

## Assemblies of Resistance: Women, remembering and demanding justice

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the main participants, stakeholders and partners of this installation, including Hermelinda Ruiz, Isabel Cruz, Luz Angulo, Marisol Méndez, and Diana Gutiérrez, who are part of the collectives Sabuesos Guerreras Sinaloa, Madres Independientes Buscando a sus Hijos, and Buscándote con Amor in Mexico City. We also acknowledge the expertise of Ana Lorena Delgadillo, Roxana Rosas, Mariana Alegre, Alejandra Lamberri, and Marisol Méndez from the NGOs Fundación para la Justicia and Seguridad sin Guerra. Finally, we express our gratitude to Harvard GSD, HUMAS, DRCLAS, UUSC, UNAM Boston, and Estación Noroeste de Investigación y Docencia del Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas de la UNAM.



### Abstract

*Assemblies of Resistance: Women, Remembering and Demanding Justice* is a multidisciplinary project that includes a two-day symposium and design strategies to amplify the messages of women-led collectives in Mexico who search for their disappeared family members. These activists demand justice in response to the ongoing human rights crisis. According to the 2025 World Human Rights Report, over 115,000 individuals have disappeared in Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> March 7, 25. *Assemblies of Resistance: Women, Remembering and Demanding Justice* Symposium.

The project originated during the MX Conference 2024 at Harvard University, in collaboration with Madres Buscadoras collectives from Sinaloa and Mexico City. Initially launched as a communication strategy to raise awareness and fundraising, the collaboration between Harvard students was developed with the input from human rights experts such as María Salguero and Marisol Méndez, focusing on the challenges these collectives face.

The communication strategy developed into a symposium, held on March 7 and 8, of this year, which included panels addressing migration, human rights, gender violence, and testimonies from the Madres Buscadoras. The current component of the project is an art installation at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, which will feature symbolic elements for demonstrations in Sinaloa and Mexico City. The installation honors the work of these collectives and acknowledges the violence of forced disappearances, creating a platform for support networks and amplifying their fight for justice.

## **Introduction**

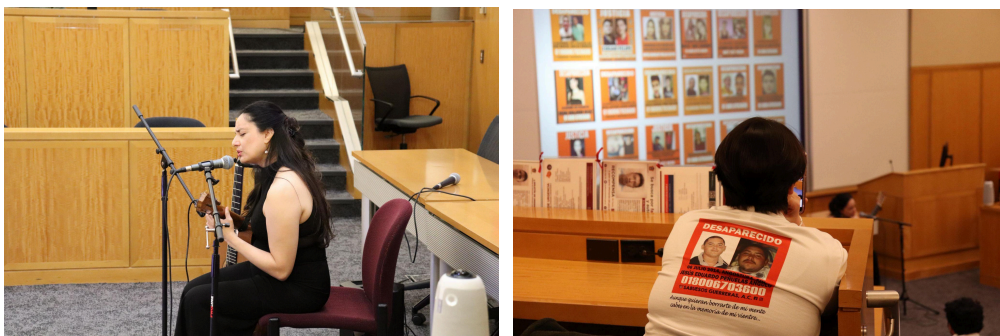
Initially, the project emerged as a communication strategy to bring visibility to the struggle of the Madres Buscadoras, developed together with them and in collaboration with María Salguero, feminist, researcher, and data scientist specializing in femicide and armed violence against women, and Marisol Méndez, lawyer at the *Fundación para la Justicia and Seguridad sin Guerra*. Through constant communication via chat, in-person meetings, weekly calls, and an understanding of immediate needs, the project focused on creating a conference that would address the issue of forced disappearances in Mexico, highlighting the needs and challenges faced by the involved collectives.

The event, held on March 7 and 8, 2025, was co-designed by Harvard University students, who worked closely with the members of the collectives and the participating experts to define the guest and panelist list. Following the ideas of theorists like Lola Olufemi and Adrienne Maree Brown, the event frames grief as a political act of transformation. To achieve this, the process was structured in five key steps.

First, *connect—understand common points of interest, how to learn and help*. Moving beyond awareness, the goal was to create empathy by creating a deep emotional connection with the women

leading the fight for justice. This space aimed to cultivate reflection, attention, and participation in the movement, encouraging participants to engage meaningfully. Then, *plan—create a work schedule and a curated guest list* identifying experts with a gender perspective, ensuring inclusive representation, a safe and respectful environment, challenging gender norms.

*Next, Act— make it happen*, on March 7, three main panels took place. *Migration and Human Rights*, with Marisol Méndez and Roxana Rosas; *Search Testimonies*, led by Isabel Cruz, Luz Ángulo, Hermelinda Ruiz, and Diana Gutiérrez, moderated by Mariana Alegre; and *Gender Violence*, with María Salguero and Ana Lorena Delgadillo. The event also featured a *screening of the film Ruido* by director Natalia Beristain, who provided introductory words before the movie. Additionally, there was a *live concert by Zaira Meneses*, a Mexican classical guitarist.



*Afterward, reflect—on March 8, a space for calm and thought, dialogue, and care was created.* A guided meditation by Tamara Braveman took place, and a commemorative installation with candles was presented on the Charles River Esplanade in Boston as an act of collective memory. *Finally, follow-up focuses on analyzing how to improve and scale the collaboration.* As part of this process, an artistic installation was held at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, including symbolic elements intended for demonstrations on August 30 in Sinaloa and Mexico City.

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<sup>2</sup> March 7, 25. *Assemblies of Resistance: Women, Remembering and Demanding Justice* Symposium.



This installation represents the transposition of collective members into a system that moves from bureaucratic insensitivity to the human, from the personal to the files, from thousands of records to thousands of victim stories and their families. Inspired by Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic politics, the search for justice is not limited to the pursuit of truth but becomes an ongoing struggle within contested spaces. The State, institutions, and activism interact in a political context where power dynamics are questioned, showing the need for confrontation and negotiation to bring visibility to the systemic violence of forced disappearances. The installation goal is to recognize the work of the collectives of Madres Buscadoras within these systems, their struggle for human rights and justice in Mexico.

*Assemblies of Resistance: Women, remembering and demanding justice* allow the visibility, recreation of memory, gratitude, and the creation of support networks for the searching collectives. These actions open opportunities for securing more funding, developing media strategies, strengthening collaboration with experts, and, above all, making statistics public and humanizing the

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<sup>3</sup> March 8, 25. *Assemblies of Resistance: Women, Remembering and Demanding Justice* candle installation and meditation.



victims, bringing their stories to a wider audience and raising social and institutional awareness. It is hoped that the Mexican presidency will take action in response to the grave situation of forced disappearances in the country, recognizing the invaluable work of these collectives.

### **Human Rights Crisis Forced Disappearance in Mexico**

According to the 2025 World Report on Human Rights, over 115,000 people have been reported missing in Mexico between 2006 and 2024 a number that approaches the total population of Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard University, which according to the U.S. Census Bureau is approximately 118,000. Many of the victims are presumed to have been murdered and buried in over 5,700 clandestine graves uncovered by different collectives of Madres Buscadoras. These graves often contain human remains that remain unidentified. In September 2024, journalists reported that more than 72,000 human remains had been classified as unidentified in state morgues between 2006 and 2023.



Several key factors contributing to this ongoing humanitarian emergency include organized crime and drug cartels, state involvement and corruption, weak rule of law and impunity, militarization of public security, mass graves, unidentified bodies, the targeting of activists,

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<sup>4</sup> Human bone remains found by Sabuesos Guerreras Buscadoras de Sinaloa.

journalists, and women, and the lack of government action. These variables are not immediately visible, but as Marisol Méndez, a human rights lawyer at Fundación para la Justicia, explained, they are the consequence of a weak system where the chances of becoming a victim of these issues increase for everyone and future generations.

### **Madres Buscadoras Collectives Work and Achievements**

In response to this crisis, over 230 search collectives have been formed by the families of victims to investigate disappearances and they are called “Madres Buscadoras”. Members of these collectives conduct searches in morgues and frequently locate and exhume clandestine graves. Their work is often met with threats and violence. Most of the information found and the narrative surrounding this issue focuses on the belief that missing people are dead, contrary to Principle 1 of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances' Guiding Principles for the Search for Missing Persons, which states: 'The search must be carried out under the presumption that the missing person is alive, regardless of the circumstances of the disappearance, the date the disappearance began, or the moment the search starts.' In this case, based on the interview with Hermelinda Ruiz searches are typically conducted in hospitals, asylums, and jails.

Based on this interview, the search process consists of different steps. The first one is filled with adrenaline, as families search near the site where their loved ones disappeared, often putting themselves at risk. According to Ruiz, authorities only begin to help after 72 hours of a disappearance, contrary to Principle 6 of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, which states: “As soon as the authorities responsible for the search become aware, by any means, or have indications that a person has been subjected to enforced disappearance, they must initiate search actions immediately, without any delay or deferral, and in an expeditious manner. These search actions must include, when necessary, moving to the relevant locations.” Ruiz also adds that the process is highly bureaucratic and corrupt. “If the disappearance involves a woman, authorities tell the victims' families that organized crime will probably return them once they are pregnant. It is a nightmare.”

Finally, Hermelinda said that “the process is riddled with issues. First, the assumption that the disappeared are dead, even in the questionnaires that families must fill out. Second, there is a stigma that if someone disappears, it is because they are criminals. Third, authorities suggest that families follow a "search manual" in an "efficient" way. However, how can someone be efficient in such a devastating situation?”

This is an example of how, when thinking about the world politically, the search for justice is not just a pursuit of truth but an ongoing struggle within its context, as outlined in Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic politics in *Agonistics*. In this framework, the state, institutions, and activism interact in a political arena where power dynamics are constantly challenged. The tension between these actors forms a central part of the search for justice, where activism and institutional failures collide. This agonistic interaction underscores the necessity for both confrontation and negotiation to expose the systemic violence that underpins enforced disappearances.

Part of this confrontation and negotiation has been done by the international institutions support that the collectives have been able to get. According to data from GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), between 2019 and 2022, the German Federal Foreign Office (AA) commissioned the project "Strengthening the Rule of Law in Mexico II," which contributed to the identification of deceased individuals who had remained unaccounted. The initiative focused on improving mechanisms and structures within the National Search Commission and forensic institutions. However, ongoing support remains critical to addressing this crisis.

The German embassy has also supported the use of scanners for digital fingerprints. This technology is a key element in searching for missing people post-mortem to help the families of the victims find closure, as outlined by Germany's UNSC. “Mobile fingerprint scanners and specialized software, developed in collaboration with the University of Hamburg, Mexican forensics, and civil society, are facilitating identification efforts. A donation of 300 mobile scanners to all 32 state prosecutor offices has empowered authorities to accelerate the identification process. Since August 2023, the cooperation has digitized fingerprints of 5,986 unknown deceased persons. 2,276 identities have been confirmed.' However, this technology could go beyond its current use.

Mobile fingerprint scanners can also assist in the search for living victims, particularly in hospitals, asylums, and prisons. The technology allows officials to compare lists of missing persons with individuals in these places and identify matches. Based on an interview with Hermelinda Ruiz, this would be incredibly helpful if they could have access to federal prisons, not just state ones. This is an implementation that authorities should carry out, ensuring that the people in these places are who they claim to be and verifying their identities through fingerprinting.

## Institutional Bureaucracy Archive

*Assemblies of Resistance: Women, remembering and demanding justice* This archive is color-coded based on data collected from local newspapers, prosecutor offices, and search committees from all 32 states in Mexico.



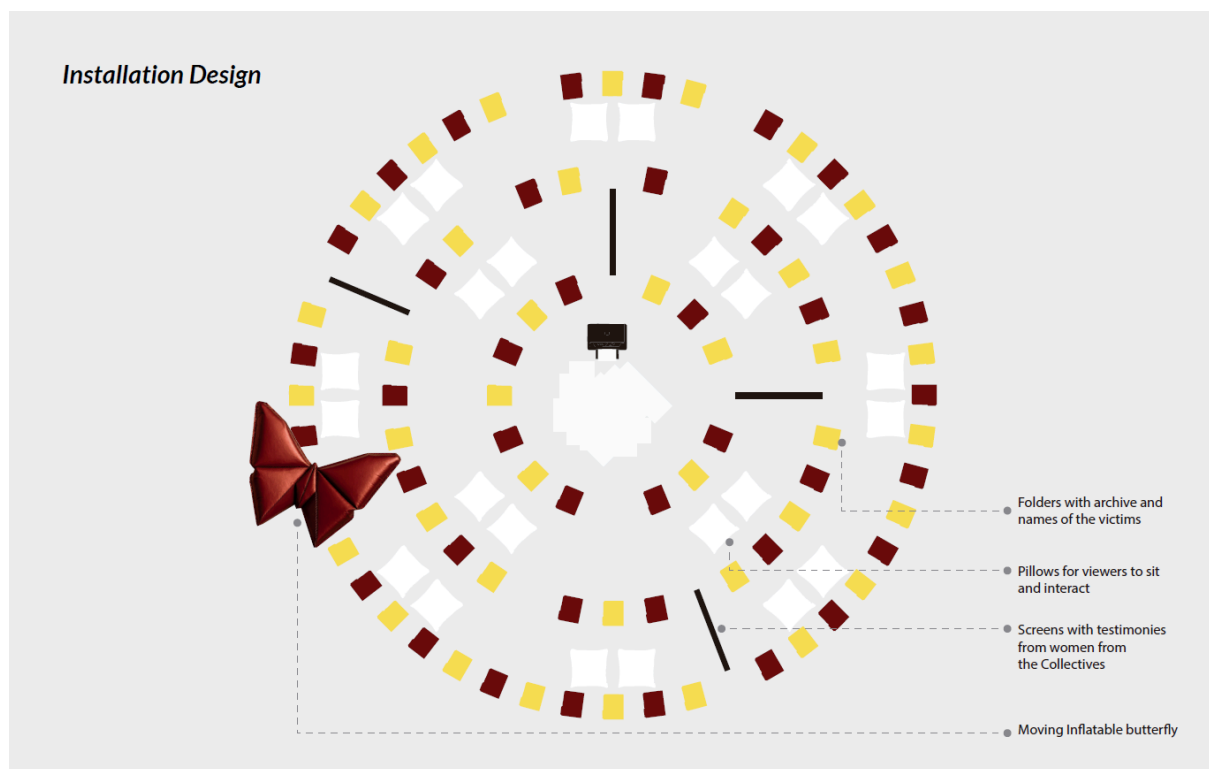
The archive contains various categories of documents, each color-coded for easy reference. It begins with News (3C0508): articles and news reports from local newspapers that provide firsthand accounts and updates on disappearances, investigations, and community responses. Next, Disappearance Forms (8E0A11): forms filled out by families and authorities to document disappearances, including official records from police departments and search committees. Following that, Disappearance Victims Flyers (CA0F14): files detailing the victims of forced disappearances, including personal data and photos. Then, Amber Alerts (FA1F1A): notices for missing minors or young adults, including details on the circumstances surrounding their disappearances. Finally, Manuals, Informs, and Reports (FC9AA9): institutional documents containing legal manuals, search protocols, and government reports on disappearances. These include action plans, resources for search committees, and updates on ongoing investigations

<sup>5</sup> Samples of Archive design



## Interdisciplinary Design as a Symbol of Support

For the art installation at Piper Auditorium in the Graduate School of Design, the curatorial approach throughout all phases and mediums focuses on creating a transformative space for *memory, resilience, and justice*. It honors the personal stories of the families of the disappeared, amplifies the voices of women-led collectives, and highlights the structural issues surrounding enforced disappearances in Mexico. The vision is to provide a platform where emotion, truth, and action converge, ensuring that visitors not only grasp the gravity of the issue but are also compelled to engage, reflect, and participate in the movement for justice.



6

The installation consists of a circular circuit that moves from the archive to the testimonies. To navigate the archive, visitors must take a map flyer that describes the installation and provides key information. The first element is positioned at the center of the circle's perimeter: a printer continuously printing thousands of flyers of disappearance persons, showing the victims while also representing the scale of the issue in both time and number.

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<sup>6</sup> Installation Design Sketch

The next circle contains seats for the spectators to contemplate the printing action. The following ring is formed by the color-coded archive described earlier in this text, guiding the circulation and drawing the spectator toward the center. While walking through this space, visitors can also interact with the archive by opening the folders and reading the files.

The last ring consists of screens displaying videos of testimonies from Hermelinda Ruiz, Isabel Cruz, Luz Angulo, Marisol Méndez, and Diana Gutiérrez. The testimonies are interview-based and were conducted in Spanish, with English translations of the text shown on the video. The background features monarch butterflies flying, symbolizing the journey<sup>7</sup> of these women. The final element is a giant inflatable butterfly designed with Harvard's branding as a message of support from the students of the Harvard GSD to the movement. This butterfly will be replicated and sent to all states of Mexico for the demonstration on August 30, marking the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. The goal is to send a message to the Mexican state. The installation also includes a media strategy, with local newspapers sharing coverage of the Cambridge installation as part of the support for May 10, Mother's Day in Mexico.

## Questions

1. Given the intense political context in the US, particularly at Harvard, how can we engage in political activism without facing significant risks as international students?
2. How can I make the archive interactive while ensuring it remains adaptable to follow the established coding system?
3. What role can institutions like Harvard, in collaboration with organizations such as the German Federal Foreign Office, play in strengthening Mexico's national search mechanisms for the disappeared? What additional support is needed for long-term success?

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<sup>7</sup> The ability to transform – In Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, the butterfly is frequently used as a symbol of transformation and fleeting beauty, particularly when discussing the idea of personal growth and the "other" self, a central theme of the book. The text describes the world as beautiful when seen "like a child," capturing the wonder of nature, including butterflies, as a way to access a deeper understanding of oneself. Butterflies symbolize metamorphosis, representing the journey from one state of being to another—aligning with the main character's personal transformation throughout the story.

4. How can public policy and design initiatives better support and protect the work of the Madres Buscadoras collectives, who lead the search for missing persons despite facing substantial threats and violence?
5. What role can interdisciplinary design, cultural initiatives, and public art installations play in advancing the visibility of forced disappearances, and how can these efforts influence public opinion and drive policy change in Mexico?

## Biography

**Michelle Segura** Through interdisciplinary design and collaboration, art, memory, and collective work can help us imagine different futures. I have worked as an art director at design agencies and as the communications and public relations director at a production company. My background includes a career in architecture and urbanism at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, and I am currently pursuing a master's degree in urban studies (MDes Publics) at Harvard University, where collective art, planning, and public policy intersect. Currently, I focus on programming and developing cultural activations through design and communication strategies.

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