Global Learning Hub
for Transitional Justice
and Reconciliation

The Cost of Searching: Women and the Disappeared

Findings from Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq

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Introduction

Enforced disappearances remain a global problem: they are used as a tool of repression and control, marked by secrecy and impunity. While international and national frameworks recognise the crime, the lived experience of families – especially women – reveals much deeper impacts.

Disappearances profoundly reshape women's lives across economic, social, and psychological dimensions. The disappearance of male breadwinners often pushes them into poverty, debt, and long-term insecurity (Mazurana et al., 2013; Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015; Amnistía Internacional, 2024; Yakinthou, 2015). At the social level, disappearances alter family and community dynamics, triggering conflicts, shifting gender roles, and isolating women who face stigma (Beristain, 2010; Mazurana et al., 2013). Psychologically, the uncertainty of ambiguous loss prevents mourning, producing "frozen grief" and translating into chronic stress, fatigue, and other health conditions (Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015; Blaauw, 2002; Arnoso et al., 2012).

Despite increasing attention on how disappearances affect those left behind, however, far less has been written about the impacts of the *search* for the disappeared. Women are at the heart of these endeavours. They organise collectives, transform grief into political action, and create spaces of resistance and memory when institutions fail (Santillán, 2025; Vega-Salazar, 2024; Maldonado et al., 2022; Domínguez Cornejo, 2022). Women also develop creative and artistic practices that honour absence and strengthen community bonds (Narro, 2023; Ramírez Martínez, 2024). At the same time, the search process carries considerable risks and burdens in contexts of institutional neglect.

This collection features three case studies

COLOMBIA

The Social and Economic Impacts on Women Who Search for the Forcibly Disappeared: The Case of Colombia

PAOLA MOLANO AND PAULA VALENCIA

INDONESIA & TIMOR-LESTE

In the Shadow of Absence: Women Searching for the Disappeared in Indonesia and Timor-Leste

ARMINDA PEREIRA, GALUH WANDITA, JOSE LUIS DE OLIVEIRA, JULINTA MORENG BUNGAN, KAREN CAMPBELL NELSON, MULKI MAKMUN, PUTRI KANESIA AND VICTORIA TOMASIA

IRAQ

The Economic and Social Impacts on Women Who Search for the Disappeared: The Case of Ninewa, Iraq

RIMA SALIMA

Considering the importance of centring women as primary survivors of enforced disappearance whose resilience and struggle demand stronger recognition and support, members of the *Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation* documented the experiences of women searching for disappeared persons across diverse contexts. The aim was to understand the role of women in search processes and how such processes result in adverse economic and social consequences. Based on the findings, recommendations were developed for how institutional responses, at both the national and international level, can mitigate these impacts and decrease women's vulnerabilities.

The three documented cases illustrate different nuances and particularities of search processes carried out by women relatives of those forcibly disappeared. They demonstrate how women's search efforts are profoundly complicated by unequal gender relations – across contexts, the effects of the search either deepen existing gender inequalities or occur precisely because of them. Each case is presented as an independent document that provides readers with information on the context in which disappearances occurred; the role of women in the search process; the institutional framework in which the search takes place; the social and economic toll of searching; and recommendations for addressing these impacts.

To produce the documentation, each case study relied on qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, workshops, and focus groups. The choice of methods responded to the women's contextual, national, and personal conditions, as well as their location. While many common aspects can be identified, differences between the cases are also evident; these are related, among other factors, to the forms of enforced disappearance, the degree of development and capacity of search institutions, the possibility of building organisations of the relatives of those forcibly disappeared, and the depth of gender inequalities in each context.

The summary below highlights the main findings of the cases, organised into four areas: 1) the role of women in the search processes, 2) the barriers to their search, 3) the economic and social impacts of searching, and 4) an overview of recommendations. This synthesis serves both as an overview of the cases and as a guide to help readers identify aspects of particular interest.

Key findings of the cases from Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq

1. The central role of women searchers

Across Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq, women have emerged as the primary agents in the struggle against enforced disappearance, transforming private grief into sustained political action.

Despite operating in vastly different contexts, women searchers have consistently demonstrated three fundamental contributions: making disappearances visible on public and political agendas, driving institutional transformations in search mechanisms, and building collective memory that shapes narratives beyond statistics.

Women's advocacy has been crucial in establishing enforced disappearance as a recognised human rights violation. In Colombia, women searchers have organised demonstrations and marches that have kept the issue at the forefront of national discourse for decades, achieving legal recognition of enforced disappearance as an autonomous crime and securing specialised search institutions. In Indonesia, the Thursday Vigil or *Kamisan* movement, initiated by mothers of disappeared persons, has maintained weekly protests since 2007, with participants wearing dark shirts and carrying black umbrellas as defining symbols of the human rights movement. In Iraq's Ninewa governorate, where formal mechanisms remain fragmented and gender-discriminatory, women have created informal networks that function as alternative systems of information-sharing and mutual support, navigating bureaucratic systems and maintaining pressure on unresponsive officials. The transnational dimension of women's advocacy further demonstrates their central role. The participation of Argentina's Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* in Indonesia's *Kamisan* vigils in 2009 exemplifies how women searchers have created networks of solidarity that transcend national boundaries, facilitating knowledge- sharing about search strategies, legal advocacy, and psychological support.

The institutional transformations achieved through women's advocacy represent a second crucial contribution. In Colombia, persistent demands by relatives' organisations led to the creation of parallel justice mechanisms, including the Commission for the Search for Disappeared Persons (CBPD) and later the Unit for the Search for Disappeared Persons (UBPD). In the context of Indonesia and Timor-Leste, civil society organisations established by families, including KontraS and IKOHI, have maintained the search agenda. However, since 2015, annual reunions of "stolen children" and their families, supported by both countries' human rights institutions and accompanied by women searchers, have been held with backing from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Timor-Leste's Centro Nacional Chega! and related state offices.

Beyond institutional advocacy, women searchers have fundamentally reshaped how societies understand enforced disappearance. Rather than reducing the phenomenon to statistics, they have created collective memory that humanises victims and contextualises disappearances within broader patterns of violence. Colombian women have developed narratives connecting individual cases to systematic strategies of territorial control. Indonesian and Timorese women have preserved testimonies linking contemporary disappearances to historical patterns of political repression since 1965. Iraqi women have maintained oral histories challenging official silence around sectarian violence.

Women searchers have developed sophisticated political strategies, legal expertise and advocacy skills that challenge power structures and demand institutional accountability, demonstrating how marginalised actors can drive significant social and political change despite systematic exclusion from formal decision-making processes.

2. Lack of legal protection and institutional support

Across all three contexts, women searchers operate within frameworks of institutional neglect characterised by weak or absent legal protections specifically addressing enforced disappearance. Indonesia and Timor-Leste lack domestic legal frameworks criminalising enforced disappearance, with neither country ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), leaving women without legal protection or recourse during their search efforts.

Iraq presents critical institutional dysfunction, where fragmented offices operate with inconsistent procedures, contradictory requirements, and an absence of centralised databases, creating bureaucratic loops designed to exhaust searchers while providing no meaningful support or accountability. This is particularly devastating for those lacking formal documentation due to conflict and displacement. Discriminatory laws, including the Personal Status Law, compound these barriers by reinforcing women's legal dependency on male guardianship, which severely restricts women's ability to act independently in legal and bureaucratic processes.

Even where search mechanisms exist, they consistently fail to address women's particular needs during the search process. In Colombia, despite specialised institutions like the UBPD, the recently approved *Women Searchers Law* remains largely symbolic with insufficient implementation and no enforcement mechanisms.

As a consequence of the lack of legal and institutional frameworks, women's leadership and specialised knowledge in the search for disappeared persons are disregarded, placing them in conditions of vulnerability and marginalisation.

3. Impacts on the economic and social rights of women searchers

Due to a profound lack of protection and support from the state, the toll on women searchers is considerable. These are not temporary effects but multidimensional harms that reshape their daily lives and extend across generations. The cases of Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq show consistent patterns of impairment, with variations in intensity depending on context.

Economic effects

The search produces systematic impoverishment. Women dedicate an enormous amount of time to search activities, including visiting institutions, filing documents, and travelling to hearings. These activities prevent stable employment while functioning as unpaid full-time work without recognition or compensation.

The financial costs are constant and significant. In Colombia, women spend their limited financial resources on transportation, legal paperwork and medical support without state reimbursement, often falling into debt. In Iraq, families must repeatedly pay for travel and, at times, informal fees to access information. In Timor-Leste, the destruction of homes and savings during the conflict left women destitute, struggling to rebuild livelihoods while searching for relatives.

Economic insecurity is compounded by exclusion from social protection. In Colombia, women have searched for the disappeared for more than four decades; as a result, they have not been able to contribute to pension systems, leaving them unprotected in old age. Similar gaps exist in Iraq, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, where women lack access to benefits and are left dependent on family or solidarity networks. Debt, poverty, and the absence of long-term security are recurring outcomes of this structural neglect.

Social impacts

The search profoundly alters women's social roles. Across all three contexts, women face isolation and stigma for challenging silence around disappearances. In Colombia, relatives of the disappeared are often labelled "problematical" or "mad", and entire families become associated with crime or insurgency, causing social isolation, damaging their reputations, and reducing employment opportunities. In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, women who search for their loved ones have been mocked or accused of mental instability, while others are denied recognition as widows due to the lack of official death certificates. In Iraq, women who insist on searching are judged dishonourable and told that their behaviour brings shame to their families.

Disappearance also forces major household transformations. With husbands, sons, and brothers gone, women assume the role of household heads and primary decision-makers, often without social or institutional recognition. While this shift generates processes of empowerment, it also brings heavy emotional and material burdens. Family and community ties are further strained: Colombian women report displacement due to threats; in Iraq, social silencing limits solidarity; and in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, widows are left in legal limbo, unable to formally define their identity and their civil status.

Health and psychological impacts

Searching also takes a heavy toll on women's health. The uncertainty of ambiguous loss produces chronic stress, depression and anxiety that persist for decades. Unlike other forms of grief, the absence of closure prevents healing and entrenches psychological suffering. Moreover, women searchers often face a "triple workday": caring for families, sustaining precarious livelihoods, and dedicating themselves to the search. This combination produces exhaustion and health deterioration with age.

Physical health deteriorates alongside psychological trauma. In Colombia, women report hypertension, chronic pain and mobility problems directly linked to years of stress and hardship. In Iraq, memory loss, anxiety and psychosomatic illnesses are widespread among women. These conditions are aggravated by poor access to healthcare.

Sexual violence constitutes a distinctive impact. In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, women describe sexual harassment and abuse by soldiers during the conflict, while Yazidi women in Iraq endured captivity and systematic sexual violence, compounding the trauma of disappearance. These experiences continue to shape women's search for disappeared relatives, as interactions with soldiers and officials often expose them to the risk of renewed sexual violence. In all contexts, psychosocial services remain generic and insufficient, rarely addressing the specific nature of disappearance-related trauma.

Educational impacts

Searching also has detrimental effects on education. In Colombia, many women abandoned higher education or vocational training to dedicate themselves to searching. Their children experienced constant school interruptions due to displacement and insecurity, which weakened learning outcomes and access to higher education. Although less documented in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, women's repeated calls for scholarships indicate the presence of similar educational disruptions. In Iraq, displacement and the burden of navigating institutions also disrupted children's schooling and women's ability to pursue further education.

Cumulative and intergenerational effects

The burdens of searching are also transmitted across generations. Children and grandchildren often inherit the responsibility of continuing the search, while also bearing the economic and psychological consequences of their parents' struggles. Women frequently enter old age with poor health, no pensions, and unresolved searches, demonstrating how enforced disappearance generates long-term and intergenerational harm. This research suggests that exploring the intergenerational impacts of the search provides a new dimension with its own impacts and policy challenges that need to be addressed.

4. Policy lessons and recommendations

While women searchers in Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq face comparable challenges, their specific priorities and demands differ. The distinct historical trajectories, institutional frameworks and social contexts of each country shape the kinds of reforms that women identify as urgent.

Colombia

In Colombia, women emphasise the need for the state to recognise the search as formal labour and their contribution to this process as part of official initiatives. This would include pensions, salaries and labour protections for those who dedicate years or even decades to searching. Beyond recognition, they call for meaningful social and economic protection: housing subsidies for displaced families, restitution of property rights, and cancellation or relief of debts left by disappeared relatives. Health and psychosocial care must also be improved and tailored to the particular trauma of disappearance, including chronic illness and ambiguous loss. Finally, women request educational support for their children, as well as training and capacity-building programmes for women searchers themselves, so that they are not permanently excluded from educational and employment opportunities.

Indonesia and Timor-Leste

In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, families of the disappeared highlight the absence of legal recognition as their most urgent challenge. They call for the establishment of a joint commission on the disappeared that could operate across both countries. Legal reforms must include explicit guarantees for the safety of women searchers, who continue to face harassment and stigmatisation. Survivors also demand reparations programmes that include gender-sensitive psychosocial services, scholarships, and broader social protection schemes. Equally important is supporting family-led memory initiatives, including those of women searchers, as legitimate forms of truth-seeking and memory-building.

Iraq

In Iraq, the priority is to secure women's status as independent rights-holders, regardless of marital or kinship documentation, which often prevents them from acting before state institutions. Women call for the incorporation of gender-sensitive and survivor-centred procedures in the existing mechanisms for the search, designed to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and discriminatory practices. They also emphasise the need for financial support and access to legal aid, along with psychosocial care that responds to the compounded trauma of displacement, stigma and ambiguous loss. Protection from harassment and exploitation in interactions with authorities is essential, as is the creation of formal spaces for women's participation in transitional justice processes and advocacy platforms.

Conclusion

The experiences of women searchers in Colombia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and Iraq demonstrate that enforced disappearance is not only a crime against the individuals taken from their loved ones, but an ongoing violation that reshapes the lives of those left behind. Women are the central actors sustaining visibility, pressing institutions into action, and preserving memory in contexts where states have failed to deliver truth and justice. At the same time, they are confronted with profound social, economic and psychological impacts extending across generations.

What emerges from the three cases is a picture of both vulnerability and agency. Women are forced into roles of breadwinners, caregivers and human rights defenders simultaneously, often without recognition or protection. Yet their initiatives, whether through organisations, public rituals, or informal networks, have been decisive in keeping disappearances on national and international agendas.

The distinct recommendations articulated in each context underscore the urgent need for institutional and policy responses to be grounded in the lived realities and expressed priorities of women searchers themselves. For such measures to be meaningful, they must move beyond framing these women merely as peripheral victims and instead recognise them as rights-holders and central actors in the struggle against enforced disappearance. Furthermore, it is critical that policy frameworks explicitly acknowledge that enforced disappearance is not only a crime, but a grave violation of human rights which reverberates across multiple domains of women searchers' lives, with lasting economic, social, emotional, and political impacts.

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

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

IMPRINT

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