.

In the following section, the data retrieved from the interviews is presented, both in fluid text and in quotations. Emphasis made by the respondents is put in italics and/or exclamation marks within the quotations and square brackets has been used when further explanations of certain aspects is needed.

5.1 Reasons for organizing

*“If we are not organized we will achieve nothing. We are more uncomfortable for the government if we are organized”* (Maricela 2017).

All the respondents indicate that the primary reason for organizing was out of pure necessity, since the authorities simply wouldn’t listen to them when they arrived alone. Maricela noticed this when she went to the capital to make her case federal. *“If you come alone, you don’t get in, you don’t get past the bars. Without support they won’t consider your case, they will send you back to your state. Our organization helped us”* (Maricela 2017). All five women believe that it is because of being organized that they were finally listened to, even if only to some small degree. *“To be organized is to have strength”* says Diana, who also organized in order
to get support and understanding from people in the same situation as her:

When I learned about the collective I couldn’t do anything else but join and work with them. It was a place where I felt the confidence, where I could speak freely, because we all spoke the same language, no one would think she must have been mixed up in something, if they disappeared him I felt that I could express myself there, I could cry, I could talk about my fears and the feelings that affected me. I said to myself, I have to be here (Diana 2017).

However, even if the authorities open investigations, the criminal inquiries are often flawed, and corruption and bureaucracy impede the process of investigation. For this reason, organizing is also a way for the relatives to do the authorities’ job, that is, to investigate and search for the disappeared. Both Maricela and Jocelyn’s organization, Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera, is part of the Search Brigades, a movement of organizations that conduct searches in the field, in marked and unmarked graves, looking for the bodies of the disappeared. As family members of the disappeared we are doing a job that doesn’t correspond to us. Despite living with the pain and suffering we are doing things that no one has dared to do and things that society is denying to see (Jocelyn 2017). The respondents are convinced that if they don’t do anything, neither will the government, who doesn’t want to accept the reality that people are living in Mexico in the context of the drug war, a reality that the organizations of relatives are struggling to make visible:

We, the families, believe that we are facing a humanitarian emergency, that hasn’t been accepted as such, and therefore they don’t administer our cases. They simulate that they attend to us, and we keep fighting. We get tired, but that doesn’t mean that we will stop pushing for searches and for the rescue of each and every one (Diana 2017).

Nadin emphasizes the need for the organizations to raise awareness, to make people understand what is going on in Mexico in regards to the disappearances. After the enforced disappearances of the 43 teacher students from Ayotzinapa in 2014, more attention was given to the situation, however only for a short while. Many Mexicans still believe in the discourse of the government, that the disappeared must have been mixed up in something bad. Nadin’s organization is focusing on raising awareness and getting people to solidarize with the struggle of the families, in order to build a bigger and more united movement (Nadin 2017).
5.2 Meanings and experiences of organizing

Being organized means taking steps, advancing, uniting, multiplicating. Being organized brings me hope of a new day, that the dark night will one day end and we will begin to see a new dawn. To me it means hope (Araceli 2017).

All the respondents describe their time in the organizations as learning processes, of personal and collective development. Araceli mentions that she has learned many new things through the process of organizing, about gender based violence against women, active violence, and violence in the family. She has finished secondary school, attended workshops and courses on human rights, conflict resolution and peace-building, thanks to being organized.

I learned that violence generates within your proper family. Up to what point can you take the violence? To what point will you have the indulgence with what he is doing to you? You realize that if your husband treats you badly, you forgive him, if he cheats on you with another woman and try to blame you for it, you accept, you agree that you are the one to blame. It’s a big lie. I have learned a lot from this process (Araceli 2017).

Besides from learning practical and theoretical skills from workshops and from school, Araceli also mentions a more profound lesson learned through organization; the pain of losing Luis Ángel has brought me to a deep understanding, an active and positive learning. I managed to transform the pain into something positive, in a good cause (Araceli 2017).

When asked about the significance of organization, all respondents answer that being able to help other families is among the most important things about being organized. Maricela feels useful when she is helping other families and considers it a form of therapy, to be able to continue the struggle and to feel at least a little bit better, despite the pain. Jocelyn considers helping others a healing process that makes her stronger internally. We are making evident what is happening, and emotionally it gives me some tranquility, knowing that we are not just standing around with our arms crossed (Jocelyn 2017). She also tells me that she has learned how to know herself through the process of organizing. I have learned to look inside of me, to focus, and learn how to know what I want. I have learned to analyze myself (ibid 2017).

Neither Diana or the rest of her family never had the need to know how to access governmental institutions before the disappearance of Daniel. When they reported his
disappearance, they were met with suspicion from the authorities on whether Daniel was using drugs or was involved in other criminal activities. The authorities showed little interest in Daniel’s disappearance and Diana says that the family, despite being well-informed, never thought that the institutions would be so corrupt and indolent as they were. She had believed blindly in justice and in the institutions doing their job. As Diana later started organizing and working at a human rights center, she became aware that she needed to educate herself, she needed to understand what was happening, in order to put pressure on the authorities and address them on the same level, look them in the eyes and not let them lie to her anymore. So she dedicated her time to reading, everything related to the crime of enforced disappearance. In the following extract from the interview with Diana, she describes how the disappearance of Daniel resulted in a process of personal transformation:

When you live a middle-class life, in a comfort zone, without excessive luxuries, but having all you need, you are living without knowing, you don’t have a very strong social consciousness. You live your life, with your family, in the society, like in a bubble. After suffering the disappearance of Daniel, and the divorce, my life was completely transformed, I became a more sensitive woman, with a social consciousness. I am certain, that if God wants me to find Daniel tomorrow, I won’t be able to keep quiet or with my arms crossed on the sideline, I need to keep supporting this cause, there are so many violations of human rights in this country (Diana 2017).

Nadin sees a change in herself, from when they started their collective on their own, without knowing anything on human rights or enforced disappearances, to how they have grown stronger through organizing, and through joining forces with other collectives. As she started to organize she became aware of the importance of knowledge, and she started going to different workshops to learn about her rights, about the crime of enforced disappearance, about legal aspects and how the judicial system works, about security and risk analysis. By acquiring these new skills and tools, the organization could advance more effectively in their work and could also accompany and advice other family members in the same situation (Nadin 2017).

Maricela describes a process that all the respondents somehow have given expression to, the process of starting by looking for your own loved one, but along the way noticing, gaining awareness of the situation and then expanding your scope, to search for all the disappeared, and for justice. I no longer search exclusively for my son, but for thousands of young people. I no longer focus solely on the state of Veracruz, I go where our companions need us, to help
In a press conference during a manifestation outside the attorney general’s office on the anniversary of the disappearance of Luis Ángel and seven other men, Araceli said “but they are not only eight, or 43, but thousands and thousands of disappeared in our country. They were taken away alive, and we want them back alive” (Araceli 2016), echoing the slogan used by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina; in Spanish ‘vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos’.

The use of the word ‘family’ when referring to their organizations is recurrent in the respondents’ narratives. There is a phrase commonly used in the movement of relatives: ‘by looking for them, we found each other’ meaning that in the lonely search for their loved ones, the family members found others in the same situation, and they could give each other support, the mothers and the families. ‘We found sisterhood, we became sisters, not of blood, but of pain’ Araceli says (2017). Maricela also mentions sisterhood when talking about the importance of her organizing. Both her and Diana say that it is like they all speak the same language in the organizations, they understand each other, there is confidence and respect. In the organizations, the women feel that they belong, they are met with compassion and understanding instead of misbelief and stigmatization (Maricela 2017; Diana 2017).

To Diana, the work of the families in the organization is a process of empowerment, where she can transform her pain into strength, to keep demanding justice. ‘We believe that only united, thinking and working as a collective, can we keep pushing. The collective is the strength. Only united can we achieve results that will lead us to find so many [of the disappeared]’ (Diana 2017). But the process of organizing and of starting to think collectively was difficult. At first people only wanted to talk about their cases, their family members, but slowly they realized that they needed to start talking about all the cases, since they are all intertwined and need to be analyzed in relation to the present context. There would be no use in advancing only in paradigmatic cases, since all cases are important (ibid: 2017).

To Nadin, organization means security and strength. The families that aren’t organized often get tired because of the hopelessness and the discouragement, many people get sick because they don’t know how to confront it. That is the biggest difference between the families that are organized. ‘When you are conscious and organized you have more tools, that has helped

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* My translation. Original: ‘Buscándolos, nos encontramos’
us a lot. Being organized also implies reparation, in knowing that we are doing everything we possibly can to find them (Nadin 2017).

5.3 Identity

We are subjects, political subjects of change. Our work goes beyond being a victim, we are resilient beings and transformers (Jocelyn 2017).

The way the respondents identify themselves individually in their activism differs some, but they all refer to themselves as family members in a collective manner. Belonging to an organization gives us an identity, and it has helped me Jocelyn says.

All five women point out that the term victim is coming from above, it is not an identity that they would have chosen for themselves. Jocelyn refers to the term victim as a condition, something that they have to wear but it is not who they are. She says that something happened to her that made her a victim, but that is not how she sees herself, she considers herself to be an active subject of change, a transformer (Jocelyn 2017). Maricela agrees and explains that they somehow have to represent themselves as victims, because that is the name that the government has given them. We are victims, but it is not a name that we like, I identify myself as a family member looking for my loved one, and for many disappeared persons (Maricela 2017). Nadin doesn’t approve of the term victim either. She identifies herself as a human rights defender, as an activist and as a daughter of a social protagonist and political activist that was disappeared because of his ideals. If you would have asked my a few years ago I wouldn’t identify myself as a human rights defender, I didn’t even know what that was. But now I do, that is what I am, a human rights defender (Nadin 2017).

Araceli is also proud to call herself a human rights defender but she is not afraid to call herself a victim either, to her it is a concept that empowers her, that gives her strength and value. However, she points out that the government must recognize that it turned them into victims, that the disappeared and their relatives are victims of the governmental system itself. Diana is offended by the term victim. It is a concept that makes me feel worse, like I need their support. I don’t feel like a victim. I feel violated, I am part of a group that is affected by the
bad decisions taken by a bad government, of a failed state, and it makes me feel very angry and frustrated (Diana 2017). Instead she identifies herself as the mother of Daniel, a disappeared young man. She does not want to call herself a human rights defender, because in her opinion, human rights defenders are born with a specific calling, they don’t need something to happen to them in order to become defenders.

5.4 Negative effects of organizing

“We received more threats in the beginning, a lot of harassment against us as a family, but also against the lawyers and the organizations that accompany us” (Nadin 2017).

Through the interviews with the respondents, it became clear that the process of organizing has had a lot of positive effects on the women’s lives, despite the tragic reason for organizing in the first place. The women themselves mention how their lives have been transformed, how they have gained a social consciousness, and an extended family. However, many negative effects of organizing were also brought up during the interviews and are important to consider.

Being organized and committed whole-heartedly to the search for the disappeared is time-consuming and requires a lot of dedication which means that other things in the respondents’ lives have suffered. Jocelyn gave up her job to search for her father and didn’t have much time for her children. You can’t search for one family member while losing another, she says, and she now tries to divide her time; 50 percent to the search for her father, and 50 percent to her children (Jocelyn 2017). Diana suffered a divorce because she was so absorbed in the search for her son Daniel. She says that she and her husband had different ways of confronting and dealing with the pain, and it became impossible to stay together. Being separated meant more freedom for Diana, to search for Daniel, but it also meant insecurity, as she lost her financial support (Diana 2017).

Another negative effect that organizing has had on the respondents’ lives is the threats that they receive because of their work. Araceli began to receive death threats almost immediately after she started investigating the disappearance of her son and seven other people that were disappeared at the same time. The other relatives got scared and withdrew from the public eye, but Araceli did the opposite. She joined the MPJD and their dialogues with the
government, where she personally told former president Felipe Calderón to stop the bloodshed. She made herself visible, and received more death threats. Araceli says she only had two options: to stop her search out of fear of the threats and live with the pain of not knowing about the destiny of her son; or to cry, admit that it hurts a lot, but then keep struggling, to find out the truth about what happened to Luis Ángel. She began to think of the threats as something that gave her strength: “every time I did something [public], I received threats, so I started to think, ah, I must have done something good! And then when three months would go by without any threats I thought, damn it, what am I doing wrong?!Ô” (Araceli 2017).

Nadin says her organization and family received more threats in the beginning of their struggle, but she thinks that because of them being visible, and making a lot of public manifestations, the threats have diminished. However, this is not the case for the popular and indigenous organizations that Hasta Encontrarlos are accompanying, who are receiving a lot of threats and even attacks. According to Nadin this is an attempt to isolate the committee and stop them from accompanying other organizations. Even though they receive less threats now, they are always under surveillance when making public actions, and their homepage, Facebook-page and telephones have been blocked several times; acts of intimidation to stop them from continuing the work in the organization. This has changed Nadin’s life, in that she always must consider issues of security; before leaving the house, when meeting with friends and so on.

Maricela reflects upon how the organization gets more threats each time they assume a new case of enforced disappearance, but how it won’t stop them from doing their job within the organization. “We suffer more threats, when we get involved in other cases, we get threatened for being in the organization. We don’t just look for our family members, we look for thousands. We suffer from threats, but it doesn’t matter anymore. The purpose is to helpÔ” (Maricela 2017).

The stigmatization of having a disappeared family member has also brought consequences to the respondents’ lives, as they have lost friends, neighbors and even relatives along the way. Some family members choose to go on with their lives and prefer not to get involved in the search, which can lead to intrafamilial conflicts and break-ups. The stigma surrounding the victims and the families is something that all women have experienced, as a common
perception is that the disappeared must have been mixed up in something.

After Daniels disappearance, and this is true for all families, we suffer a loneliness and an abandonment from a lot of our friends, from our very neighbors, from our own family! Because there is terrible fear and a strong stigma, they think that the disappeared were mixed up in something bad, and when they find out that someone has disappeared, they go away, they leave, because they don’t know better. They think that by being close to a family that has a disappeared loved one, they are insecure. You enter a psychosis; the fear paralyzes you (Diana 2017).

Nadin, whose father’s disappearance is the only one with a direct political motive, also reflects upon the stigma that surrounded her case as she and her family tried to find out the truth about what had happened to her father. As they started to look for Edmundo, the state of Oaxaca was distributing photos of him and his companion, saying they were terrorists, because they were members of a guerilla. In the beginning, many organizations were also hesitant to accompany the case, because of the association with the EPR, which made the struggle very solitary. This is one of the reasons to why Nadine started Hasta Encontrarlos, an organization that gathers family members of disappeared with political motives.

Because the government institution that is supposed to help victims with financial aid and other aspects is not functioning very well, many relatives sometimes find themselves without incomes or homes. Araceli had to give up her job and sell all her furniture to be able to afford the expenditures associated with the struggle to find her son. Maricela and her husband had to leave their business and home in Veracruz because of threats and intimidation. They are now living as displaced in their own country. It aggravates Maricela knowing that the government does little or nothing to help the families; they have salaries and resources, we have nothing, we are poorer and poorer every day because we had to leave everything (Maricela 2017).

6. Discussion of findings

The theoretical framework of this study consists of two parts: the first is centered around theories and previous research on why and how women have traditionally organized in Latin America, concentrating primarily on strategic and practical interests. The second part focuses
on theories of women’s empowerment, with a special emphasis on the concept of critical consciousness and how empowerment can be connected to organizing. The first part of the theoretical framework will primarily help to answer my first research question: What are the reasons for women’s organization as family members to the disappeared? whilst the second part is more connected to the second question: How has being part of an organization contributed to women’s empowerment process? Consequently, this chapter is divided into two categories, corresponding to the two parts outlined in the theoretical framework and my research questions. However, despite this division, some connections between the two parts will also be made.

6.1 Beyond the dichotomy of strategic and practical interests

The respondents chosen for this study have all organized around their role as family members; as mothers and daughters, searching for their loved ones who have been disappeared. In doing so, they follow a long tradition of women organizing in relation to enforced disappearances in Latin America and many similarities are to be found with the experiences of the women in Fisher’s (1993) and Schirmer’s (1993) research; the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the CONAVIGUA widows in Guatemala and the Comadres in El Salvador. They all began a lonely and difficult process of searching for their loved ones but found family members in the same situation and decided to organize together. The respondents all claim that organizing was a necessity, something they needed to do in order for the government to listen to them. ‘We noticed that if we come alone they don’t pay you any attention. We needed to be in a group, organized’ Jocelyn says and the other women are mentioning similar things when asked about why they organized.

Being organized is also a way for the respondents to do the job that corresponds to the government. Impunity surrounds the cases of enforced disappearances in Mexico, and as shown in chapter four, the state lacks the resources and the political will to confront the vast dimensions of the crisis, which leaves the families forced to conduct their own investigations and search brigades. The relatives in Argentina, Guatemala and many other Latin American countries were confronting the same negligence and impunity from their governments in the 1960s to 1980s and also took into their own hands to investigate the disappearances.
However, the big difference is that those disappearances took place in a context of military dictatorship and civil war against presumed political dissidents, while Mexico is a formal democracy that is not in an internationally recognized conflict, and the victims are not only reduced to include adversaries, but belong to the general population. In practice, however, the war on drugs and the levels of violence it has caused, together with the high levels of impunity for human rights violations, make the situation in Mexico very similar to past authoritarian regimes in the region. This indicate that the crime of enforced disappearances sparks a specific organization process that is particularly strong among women and that is recurrent under both democratic and authoritarian rule.

In relation to the debate on women’s strategic and practical interests and reasons for organizing, the findings show that the reasons for the respondents organizing in the first place was out of a purely practical interest; to find their family members. However, during the women’s processes of organizing, they expanded their activism, to include searching for all the thousands of disappeared and to struggle to achieve justice, reparation and access to the truth for all the families. The reason for organizing remains practical, the goal is still to find their loved ones, but it is also strategic in the way that it aims to transform society, achieve justice and respect for human rights and to find all of the missing people and prevent enforced disappearances from happening again. Although the women are not defying or challenging their gendered subordination in society per se, as is the original definition of strategic reasons for organizing, collective organizing has been an emancipating force that has created and transformed women’s identities, turning them into political subjects and active citizens (Conger Lind 1992; Eduards 2002), which should be valued as an equally important factor when analyzing women’s participation in civil society. These aspects will be further analyzed under the forthcoming category but we can conclude that the results defy the dichotomy of women’s strategic and practical interests and instead considers it a continuum or a simultaneous process that doesn’t value one interest more than the other (Craske 1999).

The emphasis on motherhood in the search for their relatives was not particularly strong among the respondents that are looking for their sons, contrary to what I thought I would find. In previous research on women organized as family members in other Latin American countries, women have traditionally favored a gendered discourse where their roles as mothers or wives has been the focus of their political activism. The respondents sometimes talked about themselves as mothers, but more often the women referred to themselves as
relatives, family members\textsuperscript{10}. This differs from the \textit{Madres de la Plaza de Mayo} for example, that accentuated their role as apolitical mothers in their struggle. The respondents refer to their struggle as being political several times and when referring to themselves as family members in general they take on a more collective identity then only mothers or daughters. It seems as if the organizations and the collective struggle of finding the disappeared have given the women an empowered collective identity as family members. Further research would however have to be conducted on the aspect of motherhood and organization within the movement of relatives, to draw any kind of conclusions. There are for example organizations in Mexico that consist only of mothers of the disappeared, that might focus more on their maternal identities.

After having discussed the reasons behind women\textsuperscript{â} organizing, the next section will instead look at the outcomes, and how empowerment can be considered a result of being organized in family members\textsuperscript{â} organizations.

\section*{6.2 Organization as a space for women\textsuperscript{â}s empowerment}

The aim of this research study is to explore possible connections between women\textsuperscript{â} organizing as family members and women\textsuperscript{â} empowerment. Chapter two presented the feminist perspective on power as a background, a frame, for understanding the concept of empowerment as increased feelings of \textit{power to, power with,} and \textit{power within}. By focusing on the concept of critical consciousness and the organizations as sources for empowerment, this section will analyze and discuss the data retrieved from the interviews in order to draw some conclusions regarding how women\textsuperscript{â} organizing is connected to their empowerment process.

As established, women\textsuperscript{â} organizing started as a necessity out of a practical reason, to find their missing sons or fathers. However, during the course of time, organizing would develop into much more than this. Stigmatization and guilt were common emotions among the women as they began their searches, as the government is trying to put the blame of the disappearances on the victims, for \textit{being mixed up in something}, a discourse that can be

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Familiares} in Spanish.
reflected among general parts of the population as well. People would dissociate themselves from the respondents, not wanting to be close to a family that has a disappeared member. In contrast, the organizations became places where the women felt familiarity, sisterhood, compassion, respect and understanding. ‘We found a family’ Jocelyn said and refers to her organization. The organizations became safe places where the women could share their experiences, feelings and emotions. In these safe places is also where the women started developing a critical consciousness. They became aware of them not being alone, that what had happened to them was not an isolated happening, but rather part of a systemic injustice. They realized how their own interests were related to the interests of the other women and started identifying as a group (Rowlands 1997; Gutiérrez 1994). As a result of this, the women expanded their scope, from searching for their specific loved ones, to searching for all the disappeared in the country, and to fight for their right to the truth and justice. The women developed an understanding of themselves and the social environment that surrounds them, which provided a breeding ground for action (Carr 2003; Gutiérrez 1994; Eduards 2002).

Araceli expresses how she gained a gendered consciousness through organizing, she learned about gendered violence and inequality and could recognize examples of this in her own life and consequently break free from them by separating from her partner. Diana exemplifies the process of personal transformation and gaining a social conscience when describing how, even if her son Daniel would be found tomorrow, she would still continue her work with human rights, she could never go back to the life she had before, knowing what the situation in Mexico looks like in regards to the violations of human rights. She now works at a local human rights center and is one of the coordinators in her organization. These two examples clearly show how being part of an organization has contributed to a critical and even gendered consciousness.

Diana also recognizes how organizing made her realize that she couldn’t trust the authorities, and that it was crucial for her to educate herself to be able to confront them and to keep demanding justice. The other women mention the importance of going to workshops on human rights, criminal law, gender violence, conflict resolution and risk analysis. The collectives became spaces for education, where the women developed their analytical skills, and gained new knowledge. Self-education within the group of relatives further increased women’s critical consciousness and in turn led to the politicized ability to act, which constitutes an important step in the empowerment process (Kabeer 1994; Eduards 2002). All
the respondents seem to have gained a political consciousness as they have uncovered and become aware of the impunity and flaws within the judicial and political systems, and they are convinced that if they don’t act, neither will the authorities. The women share a total mistrust against a government that has constantly failed them, and they have come to realize that the hope of finding the disappeared lie within the organizations of family members and not with the authorities. Nadin sees her commitment to organizing as a political project for life and reflects upon her journey from not knowing anything about human rights to becoming an expert and helping other families. Jocelyn says that the family members are making evident what is happening in the country, all the women coincide on the fact that they need to push the authorities so that they will investigate their cases, the families’ job is to put pressure on the government. These examples show a politicized and empowered discourse used by the women, their narratives and accounts are far from passive or victimized, but rather show empowerment and resistance.

Some of the questions in my interviews explicitly regarded identity, as I was interested in knowing both how the respondents would identify themselves, and in their thoughts on the term ‘victim’. I believed that how the women identify themselves could be relevant for the analysis of their empowerment process. In the governmental discourse, the relatives of the disappeared are called victims or indirect victims of enforced disappearances, often with a passive and helpless undertone. I had observed that some family members in meetings that I attended referred to themselves as victims and others not.

The respondents’ answers showed many similarities, but also differed in some ways. All the women consider the term victim to be problematic, as an identity that has been inflicted upon them by the government. Araceli is the only one of the respondents who doesn’t mind the word. She wants the government to recognize that it is responsible for making them victims, but she has embraced the concept as an empowered identity that gives her strength and she can identify both as a victim and as a human rights defender. Nadin proudly identifies herself as a human rights defender and as the daughter of Edmundo, Jocelyn sees herself as a political subject of change and as a transformer, Maricela as a family member looking for her loved one and for thousands of disappeared and Diana identifies herself as the mother of Daniel. The important thing here is that the women have taken a dynamic stance in identifying themselves as active subjects and not as the passive victims that the state is trying to depict them as, which could be interpreted as an empowered posture, as a result of the organizing
process and the gaining of a critical consciousness, an understanding of one’s situation and that changing that situation is possible.

One can also distinguish notions of empowerment within the respondents’ narratives when they talk about how organizing has made them stronger on the inside and given them the ability to transform the pain into something positive. These empowered stances of self-esteem, or a sort of power within, have been crucial for the women’s ability to keep their activism strong, as part of a politicized struggle within the organizations, but also as a value in itself that has had effects on their lives in general. Despite the negative effects that organizing has resulted in, like threats, stigmatization, family conflicts, break-ups and poverty, the respondents show a determination to keep struggling, and the value they see in their activism and in their searches, seem to surmount the difficulties. Nadin mentions how family members who are not organized more often get sick and lose hope, since they lack the tools to confront their problems. Because of the empowerment that organizing has resulted in, and because of the strength and support from other family members, the women feel strong enough to confront the hardships and keep searching for their relatives and for justice. Their activism is driven by strong emotions of love, family and hope, but also of infinite sadness and despair as their whole commitment to organizing is originally because they have lost someone very close to them. Throughout the interviews I got the feeling that there is no turning back for the women, they will keep on struggling for as long as they can, for their missing sons and fathers, for themselves, for all the families who has a disappeared relative, but also so that families will never have to go through what they are going through. The ability to help other people is something that the women emphasize as the most important aspect of organizing, which also helps to reaffirm the collectivized identity and the solidarity that the enforced disappearances have resulted in, the feeling that they are all in this together, justice will not be done until all the disappeared are found, as reflected in the slogan Hasta Encontrarlos! commonly used in protest marches by family members, meaning ‘until we find them’.

It is however important to highlight that the threats and stigmatization along with the time-consuming process of being an activist is probably what keeps many women (and men) from organizing. Being an organized woman can potentially lead to a triple burden as many women are supposed to take care of the family and the home, while having a job at the same time, which leaves little time for organizing (Craske 1999, Chant with Craske 2003). My interviews were not deep enough to analyze this aspect further, but I think it’s safe to say that
this factor indeed influences women’s choices of whether to organize or not. The downsides to organizing as family members of the disappeared should not be minimized, but rather recognized as threats to a functioning civil society and subsequently to democracy, which is already frail in Mexico. Although the organizations can provide strength and tools to better cope with stressful life events, it is not an encompassing solution to all these external negative effects, this is important to underline.

To sum up, being organized in a family members’ organization has contributed to women’s empowerment because it has provided women with safe environments consisting of feelings of familiarity and sisterhood which has resulted in the women sharing experiences and developing an awareness of their situation, a critical consciousness. The developing of theoretical and practical skills within the organizations have furthered this critical consciousness and has increased women’s ability to act, which is a significant part of empowerment, having the power to take action, to change one’s situation. The women’s discourses when describing their work in the organizations and when identifying themselves also show an empowered stance. This process of empowerment is also what has made women’s reasons for organizing develop from purely practical into more strategic and political reasons.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze women’s experiences from organizing as family members to the forcefully disappeared in Mexico and to explore possible connections between organization and empowerment. The starting point of the thesis was that little research has been conducted on organized female family members in Mexico overall, but also that research on women’s empowerment as a result of organizing has been discussed mostly in relation to social movements and feminist organizations, that have a political starting point, or even an outspoken aim of empowering women. This thesis has intended to fill that research gap.

In order to reach the aim of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five organized women in Mexico and their answers were subsequently analyzed against a theoretical framework and previous research on women’s organizing and women’s
empowerment. In order to get a better understanding of the women’s processes in their organizations, it was important to know why they organized in the first place, hence the first research question: What are the reasons for women’s organization as family members to the disappeared? By looking at the concepts of practical and strategic interests, the analysis showed that women’s reasons for organizing was out of a practical interest, out of necessity, in order tofacilitate the search for the missing relatives. However, their reasons for organizing has developed during time and can now be considered more strategic. The study has showed that women’s organizing is more complex than the dichotomy of interests and agree with critics like Radcliffe & Westwood (1993), Schirmer (1993), Craske (1999) and Conger Lind (1992); we should not strive to strictly categorize women’s interests under these categories but rather see them as linked together, without any clear-cut boundaries between them. We should instead be more interested in how women themselves make sense of their own life situations and choices and not attempt to grade women’s reasons for organizing from a scale of feminist or feminine, strategic or practical. Nevertheless, the division of interests can be useful when analyzing changes in women’s organizing patterns. I argue that women’s reasons for organizing developed into more political and strategic interests as the empowerment process within the organizations progressed. This is connected to my second research question of how organizing has contributed to women’s empowerment.

The concept of empowerment used in this study is based on a feminist perspective on power and has aimed to regain the transformative potential of the concept as it was developed originally among women at the grassroots (Rowlands 1997; Kabeer 1994). The concept of empowerment originates from a feminist research tradition, with an agenda for social change, to increase women’s power over their own lives and over decisions that include them. In contrast to how empowerment is used within mainstream development approaches as an instrumental value, a feminist perspective sees women’s increased power and empowerment as a value in itself, but also as a necessary means to achieve social change (Eduards 2002). According to Eduards, organizing is not only about achieving rights, but also about human dignity, which in turn is not about improved material conditions, but about self-respect, ability to act and the right to be a critical subject (ibid:117).

This research chose to focus on how gaining a critical consciousness and being part of an organization contributed to a process of empowerment. The analysis of women’s experiences show that the feeling of support, respect and solidarity within the organizations created a
space for women to talk about their experiences and to connect them to bigger, social phenomenon, it made them realize that the disappearances of their specific loved ones are not separate cases, they are all connected and need to be analyzed in relation to the ongoing war on drugs. This, together with the development of specific skills and new knowledges, sparked the process of gaining a critical consciousness, that contributed to women’s increased self-esteem and empowerment (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997). By organizing in family members' collectives, the respondents have gained a voice and have become subjects in their own lives (Freire 2000).

This study adds to the body of research on women organizing and empowerment in that it shows how non-political organizations like family members collectives also lead to women’s empowerment, without it being an outspoken goal. Women’s empowerment is a cornerstone for building an active and inclusive civil society, which highlights the importance of conducting research on how and why women choose to organize and how organization in turn affects the women and their lives but also society in general. Further research on women organizing as family members and its empowering consequences could look more into the specific organizations for deeper analysis and comparisons. It could also be interesting to investigate differences and similarities between mothers’ and daughters’ levels of empowerment within the organizations. Importantly, more research is needed on women human rights defenders in Latin America, on their specifically exposed and vulnerable situation and how threats, intimidation and stigmatization affect their lives and the ways in which they organize.

This research study maintains that the organizations of family members represent hope and persistence in their dedication to the search for the thousands of disappeared in Mexico and Latin America, and in their struggle for justice and respect for human rights. The organizations provide breeding grounds for women’s increased empowerment and visibility within the public and private spheres, and are places where power and democracy are generated (Eduards 2002).

They have tried to take tranquility and peace away from us, from the families, but they don’t know what have risen instead, and they don’t know the power of the mothers and of the family members, that one day, if we keep organizing, things have to change (Diana 2017).
References

Books


Eduards, Maud (2002) *Förbjuden Handling i om kvinnors organisering och feministisk teori.* Kristianstad: Liber AB


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Appendix 1

Interview guide

What is your name?
How old are you?
Where are you from?
What is your occupation?

Could you tell me a little bit about your case?

What is the name of your organization? Could you tell me a little bit about it?
How long have you been organized?
Are there other people in your family that are also organized?
Had you been organized in any kind of organization or union or something similar before?

Why did you decide to organize?

What does organization mean to you? What does it make you feel?

How has organization affected your life? Could be negative and positive things

Have you received threats because of your activism?

What have been the greatest lessons (aprendizajes) during the process of being organized?

Have you been able to use what you have learned in other parts of your life?

What have been the greatest obstacles?

How do you identify yourself in the struggle to find your relative?
To you, what does the term victim mean?

Do you have something you want to add?