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# How to Start over: Coping Mechanisms during Individual Women Displacement by Organized Crime

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## ABSTRACT

Every year, thousands of innocent victims—often women—leave their communities individually and in silence to escape the direct and indirect violence that criminal organizations exert. We explore and catalog the coping strategies these victims implement during what we call individual displacement. Then, we analyze in-depth interviews with women in Mexico—a country going through a severe insecurity crisis—to illustrate how individual, familial, social, and institutional coping occurs. We conclude by discussing how making visible individual displacement and understanding coping strategies can help governmental and non-governmental organizations develop interventions aimed at helping women going through this harrowing experience.

## KEYWORDS

Coping strategies; forced displacement; women; war on drugs


## INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement is a phenomenon that affects millions of people throughout the world (Crisp, 2010; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009; Ibañez, 2009; Lubkemann, 2005; Siriwardhana & Wickramage, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Unlike cross-national migration, however, this type of population transfer, typically remains within national borders, complicating the registration, monitoring, and protection of those who experience it. It is estimated that, in 2019, at least 33.4 million people were forced to migrate worldwide, of which 8.5 million were displaced due to conflict and violence (IDMC, 2020).

Although Mexico and Central America are not the regions that have seen the largest exodus, they have suffered greatly. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, between 175,000 and 250,000 families relocate every year to escape gang violence (Cantor, 2016; OAS, 2018; UNHCR, 2017; Wolf, 2021) meanwhile, according to Mexico's most recent census (2020), as many as 274,000 Mexicans have permanently relocated to escape the threats, extortion, homicides, and attempted homicides that accompany violence in the country.

The type of displacement in Mexico and Central America is unlike what we typically see in the aftermath of war or natural disasters. Instead of moving in large groups in a coordinated and simultaneous manner, those escaping economic violence typically move in an unsystematic way, in solitary, and in silence. Discretion is crucial because victims typically flee drug cartels or gangs that may know their personal identity, can overwhelm the efforts of indifferent authorities (Wolf,

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<sup>1</sup>The experience of having to migrate, not as a free personal choice, but as a need to find minimum conditions of security, respect for human rights, and/or basic human needs (Cobo & Fuerte, 2012; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Sangalang et al., 2019).

2021), or can bribe security forces (Cruz & Lobato, 2017). Perhaps for this reason, there is very little information or research about the phenomenon on the continent.

Still, two points must be acknowledged. First, individual migration is not exclusive to Mexico. In fact, some calculate that there could be as many as 602,000 people displaced by internal conflicts not involving war. This number means that, in the region as a whole, trickle-down migration due to violence could account for a larger proportion of internal migration than natural disasters (Durán-Martínez, 2017). Second, while the violence and threats exerted by organized criminal actors affect all citizens, vulnerable populations are particularly impacted (Sánchez-Mojica, 2020; Weld, 2015). Some citizens may enjoy preferential treatment, but members of historically discriminated groups typically face direct and indirect barriers to access justice and may have to deal with criminal organizations alone. Furthermore, while some citizens may be able to withstand the psychological harm derived from extortion, threats, and environmental violence, others may not be as strong and may incur heavy emotional and cognitive damage.

The objective of this text is to explore the strategies that women—a particularly vulnerable group—implement to cope with the challenges they face when fleeing their community in response to the threats made by organized criminal actors (in this case drug cartels). Like others, we understand the concept of coping as an act by which individuals respond to stress—in our case, violence and uncertainty—using their available resources (Comellas et al., 2015; Saxon et al., 2017; Seguin & Roberts B, 2017). We shall expand on this classic concept by hypothesizing that such strategies focus not only on individuals but also on collective resources. Our research extends individual perspectives of coping (Zbidat et al., 2020) by connecting them with collective strategies, which are relevant to understand the link between cartel violence and the capacity of women to cope through institutional means (Başoglu et al., 2005).

Empirically, we engage in an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with displaced women, authorities, activists, and close family members in Mexico. Since 2006—the year in which the former president of Mexico Felipe Calderón sent more than 5,000 troops to occupy the state of Michoacán—this country has been submerged in a *war on drugs* that has taken homicide rates to record levels and that, according to census data, has forced tens of thousands of citizens to flee their communities (274,158 to be precise). We focus on women not only because this subpopulation is particularly vulnerable but also because, in Mexico, most of the victims of individual displacement are women.<sup>2</sup>

Although our interviews are not representative of the universe of displaced women, they allow us to capture a broad picture of the strategies that this vulnerable sub-population employs to cope with the violence and uncertainty of displacement. In addition to contributing to our knowledge of the problem in academic terms, we hope that our study will serve to give the issue visibility and to recognize the value of women who face such a harrowing experience alone.

The text is organized in five sections. In the first section, we engage in a theoretical discussion of the problem of coping in contexts of violence. In the second, we describe the problem of the invisible victims of the war on drugs—the displaced women. In the third section, we describe the methodology through which we collected the life histories and conducted the analysis to identify their coping strategies. In the fourth section, we present the results of our research, seeking to recognize—through the voice of the interviewees—four different coping strategies that women use to deal with violence. Finally, in the fifth section, we summarize and discuss our conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: THE OTHER VICTIMS OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

One of the most serious problems Mexico has recently faced is the growing presence of drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). As a result, the Mexican government has implemented various

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<sup>2</sup>According to Mexico's most recent census data 52% of those displaced by violence are women.

policies aimed at counteracting their negative activities. Most notably, beginning in December 2006, every president, starting with Felipe Calderón, has implemented a security strategy characterized by the strengthening of the prohibition of drug consumption, the use of the military to occupy territories, and the decapitation of the leadership of large groups (Atuesta & Ponce, 2017; Ríos, 2014).

This strategy—also known as the Mexican War on Drugs—bore some positive fruits in its first stage but was soon overtaken by the country's context. Corruption and the lack of professionalism of law enforcement and judicial authorities allowed many criminals to escape justice (Dell, 2015; Ríos, 2014). The violence exercised by the army pushed DTOs to hire private armies that eventually seceded from their parent organizations (Astorga, 2015), and the strengthening of prohibition has pushed DTOs to diversify their activities to include robbery, extortion, and kidnapping (Calderón et al., 2015).

Due to this diversification and fractionalization, disputes between DTOs increased, along with the use of fear as a tool to control, challenge, and intimidate others (Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011, 2012; Escalante, 2010; del Pilar Fuerte-Celis et al., 2019). Roadblocks, kidnappings, extortions, disappearances, and the public display of corpses are just some strategies DTOs currently use to terrorize government, society, and opposing groups (Phillips & Ríos, 2020). In this context, some citizens may limit the places they visit or hire private security as a measure to protect themselves. Others, have no choice but to leave their communities (Cantor, 2014) even if economic conditions are adverse in their destinations.

While research on the dynamics of the war on drugs in Mexico has established drug trafficking as a male activity (Hernández, 2012; Núñez, 2004) most frequently having men as its deadly victims (Sánchez-Navera & Osorio, 2020),<sup>3</sup> it does not mean that women have been absent from suffering. In fact, a growing body of scholars has become interested in the diversity of ways in which the phenomenon affects women directly and indirectly.

Some have focused on women as victims. Gasca and Flores (2017), for example, conducted a spatial-temporal analysis of violent deaths of women in Mexico in 1990, 2000, and 2010, casting a light on the femicides that occur in the country. They find femicides to be geographically concentrated, to move from the southern to the northern region, and to be most frequent in rural areas with a lower population level and a higher indigenous concentration (see also Vilalta, 2013).

Meanwhile, a growing number of studies have attempted to analyze the role of women in drug trafficking. Most authors have noted the fact that women are not often immersed in drug trafficking as subjects, but rather as objects necessary to contrast the masculinity demanded by the dominant discourse of power relations (Moncada, 2015, p. 2444; c.f. Siegel 2010). It is true that sometimes women participate in activities such as cash transfer (Scherer, 2008, p. 9), money laundering (Ronquillo, 2008, p. 33), and drug smuggling (Lizárraga, 2012, p. 153), but must frequently do so by force (Jiménez, 2014, p. 116). Most frequently, the role of women is one of companionship, whether as girlfriends, lovers, wives, or daughters. They are assumed to be an object of desire or love and are considered an extension of men (Grayson, 2011; Ovalle & Giacomello, 2006). It is precisely for this reason, we believe, that they become key targets of criminal bullying and, eventually, individual forced displacement.

Regardless of their position in the war on drugs, women can become a way for factions to send messages to each other. Taking advantage of a moment of weakness by an opposing faction (e.g. the detention of its leader) one cartel might threaten the family of another as a challenge. Similarly, to force a cartel to negotiate, authorities might apprehend the partners of its core members. After one gang takes over the territory of another, it may threaten (or kill) the other groups' lieutenants' women and families to assert dominance. Thus, before violence escalates, it is the

<sup>3</sup>INEGI (2020) reports a total of 35,000 homicides, of which 88% were male and 11% female (Sanchez Nájera and Osorio, 2020).

women who most escape—alone or with their family—to avoid becoming a message (Fuerte-Celis et al., 2020; McSorley, 2013; Sangalang et al., 2019).

Additionally, women suffer violence indirectly due to their role as caregivers in the traditional structure of the Mexican family. Not only must they tend to their husbands, sons, and brothers, but when crime targets men, they must also protect them by going into hiding. In their role as mothers or wives, they must disappear from everyday life, seek refuge in anonymity, and survive in precariousness so that crime does not escalate. In their role as girlfriends and daughters, they must hide to survive (Salazar-Cruz, 2014; Fuerte-Celis et al., 2020). How do women cope with the threats posed by drug violence and the challenges associated with individual displacement?

### ***Coping with Threats and Suffering***

There is no single definition of coping (Comellas et al., 2015; Lazarus, 1991; Seguin & Roberts B, 2017; Soriano, 2002). When psychologists and sociologists refer to the phenomenon, they typically understand a “strategy for dealing with a threat” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988, p. 564). Defined so broadly, coping encompasses a multitude of strategies that collective and individual actors can choose and that must be further typified to be better understood.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984)—the most influential students of the phenomenon—characterized coping as problem-oriented (focused on resolving the problem) and emotion-oriented (focused on dealing with emotions). Yet, this is not the only way in which coping can be grouped. Some, for example, have grouped coping along valuational (positive/negative) lines (Mestre-Escrivá et al., 2012). Others, have identified a directional (approach/avoidance) along which coping can be organized (Jimeno & López, 2019; Lee et al., 2017). In all cases, coping plays an intermediary role between stressful experiences and the personal and social resources that people have for dealing with them (Mestre-Escrivá et al., 2012).

Differentiating between coping strategies is important because different strategies have distinct consequences on situations and individuals. For example, we know that problem-oriented strategies allow subjects to modify their context, eliminating or attenuating the causes of stress. Emotion-oriented strategies, on the other hand, are usually the product of situations in which people cannot modify the conditions that generate stress. Therefore, when used in contexts in which change is possible, they tend to be less adaptive since people may abandon their efforts to change their conditions (Pimentel et al., 2020). Something similar happens with avoidance strategies, in which it is possible for people to develop problems such as anxiety and even depression (Barajas, 2015).

Most literature on coping has developed in the fields of mental and physical illness (Jimeno & López, 2019). Yet, this is not the only context in which coping matters. Contexts like civil and inter-state war—in which individuals must do everything in their power to survive physically and psychologically—can also trigger very high levels of stress. In these contexts, not only do combatants and noncombatants experience stress but also innocent civilians who must endure the injuries, loss of property and family, and memories of physical and sexual abuse that can last for a long time (Prügl, 2019; UNICEF, 2021).

As if the direct and indirect repercussions of violence were not enough, the challenges refugees face when they arrive in a new region or city are diversified and compounded by the displaced people’s unique individual characteristics and experiences (Brück, 2003). Displaced people carry the weight of trauma, which influences their lives internally and externally. Child-soldiers forced to participate in civil wars, for example, are frequently separated from their families, suffer from a lack of access to education and health care, and are forced to participate in executions and acts of sexual violence (Betancourt et al., 2020). Therefore, they face strong sequels of post-traumatic stress, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, family alienation, and the inability to extend social interaction (Boothby, 2006; Frounfelker et al., 2019). Moreover, they must confront the fact that

communities often perceive them as dangerous criminals or as bad omens that may bring external conflict into otherwise peaceful communities (Betancourt et al., 2020; Frounfelker et al., 2019). Thus, they face great challenges in moving on after their experience in violent conflict.

In this study, we conceive women as autonomous rational-emotive subjects capable of coping with the challenges that forced migration entails. Thus, we seek to characterize how women displaced by drug violence in Mexico cope with the negative experiences that arise when violence threatens their lives (Wenzel et al., 2019; Wright, 2011; Wringe et al., 2019) while contributing to the theory of coping. The literature on coping is scarce and generally lacks a gendered perspective, yet it can be summarized in three broad fields.

The first approach, emerging from a critical view of society, has focused on how refugees cope with the psychological and social challenges associated with leaving their place of origin and arriving at their destination (Acevedo-Centeno & García Montoya, 2016; Alba-Hernández, 2019; Salazar et al., 2011). This literature covers the challenges inherent to starting a new life in a place different from one's own (Bada & Feldmann, 2019); the cultural, social, and economic challenges being away from home entails (Potocky & Naseh, 2020); and the threats inherent to acculturation and stigmatization (Araya et al., 2007; Comellas et al., 2015 Sangalang et al., 2019; Romero & Sánchez, 2007). It has remained contextual, paying less attention to the views, attitudes, and actions of victims.

In stark contrast, the second strand of scholarship has analyzed coping strategies from the victims' viewpoint (Comellas et al., 2015; Saxon et al., 2017; Seguin & Roberts B, 2017). This literature has focused on the capacity of self-analysis, future planning, and sense-making as tools for coping with problems and adversity. It assumes that violent events are obstacles to overcome (Ibañez, 2009; Siriwardhana & Wickramage, 2014) and sees positive-reprisal coping as a tool that allows individuals, especially women, to overcome their victim status (Acevedo-Centeno & García Montoya, 2016).

A third theoretical wave—developed in the context of civil wars—sees coping as both a social and an individual phenomenon (Rodríguez et al., 2002; Başoglu et al., 2015; Spencer & Walklate, 2016). This point perspective proposes the generation of healthy social coping as a prerequisite for peace. This is critical since it is only through successful depolarization that communities can help conflict victims reconcile with their victimizers and finally heal (Ricaurte et al., 2019). While this perspective coincides with our own in that it incorporates some form of “social coping” it is important to distinguish it from our own by specifying who leads the coping process. In the literature mentioned before, it is the community that makes the first move, in our paradigm, it is the individual who reaches for social organizations as an instrument of support.

### ***Analytical Strategy: Coping as an Attempt to Mobilize Resources***

As described before, coping is the psychological process through which victims find solace when faced with threat and suffering. We theorize an alternative characterization of coping that uses resource mobilization—rather than targeting (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), directionality, or processing (Araya et al., 2007; Comellas et al., 2015 Sangalang et al., 2019; Romero & Sánchez, 2007; Zbidat et al., 2020)—as its guiding point. That is, a typification that looks at the source of support to which individuals turn for help when dealing with a stressful situation. Exploring the strategies that women take to confront the threat caused by drug violence and the suffering that emerges from displacement is not only important to help us understand the psychology of victimization. It is also critical because it can help policymakers identify policies and interventions to address the needs of vulnerable victims. Generally, we propose that individuals at risk can resort to four styles of coping—individual, family, social and institutional.



### **Individual Coping**

This type of coping involves the mobilization of internal resources to deal with threats or suffering and is perhaps the most heavily theorized style of coping. Some, for instance, distinguish between instances in which individuals employ mental actions (cognitive coping) such as crying, reflecting, and meditating (Araya et al., 2007; Comellas et al., 2015; Sangalang et al., 2019; Romero & Sánchez, 2007; Zbidat et al., 2020), and actions in which individuals engage in overt behavior (behavioral actions) such as fighting, exercising, and fleeing (Başoglu et al., 2005; Comellas et al., 2015; Saxon et al., 2017; Seguin & Roberts B, 2017). Others, distinguish between actions that seek to address the problem (fighting or flight) and actions that involve dealing with that problem's emotional sequels (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zbidat et al., 2020).

Although we acknowledge that individual coping can be subdivided according to previous conceptualizations, our framework highlights the importance of recognizing the similarity of actions in which victims attempt to mobilize their internal economic and psychological resources as a strategy to deal with a threat. While some might attempt to use their non-material resources (e.g., individual bravery and charisma) to negotiate an agreement with threatening actors, others might attempt to use their individual material resources to pay for extortion or flee their community. Even though these actions are different in many ways, they are similar in others and should be considered. Further, despite the importance of individual coping, the creation of this category allows the examination of its complement (external coping).

### **Family Coping**

The first style of external coping involves individuals attempting to mobilize their close and consanguineous networks. Family trust is an engine that allows individuals to control fear and deal with a violent situation with the support of others. Family members can provide counseling, companionship, and emotional support. Additionally, they can provide those hurting with funding, shelter, and extended support networks to deal with their emergencies. Thus, by turning to their family, individuals can stabilize their present, rebuild their future, and, eventually, re-signify their past.

Evidence for the importance of family coping for displaced people in the case under study is limited, but evidence from the case of the Rwandan genocide shows, that the promotion of family support can improve familial relationships and victims' ability to cope with situations such as armed conflict (Frounfelker et al., 2019). Given this network's ability to help those facing an immediate threat to their life, it makes sense for people to seek it out to prevent and address their challenges.

### **Social Coping**

Second, we identify a style of coping that is neither individual nor familial. It involves victims attempting to mobilize their community, the organizations that operate with them, or both to find protection. Sometimes this strategy involves individuals turning to their peers or leaders in the social organizations in which they participate. Initially, victims can, for instance, turn to their mates on a sports team, to their colleagues from work, or to their fellow parishioners. When, things escalate, they may also turn to their local priest, to a leader in their help group, or, in places in which they are more relevant, to non-governmental organizations.

As there is evidence that social support can help individuals overcome significant life changes with the least negative effects on mental health (Harel-Fisch et al., 2010), and because non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can provide women with legal and psychological resources that can help them throughout their experiences, so we should expect women to turn to social actors to survive forced displacement (Kline & Mone, 2003). That said, because community stigmatization and rejection represent a serious problem that can contribute to aggravating

displacement and its consequences (Frounfelker et al., 2019), in contexts of social decomposition, women may choose to avoid attracting attention, instead turning to other strategies before social coping.

### ***Institutional Coping***

As its name suggests, institutional coping involves victims attempting to turn to the state and its institutions for safety. It is important to note that institutional coping does not always involve a relationship between citizens and the institution in charge of helping them. Individuals are frequently ignorant of which specific institution is responsible for helping them and the processes necessary for obtaining support. Thus, we are not necessarily interested in measuring whether citizens turned to a specific institution or whether they received help from the government. At this point, we are merely interested in knowing if they turn to the government for protection at all.

The options for those threatened by DTOs in a federal country are almost endless. Individuals can decide to report the facts to local, state, or national security forces or they can turn to the institutions that the government has created to support families in a vulnerable population. The Mexican government has created two institutions responsible for helping women directly and indirectly—The National System for the Integral Development of Families (DIF)—a decentralized public institution of social assistance that offers courses for the development of families; and the National Women's institute—a federal institution designed to prevent gender violence and discrimination. While the two systems have been broadly criticized and neither employs a robust protocol to address problems of trickle-down displacement, they must be considered when contemplating the options women have to cope with the harrowing experience of individual displacement.

In sum, the decision to escape from the threat of organized crime in Mexico depends on the availability of social and family organizations. At the same time, there is an innate drive to reach for others and survive. To illustrate how the different types of coping are reflected in the experiences of women escaping violence, in the following sections we present some of the narratives we compiled during our interviews.

## **METHODS**

There is a constant influx of quantitative data in the public debate about the war on drugs. There is much discussion of how many deaths have been accumulated (Fondevila et al., 2020), how many criminals have been arrested, how many tons of merchandise have been seized or eradicated, and even what areas in which violence is most prevalent (Calderón et al., 2015; Trejo & Ley, 2020; Muñoz-Sánchez et al., 2022). There is much less information about those displaced by crime and how they undergo the experience of having to leave everything behind to escape. Without this research, it seems difficult to create a policy model that prioritizes the protection and restoration of victims.

In this context, our study covers women displaced by drug-related violence in Mexico who do not occupy a clear place in the bipolar narrative of the war on drugs. They are with neither “the good” nor “the bad” guys. They are associated with the different actors in the conflict—the cartels, the business elites, the citizens, the police, and the rulers.

The experiences of our interviewees occur in the central-western states of Mexico (Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, and Jalisco). Although these states are less talked about than Michoacán, Guerrero, Veracruz, Sinaloa, and others where drug violence was strongest in the early 2010s, they have recently been added to the map of violence as a result of productive reconversion and the presence of state forces (Fondevila et al., 2022).

Additionally, our study deals with the stories of many female heads of households—women who tell their stories in the first person but who include in them the story of their sons,



daughters, parents, and siblings. They speak to us from their own experience, but the victims are also the family members they support. They earn their displaced status from their individual behavior, but this behavior was shaped and reshaped by a relationship with a man—a drug trafficker, a victim, or an everyday citizen accused by the police of being involved in criminal activities.

Most of the women we interviewed were over 30 years old, had small children, and were either married or in a civil union. A significant portion of our interviewees experienced the traumatic event 8 to 10 years ago, but some experienced it only recently. The women came from different socioeconomic levels and occupations. Some were the wives of large landowners and others were the wives of police officers, journalists, drug dealers, and hired assassins. These women have a wide range of incomes, but most of them live paycheck to paycheck. For them, the main motivation for speaking with us was to make the phenomenon visible and not allow the facts to be normalized.

These women and their families are the other victims, those who do not appear in the public discussion, those who hide, those who do not claim justice or try to exercise their rights (Duarte-Gómez et al., 2018; Pérez & Castillo, 2019; Fuerte-Celis et al., 2020). They are the forgotten ones, “the other victims,” those who do not exist in the official records, the collateral victims who feel shame because society and government have made them believe that it is their fault, that they made a mistake when choosing with whom to live. They are the wives, the daughters, or the mothers of the men who were killed for being “up to no good” (Fuerte-Celis et al., 2020; Muehlmann, 2013, 2017; Pérez & Castillo, 2019; Salazar-Cruz, 2014).

Using a life history methodology, we recovered the stories of women who were living in a situation of forced internal displacement at the time of the study, due to their relationship with the drug cartels. We conducted the interviews between March and November 2020, with the main objective of investigating how women face the threats that emerge from their relationships—voluntary or involuntary—with drug trafficking organizations. The first three months of 2020 were dedicated to finding governmental and non-governmental organizations that could help us contact women in hiding. The last seven months were dedicated to conducting, transcribing, and analyzing the interviews.

To reach our informants, we first turned to local and federal government institutions responsible for addressing violence against women. As described in [Online Appendix A](#), we offered agencies a protocol that guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of informants. However, these institutions denied privately and publicly the existence of cases such as those we were looking for. This attitude is consistent with an attempt by officials to protect victims and with their denying the problem systematically and failing to keep track of women displaced by organized crime (Salazar-Cruz, 2014; CMDPDH, 2014; OSA, 2015; NHRC, 2016).

To achieve our objective, we had to approach groups and associations that support women in defense of their rights. Forty institutions answered our calls. Yet, it was only by establishing a link of trust with these institutions that we were able to reach the women who eventually participated in the study. If providing victims with a safe environment to tell their stories was complicated, doing so under pandemic conditions was even more so. Yet, as we describe in [Online Appendix A](#), we took every measure possible to protect the anonymity of our sources and prevent any risk of Covid-19 transmission. Some of the measures included not recording real names, using remote interviews with headsets, and allowing respondents to cancel their participation before, during, and after the interviews.

Thanks to the support of the NGOs we contacted in the first stage of the project we were able to conduct an initial meeting with approximately 70 women. At this meeting, we explained the objective and protocols of the project. Of the initial seventy women, thirty-two showed interest in continuing with the study. With these women, we made a second contact to learn a little more about them and discuss in greater detail the characteristics of the interview. Finally, in a third

and even a fourth or fifth contact, we conducted a recorded interview according to our guiding questionnaire (in [Online Appendix C](#)). This questionnaire addressed three key moments in the lives of displaced women—their experience at the time of leaving their community (departure), their trip to their destination (transit), and their experience during exile (arrival).

In each section of the questionnaire, we encouraged women to reconstruct their experiences, explore their feelings, and understand how they got through such a painful and difficult situation as having to escape. Whenever women did not volunteer the information through a general question, we asked them directly about the role of family, friends, society, and institutions, being careful not to suggest a socially desirable answer. These probes connected our questionnaire to the purpose of the study and allowed us to classify and typify the coping strategies under analysis.

Of the 32 who were willing to participate, only 22 agreed to grant us a recorded interview. The main reason for denial was that they were not ready to give a recorded interview about what they had experienced. This situation represents a first selection bias that, we believe, might be associated with the levels of emotional distress women experience when escaping their community to survive.

Of the 22 who agreed to grant us a recorded interview, 12 withdrew their testimony. Some discovered during the interview that they were not yet ready to share their stories, and others, after the interview was over, did not feel safe and asked that we not make their stories public. We suspect that this last layer of selection bias may be related to women's shame about the facts presented in the narrative and to the fear of being found by the agent who prompted the displacement.

In short, while our inferences are based on the stories of 32 displaced women, the quotations presented below are taken only from the 12 transcripts that we were given permission to share. In consequence, the stories below are not representative of the experiences of all women in the study. Had we been able to secure permission from more participants to share more material, the stories below would have been much more violent. Still, we have no evidence that the interviews excluded from this manuscript hide different coping mechanisms than those described below.

In addition to the interviews with displaced women described above, we conducted interviews with several authorities at different levels of government who agreed to speak with us. We also interviewed representatives of civil-society organizations interested in the issue or who were directly involved in addressing it. We did so to explore the problem from different angles, as well as from the individual and collective perspectives—from the viewpoint of the victims who suffer the problem and from the position of the institutions that deal with it. The interviews were unstructured and focused on the extent of the problem, the perceived problem, and the actions taken by the institutions to provide care to the women.

Interestingly, we found a selection bias similar to that of the participants. The officials and managers of associations, approximately 15 workers, asked that we not record their comments and agreed to talk to us only in informal interviews. We believe this reluctance is due to the authorities' fear of exposing the victim, of being the target of attacks by organized crime, and of being the object of political criticism by victims' groups.

To complement these two sources of information, we constructed a field diary in which we recorded the reflections and observations that arose during the study. Through this anthropological approach, we try to understand from the victims' perspective the coping strategies that allow women to survive and overcome the experiences of displacement (Chaim, 2008).

The field diaries are notes developed by the researcher throughout the field collection process, with the objective of describing each event that occurred, and to allow the researcher to share feelings, anecdotes, and impressions of what happened in the interviews he or she conducted. In our study, the field diary allowed us to contrast experiences, record observational impressions about the reactions of the women, and take notes on secondhand information shared by bureaucrats.

## COPING STRATEGIES THROUGH THE STAGES OF DISPLACEMENT

The women who were part of our research came from very different backgrounds. Some are not yet 30; others are over 60. Some were lawyers with a very high level of education, others had no education. Some were threatened during the early years of the Mexican war on drugs and had moved on since then; others were threatened recently and were still in hiding. This, for example, was the case of a woman who initially agreed to give us an interview but canceled because she was injured during an attack on her life perpetrated by a group of organized criminals searching for her. Although this variation represents practical challenges, it also shows how diverse the phenomenon of displacement is, enriches the information we can obtain, and strengthens the generalizability of our findings.<sup>4</sup> The following section, presents a series of abstracts from our interviews as they relate to women's strategies that women take to cope with organized crime.

### *Individual Coping*

The moment in which women decide to leave their community is usually abrupt. It is a desperate situation in which a decision must be made in a matter of minutes and under great pressure. Deciding to stay or leave is a matter of life or death; every step counts, but what counts most is getting away early, leaving, and disappearing. At this stage, coping often involves mobilizing both individual and familial resources. As Angelica said:

*"Things in town got ugly, our family was in danger, people pointed [their fingers] at us, and things changed: strange people arrived (...). When we decided to leave, after receiving threats and seeing two relatives die. It was at night, I had to wait on the road cruise for my parents. Imagine, the longest night of my life; fear that they would not arrive or that someone else would find us; anguish for not knowing how we would move forward (...). Fortunately, we had savings, and we relied on them to start a new tomorrow."*

This was Angelica's initial experience when she decided to leave her community behind to protect her life and that of her child. As it is evident, her decision to escape relates to her internal capacity to deal with past, present, and future threats, and her perception of having sufficient economic resources to move forward. Interestingly, emotion-oriented coping is not the only important force fueling women's decision to migrate. In many interviews, women's decision to engage in problem-oriented coping was crucial. As Alicia told us,

*"On one occasion I served him [her husband] the food badly, I don't know what it was, if it was cold or if it had something he didn't like, but I served him badly. He stood up angrily and started beating me; I was pregnant, and because of the blows I lost my baby. I felt so sad and angry that I decided to do what I would never have dared to do: I looked for the opportunity, and since I already knew where he kept his things, I took the money that was there and left. I stole it. I don't know where I got the courage, but it was something that I had to do. I don't know how my mother-in-law managed with her son, but I put some things together, went for my daughter, and ran out until I reached the bus station. There, I took a bus and never looked back again."*

As the story shows, in the beginning, the emotions that mobilize victims are diverse—fear, courage, shame, and anger. Anger at the beatings, rage for a lost child, indignation at the constant humiliation. These emotions lead women to ignore the risks of flight and the uncertainty of the future and finally that pushes them to engage in individual and problem-oriented coping. Interestingly, however, not all our interviewees reacted to the intra-family violence that members of drug cartels bring home in the same way. Some women see themselves as guilty and need different psychological resources to find the strength to leave. Elisabeth, for example, told us,

*"I asked for it, I put up with it for many years, until I saw how my children lived in fear and shame of their father. That's why I left, to protect my children; they could not go on living with so much pain and fear, I made the decision for them (...)."*

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<sup>4</sup>To protect our interviewees we replaced their real name for one taken from a random name generator. <https://www.behindthename.com/random/>. We made sure that the names did not coincide with the women interview.

As the citation shows, many of the women we interviewed had been weakened by years of cultural, social, and familial abuse. When this is the case, it seems that it is only until they reach within themselves for an internal object of love—in this case, Elisabeth's children—that they are able to find enough strength to change their lives. Angelica, Alicia, and Elisabeth had to cope with the threat posed by organized crime as well as the uncertainty of displacement. Yet, many women must also cope with the rejection of society. Diana, for example, told us,

*"There was no support, they didn't help us. We left with some savings we had and rented a little house, it was my younger brother, his wife and children, my mother and I.[...] At the moment, it was not so hard. I was not so angry with my people yet. Everyone knew us! Now supposedly we were all narcos (...). [Moreover] after being far away for a while we found out that the self-defense groups had arrived and that our orchard was already in someone's hands."*

In other words, women do not only resort to internal coping because of the availability of resources. Sometimes, they resort to this strategy because it is their only option. As can be seen in Juliana's case, although we would like to think of communities and institutions as benevolent agents, they are actors that can stigmatize women even further and, in doing so, generate additional challenges to which women must respond.

### **Familial Coping**

Although external organizations served as stressors for many of the women we interviewed, we do not mean to vilify them. On the contrary, we firmly believe that external actors can be critical in the dynamics of women's migratory experiences. Most directly, families play a crucial role as a companion during displacement. As Martha narrates.

*"There were problems before, but it was a land of work; we were all doing well with effort and sacrifice. However, things changed: strange people arrived and began to make friends with the boys there. Everything broke down; even the police could no longer be trusted. When we decided to leave at night, (...) with anguish for not knowing how we would move forward. (...) [Each of my brothers and relatives fled to different places]. That's what hurts me the most; to have lost my family."*

Here, the family is the main actor deciding on how to cope with a criminal threat and, as expected, women's choices are deeply intertwined. Yet, the family also entails a critical resource for women in Mexico when they act instinctively. As Laura told us,

*"One day my husband didn't arrive, (...) I grabbed my son and left. I don't remember everything well. I was just very afraid (...) I walked around, hiding when someone came, not knowing who was looking for me or why. I was afraid of strangers and the police; some could kill me, and others could take me into custody and take my son away (...) [after so much fear] I remembered where we were originally from, (...) and that there were some relatives there, so I went there."*

Here, the family plays no role as a decision aid. Instead, it serves as a light in the dark. Women on the run feel that the minutes they spend on a bus driving through a dark and empty highway turn into hours. They begin to think that they could lose everything and that they will not be able to get away fast enough. At this point, women reach for any sign in an attempt to catch the tiniest ray of hope—a light, a face, a voice, a movement, anything that can signal that someone is there for them and that the escape is finally achieved. In Laura's case, it was her family. The same happened to Martha, who told us,

*"At the end of the funeral [of my brother who had been kidnapped] [all the family] got together and decided to leave town. We left at night, carrying only what we could and looking for a place to settle down. There were many of us, but some wanted to stay close, like us, and others wanted to move away. We had to stay close, because my daughter has her husband's relatives, and she cannot leave them alone (...)."*

Here, Martha not only made the decision in conjunction with her family but also served as support for other family members (her daughter and her daughter's husband). Something

similar happened to Diana, whose family also played an integral part in her story of displacement.

*“Our story has nothing to do with drug trafficking directly. We lived on the ranch, with our garden and our animals; we never had any problems, although we knew about the violence. However, the army arrived, and the agony began for us. They accused my brother of being part of a criminal organization, took him prisoner, and, then, the ordeal began: lawyers, money, hearings, documents, corruption, and impunity (...) we realized that the bad guys wanted to take our land (...) we tried to resist, but everyone thought we were guilty, because they saw the army take my brother away and they accused us of being part of the bad people, so we had to leave (...).”*

In Diana’s case, the community not only failed to serve a supporting role but also played a decisive antagonist position that pushed her to turn to her family as a source of protection. This pattern does not repeat repeats in every case. Numerous women across Mexico trust their community and are willing to turn to it for help.

### **Social Coping**

Formal and informal social organizations play an important role in Mexico. It is through the mass media and a large ecosystem of organizations that women can sometimes cope with fear, pain, and despair and find hope for tomorrow. Elena, for example, turned to a television show for help after the forced disappearance of her husband, she told us.

*“Acquaintances began to see me badly, and even my family began doubting me (...). The people from the show, however, helped me. After some research, an international organization found me and helped me get out of the town under protection and everything (...). However, the pain of having everyone considering me as a problem was terrible.”*

Mixed emotions such as anger, fear, hope, and distrust accompany those displaced by the violence associated with drug trafficking. The first day for women is often the worst. The first night is one of constant anxiety for some; for others, it is thinking that everything will be better—a night spent hoping that the journey to a better place will give them a chance to stay alive and have a better life. It is at the transfer and at the point of arrival that social coping can make the difference. As Laura noted,

*“(...) I don’t remember the whole journey well, only (...) I remembered where we were from. My mom said there were some relatives, and I went there, but I didn’t find them. I was looking, but I didn’t find anyone. I would walk back and forth, eat what I could, and start begging, with embarrassment and all, but I would do anything for my son. It was several months that I was like this, living on charity, as a beggar, until a woman invited me to her house. She rented me a little room, and with what I got out of the handouts, I paid her. One day I invited her to eat in gratitude, and she liked my food so much that she recommended I make a living selling food!”*

It was thanks to that voice of encouragement that this woman went from begging to finding a job, from being in desperate poverty to paying for food, from sleeping on the street to being able to rent a safe place to live with her son. Even if unsolicited, social support from those in the receiving communities is also critical for survival. As Angelica narrates.

*“I found work [(...) but (...)] I remember that on one occasion someone from my town came to my workplace, I had to tend to him, but I did not want to, so that he would not recognize me. Fortunately, my co-worker understood my fear and offered to cover for me; she didn’t ask me anything; she just told me to count on her when necessary. That was a good thing, a detail I don’t forget.”*

But not all help comes from informal sources. Help frequently comes from non-governmental organizations to which women turn to find protection. As Elisabeth told us,

*“I am alive thanks to a lovely lawyer of the organization (...) because imagine, my husband would leave [prison], and he would have already sentenced me to death, (...) seeing that situation, I did not sleep, I did not eat and I almost lost everything, but the lawyer helped me, presented a number of papers and things and*

*now he cannot harm me, he knows that I am not alone, because my children are with me. I already have a partner who supports me and [I also have] this organization (...)."*

Not all help comes from informal sources. It frequently comes from NGOs to which women turn to find protection. As Elisabeth told us,

*"The teachers' union supported me, my colleagues in the church too, and thanks to the fact that they listened to me at the attorney general's office and, [fighting to find my husband] (...) I'm not alone, I have someone to advise us [on to find the truth]."*

Interestingly, social support can even come from criminal organizations. As Juliana noted,

*"My life was very quiet: being at home, watching TV, making food. My husband was a truck driver, and we were well off enough [...] we even had some luxuries. Then, visitors began to arrive, they were armed men armed with guns. I didn't like it(...). It was like that for just over a year. Those visitors came and went, but I as a woman did not get involved. If my husband said, "Serve the food," I would serve it; if he said to me, "Shut up," I had to shut up; if he told me: "go to the room, watch TV, and don't go out," that's what I did. That is how things came to be for a while. One day, however, he did not come back [from a trip]. Only one of the regular visitors showed up to let me know that my husband was in jail and that, if I wanted to stay alive, I better leave immediately (...). He gave me some money and explained that I should take care with strangers and the police. I grabbed my son and left."*

While this interview was noteworthy, we found it to be the only one to reference criminal organizations helping women in crisis. All stories considered, it seems that criminal help tends to be scarce and unsolicited. Still, this claim must be taken with a grain of salt since women receiving help from criminal actors might be afraid of confessing to it. We do not have enough evidence to launch hypotheses about criminal coping.

### ***Institutional Coping***

We refer to institutional coping when individuals seek state agencies or actors to address their problems. Although some women turn to social and governmental institutions for help and, in some cases, they provide attention, we find that most frequently, social and institutional coping is scarce, unknown, difficult to access, limited, and unresponsive. When we asked Elena about her choice to turn to a television show rather than the municipal government, she told us that she did turn to the latter, but she found total impunity.

*[The municipal administration said that perhaps] "he had left me. That maybe I couldn't find him because he had left with another woman, but I know him. My husband is a good person. He was in the police force doing his job. He was upright and honest (...). As I didn't keep quiet, they started to threaten me. That is why I sought help from the media and when they saw my situation, they helped me to get out and to join a protection program."*

In Elena's case, it is very clear how some victims try to reach out to state institutions but, facing corruption and adversity, have no choice but to seek out other coping mechanisms—in this case social. We observe a similar pattern in the case of Elisabeth. She told us,

*"My story, in part, is my fault. I was the one who looked for that relationship and the one who endured many things (...) Of the last times we argued, he threatened to do something to my parents (...) Once I left him, I moved to another house (...), but he found me, and things got worse. Therefore, I thought: 'if you are going to find me anyway, why am I even hiding?'. I did report him; I sought help in the DIF, in Human Rights, I went to the police, to many government offices; I knew that the authorities had to help me, but nowhere did I receive support. I think that it was the saddest thing of all, that loneliness I found myself in for so long. [Nonetheless,] the fault was not in my children, nor in my family, nor in myself: we were all afraid. The fault lay with the government, which did not know how to protect me because that is the task of the authorities (...) I don't feel guilty either. I did what I could to defend myself. On that journey, I met a high-ranking municipal official, I told him about my situation, and with affection, he told me: "I will look for help in the institutions." Then, I told him: "I already looked for help and they never listened to me." At that time, he told me he would personally raise some money to help me get through. I will never forget that day because*



*I told him: the money will run out and I will always need help, so help me get a job instead (...) Today, I have an honest job and I can keep going on."*

Elena engaged in familial and institutional coping, and it was not until she realized that these strategies were insufficient that she decided to turn to informal social mechanisms to improve her situation. Only the smallest group of interviewees received some degree of help from the government. As Elena told us,

*"If this happens to the people who take care of us, to the police officers, to those who have disappeared overnight at the hands of their own bosses, what can we expect? Now I am looking to emigrate to Canada, in the refugee program: I feel that only in another country can I live in peace. My husband disappeared; but as you see, I am still in hiding."*

While we found institutions to be implicit or explicitly present in virtually all our interviews, their role was rarely positive. Rather than seeing them as a source of support, most interviewees saw governmental institutions negatively and as an additional barrier to overcome. Perhaps future studies should look at how individuals cope not only with the threat of organized crime and displacement but also with the frustration of finding institutions inefficient, corrupt, or even colluding with cartels.

## DISCUSSION

In Mexico and other countries in Latin America, hundreds of thousands of citizens live the distressful experience of having to leave everything to save their lives. Our interviews with women in Mexico who are currently living this nightmare shed some light on the way individuals cope with this traumatic experience.

For a long time, the literature has shown (Kline & Mone, 2003; Frounfelker et al., 2019) that the first step for people facing a traumatic situation tends to be individual coping. Our study reveals that, for the women we interviewed, such is also the case. They focus on their personal resources, their strengths, and their desire to survive. Immediately after turning to their internal resources, family coping appears. Women look to their families for support, as a source of advice, and as a voice of encouragement.

However, the family is not always present. Sometimes, relatives are unable to provide financial support. Other times, they become a direct source of stigmatization. They consider women in hiding as reckless, rebellious, and equally as guilty as their partners. They see them as irresponsible for getting together with someone they should not have. Still, at least in Mexico, women continue to search for support within their different family circles.

It is only when this support cannot be found that women focus their efforts on governmental and civil society organizations. Thus, it is possible that the coping that we divided initially into four dimensions (individual, family, social, institutional) in fact exists in only two dimensions, external and internal coping, where family is considered as part of the individual's inner circle.

Whatever the case may be, we observe that in the context of Mexico and as long as the emergency is not immediate, women continue to seek out the help of governmental organizations. It is only when institutional avenues fail that women try to "pull levers" within a corrupt bureaucracy or attempt to turn to alternative mechanisms of protection (social or internal coping).

In relation to social coping, two observations stand out. First, given the low penetration of NGOs, it is difficult to infer their role in the phenomenon under study. Certainly, organizations play an efficient and effective role in the protection of women lawyers, journalists, teachers, and homemakers under threat. Yet, it appears that organizations must establish a strong relationship of trust with women before they can emerge as a viable exit strategy. In this sense, perhaps both organizations and society in general have more to gain by serving as a source of integration and protection at the point of arrival.

The second observation relates to the apparent absence of the Catholic Church. Notably, in only a few interviews did women turn to the church as a source of help in seeking to escape their situation. This situation may be due to extreme selection bias in our sample or to the fact that, in some ways, priests must play a dual role in many communities in Mexico, mediating between victims, authorities, and armed actors. We hope to inspire a debate that can eventually disconfirm our observation or deepen our understanding of the role the church is playing for women.

In general, and in relation to all strategies, it appears that trust plays an important role in each type of coping. It appears that women who are more self-confident tend to be more likely to resort to individual coping than women who are less confident. Similarly, women who trust their family more strongly are more likely to turn to them than women who do not. When it comes to choosing between types of coping, we find the role of trust to be less clear. For instance, we find that while Latin Americans in general and Mexicans in particular tend to trust the catholic church more than other institutions (LAPOP, 2014) it does not seem to be the case that the church is the first choice of women escaping from crime. Conversely, despite the police consistently ranking as one of the most distrusted institutions in the continent (LAPOP, 2014) many women still tend to turn to this agency as a source of help before escaping. It is unclear whether women's willingness to turn to the authorities for help after being directly threatened by the drug cartels is an expression of wishful thinking, motivated reasoning, or another explanation. Additional research would be necessary before this puzzle can be fully solved.

The same is true of the relationship between resource availability and the choice of coping type. While at first glance it appears that women choose the coping strategy for which they have a greater amount of resources, in several of our interviews, we find that resources can be stolen, substituted, or exchanged. While our study was not designed to confirm or disconfirm the existence of a pattern, we believe that our interviews provide sufficient evidence to assert that the relationship between resource availability and choice should be evaluated and not simply assumed.

All things considered, our findings suggest the existence of four different ways in which women cope with threat. Of them, an individual style seems to be the most frequent. This comes as no surprise since, today, there is no program specializing in the care of women displaced by drug violence in Mexico. No organization dedicated to protect those who flee their towns in silence. No civic, social, or religious mechanism designated to help women avoid the stigma associated with escaping the harassment of drug cartels. It is urgent for the Mexican government to create a horizontal program that coordinates the police, the National Institute for Family Development, and the National Women's Institute to help women—particularly those with lower internal resources—escape violence and overcome displacement.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we explore how victims cope with the threats of organized crime and the experience of fleeing their community to survive. We propose that, in addition to being grouped by its objectives (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and processes (Lee et al., 2017), coping can be categorized based on the resources that victims mobilize to save and rebuild their lives. Thus, we propose that there are four types of coping: individual (mobilizing internal resources), familial (mobilizing family resources), social (mobilizing community resources), and institutional (mobilizing governmental resources). To uphold our hypothesis, we examine the experiences of 12 women hiding from organized crime in Mexico.

We believe that this study contributes to the literature on the psychology of displacement and violence on various fronts. First, it makes visible a phenomenon that is generally ignored around the world, that of trickle-down forced displacement, of individuals and families—often women—leaving everything in a desperate, silent attempt to flee areas being drained by organized crime. We know that there is much to be done before we can appreciate the phenomenon in its full

amplitude. Still, we believe that, when considering its amplitude and temporality, the repercussions of trickle-down displacement could very well surpass in importance other forms of violence-induced displacement throughout the world.

Second, while our study shows that neighbors can sometimes emerge as unsung heroes, it also shows that society generally plays a feeble role in both the exit and integration of persecuted women. This finding suggests that it is important to study not only how victims react to displacement but how social groups react to the threat that victims—cursed by their connection to drug trafficking—represent. Only then will decision-makers be able to design tools for organizations to help integrate women.

Finally, we believe that our study contributes to the literature by showing how gender intersects with violence. Like men, women are victims through their property, family, and person. Yet, when women must escape from organized criminals, they suffer more intensely in their dignity and reputation. They are victims of cultural and family relationships that demand that they sacrifice themselves to protect, to the last consequence, their home, their children, and their partner. They are the victims of a state incapable of providing them with security, a state that provides empty institutions and toothless tools to hide and protect them. They are the victims of a society that judges and criminalizes them, that reproduces an elitist, sexist, and violent discourse that sees them as guilty of their own misfortune (Muehlmann, 2017; Fuerte-Celis et al., 2020).

Above and beyond our goal of generating hypotheses about how the theory of coping could be expanded, we hope to inspire others to continue to discover how trickle-down displacement operates and how women—in their vulnerable position—manage to survive. Moreover, we hope that our study inspires social and political leaders to find the courage they need to create interventions aimed at saving the lives of women persecuted by drug cartels, integrating them into secure communities, and—when the danger has passed—helping them return to their places of origin without stigma.

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