

# Lacerated motherhood: mourning of mothers who have lost children in contexts of socio-political violence in Cali, Colombia

Diego Fernando Mercado-Lenis  

Master in Development, psychopathology and psychoanalysis, cross-cultural clinic. Psychologist Universidad del Valle. Cali, Colombia  
diego.mercado@correounivalle.edu.co

## Abstract

The present study explored the grief experienced by mothers belonging to an association of victims in the city of Cali, Colombia, who lost their children in contexts of sociopolitical violence. To this end, a methodological strategy was implemented to understand the subjective elaboration of loss in these mothers, investigate the role played by sociocultural aspects in their grieving processes, and analyze the role of truth, reparation, and justice processes in their experience of loss. This qualitative methodological strategy employed a phenomenological design, resorted to convenience sampling, and conducted content analysis based on analysis categories. The strategy described by as 'research scenarios' was employed to negotiate the researchers' needs with those of the victim group, resulting in the conception of workshops with specific themes through which relevant information was obtained, namely: the reconstruction of mourning in connection with the participants' biographies. The results highlighted several elements for understanding the uniqueness of this type of mourning, such as the necessity to resort to the notion of traumatic grief, given the senselessness of an experience impossible to process; the experience of a suffering body, broken by the detachment of the mother-child bond; the loss of fundamental trust in others contrasted with the communion experienced with other mothers and victims, becoming a powerful resilient element. Finally, the ineffectiveness of justice and the prevalence of impunity hindered the grieving process on one hand, but, on the other, facilitated the research setting to become a space where participants could provide testimony that was both reparative and healing.

**Keywords:** Grief; Traumatic grief; Trauma; Sociopolitical violence; Motherhood.

Received: 26/11/2023 | Evaluated: 16/04/2024 | Accepted: 30/04/2024 | Published: 01/07/2024



This work is under a Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

 **Correspondence:** Diego Fernando Mercado-Lenis. Universidad del Valle, street 13 # 100-00 headquarters Meléndez, Cali, Colombia. Email: diego.mercado@correounivalle.edu.co

---

## ¿How to quote this article?

Mercado-Lenis, D. F. (2024). Lacerated motherhood: mourning of mothers who have lost children in contexts of socio-political violence in Cali, Colombia. *Prospectiva. Revista de Trabajo Social e intervención social*, (38), e20613387. <https://doi.org/10.25100/prts.v0i38.13387>

# La maternidad lacerada: duelo de madres que han perdido hijos en contextos de violencia sociopolítica en Cali, Colombia

## Resumen

La presente investigación exploró el duelo de un grupo de madres, pertenecientes a una asociación de víctimas de la ciudad de Cali-Colombia, que perdieron sus hijos en contextos de violencia sociopolítica. Para tal fin se adelantó una estrategia metodológica destinada a comprender la elaboración subjetiva de la pérdida en estas madres, indagar el papel que jugaron los aspectos socioculturales en sus procesos de duelo y analizar el papel de los procesos de verdad, reparación y justicia en su vivencia de la pérdida. Dicha estrategia metodológica de corte cualitativo tuvo un diseño fenomenológico, recurrió al muestreo por conveniencia y al análisis de contenido conforme a las categorías de análisis. Los resultados pusieron de relieve algunos elementos para comprender la singularidad de este tipo de duelos, como la necesidad de acudir a la noción de duelo traumático en tanto hay un sinsentido de la experiencia imposible de tramitar; la vivencia de un cuerpo sufriente, roto por la pérdida del vínculo madre-hijo; la experiencia de pérdida de la confianza básica en el otro contrastada con la comunión experimentada con otras madres y víctimas, lo que se convirtió en un potente elemento resiliente y, por último, la inoperancia de la justicia, el predominio de la impunidad que, por un lado, obstaculizaba los procesos de elaboración del duelo, pero, por el otro, propició que el escenario de investigación se convirtiera en un espacio en el que las participantes pudieron dar un testimonio que fue reparador y sanador.

**Palabras clave:** Duelo; Duelo traumático; Trauma; Violencia sociopolítica; Maternidad.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 1.1 Background, 1.2 Conceptual referents of child death in contexts of Violence, 2. Methodology, 2.1 Ethical considerations, 3. Findings, 3.1 Traumatic grief, 3.2 An "impossible grief", 3.3 The enemy other and the loss of essential trust, 3.4 How the human emerges from inhumanity, 3.5 Failed reparation and the value of testimony, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographical references.



## 1. Introduction

Yo he vuelto a parirte, con el mismo dolor, para que vivas un poco más, para que no desaparezcas de la memoria. Y lo he hecho con palabras, porque ellas, que son móviles, que hablan siempre de manera distinta, no petrifican, no hacen las veces de tumba. Son la poca sangre que puedo darte, que puedo darme. (Bonnett, 2013)

The armed conflict in Colombia, which has persisted for several decades, has left material, human, and symbolic losses hard to assess. According to Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV, 2023), the armed conflict in Colombia has resulted in 9,423,138 direct and indirect victims. Among these, as the same report asserts, the victimizing act of “homicide” has resulted in a balance of 274,343 direct victims and 812,689 indirect victims. On the other hand, a sociodemographic analysis with a gender perspective reveals that among the survivors of the armed conflict in Colombia, there are more women (87%) than men (13%) (Alianza Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz [IMP], 2007). Additionally, according to Comisión de la Verdad (2022), there is a significant disproportion in the direct victims of homicide: 91% of the victims are male, and 9% are female. This equates to 410,104 men and 40,560 women. In the same report, reference is made to the connections between the survivors who report the homicides and the direct victims of these acts; after the sentimental partners, mothers are identified at 18.1%.

In the IMP (2007) report, survivors are described as “adult women in a state of poverty who have lost the emotional and economic support that a child or spouse can represent” (p. 17). In rural areas where men typically support the family economy, households of survivors experience impoverishment. It is also known that, in rural families, children often become the economic support for their parents in old age, as the parents may not have formal employment to guarantee their sustenance once their physical condition or health prevents them from working.

According to Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres (2013), many mothers in conflict zones live their motherhood with great anguish, as seeing their children grow up entails a state of unease and constant fear, given that various armed groups see them as new combatants. Any refusal in this regard could result in mistreatment, violations, or even death. For many women, their situation worsens when the integrity of one of their family members, especially their children, is threatened. In some compiled testimonies by Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres (2013), they feel a more significant impact when their role as mothers is compromised as they take on a heightened sense of protection corresponding to the social gender role of caregivers they have assumed.

The Colombian southwest has been one of the most affected regions by the armed conflict. Valle del Cauca, in particular, is a department that includes municipalities acting both as receivers and expellers, with Cali being one of them (Gobernación del Valle del Cauca, 2015). The displaced population in Cali is characterized by many displaced women, predominantly residing in the eastern part of the city, specifically in districts 21, 14, 13, and 15, which are also the most densely



populated areas. This population is also in a state of psychosocial vulnerability due to economic precariousness, urban Violence, and unmet basic needs, among other factors characteristic of this area. Notably, a significant portion of the population in these districts is of Afro-descendant origin, originating from the Pacific coast. In summary, the document portrays the displaced population in Cali as follows:

The above implies that the displacement cluster located in the east of Cali is predominantly composed of single, separated, or widowed individuals, acknowledging the existence of households where women are mostly heads of households, unmarried, Afro-descendants, and responsible for secondary members. (Gobernación del Valle del Cauca, 2015, p. 20).

Although it is tough to find precise data on how many mothers have lost children in contexts of Violence because there is no category like “widower/widow” to refer to those who have this condition, it is clear that, as the majority of people killed in conflict events are young men and the surviving women, the vast majority of whom are displaced, have lost both their spouses and their children or those (nephews, sons-in-law, grandchildren) who can be considered as such; we conclude that the loss of a child in violent events is one of the most frequent occurrences in the armed conflict and a cause of psychological suffering for many women in Colombia.

## 1.1 Background

It is difficult to measure the subjective, social, and cultural impacts of losses in contexts of Violence. However, it can be stated that since grief is the usual psychological consequence of a significant loss, this is one of the most relevant mental health issues in our country. In other terms, while grief is considered a normal phenomenon as a reaction to a loss when it occurs under violent circumstances, it entails a series of extraordinary conditions that often complicate its progression (Fernández-Liria & Rodríguez-Vega, 2000; Mercado-Lenis, 2017). Likewise, the death of a child has been considered particularly painful because it involves an inversion of the natural order of life, among other things (Bonnett, 2013; Roitman *et al.*, 2002; Umpiérrez, 2015). To understand this phenomenon, some articles concerning grief due to the loss of a child and those in which this loss occurs in the context of Violence were reviewed. These were selected for their disciplinary affinity and geographical and cultural relevance, so they are in Spanish.

Research on the death of a child agrees on several aspects. One notable aspect is the pain experienced. For instance, in their research, Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.*, (2008) assert that mothers expressed “the feelings and the suffering caused by the circumstance o Children's deaths are preserved and relieved with each memory. Even if it occurred a long time ago” (p. 4). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the work of Umpiérrez (2015) can be highlighted. He asserts that there is a characteristic pain in these mothers that is always present, and each of them navigates through it using their own physical, psychological, and social resources. Roitman *et al.*, (2002) note



something similar, referring to this as “punctual” pain. This means that although the overall suffering may have diminished over time, each memory or thought associated with the child triggers a pain that quickly becomes intense. In their thesis, Agudelo-Patiño and Sánchez-Villada (2013) found that the pain from the forced disappearance of a child remained very much alive even after several years had passed, while, in contrast, the romantic partners of the disappeared were often able to rebuild their lives with other men relatively quickly. Mercado-Lenis (2017) attributes this difference to the narcissistic bond (Freud, 1914) that is often characteristic of the mother-child relationship.

Roitman *et al.* (2002) propose that a more conscious form of guilt is the feeling of having failed as parents. Fidelity to the memory of the child thus becomes a means of continuing to love the child and can hinder therapeutic efforts to alleviate pain and sadness. Díaz (2008) illustrates this concept with a fragment from a poem by the Spanish poet Pedro Salinas (1994): “No quiero que te vayas dolor, última forma de amar” (“I do not want you to leave, pain, last way of loving”). García-Hernández (2009), in his doctoral thesis, highlights the enduring bond with the child, even through pain. Through phenomenological interviews, he found that parents rejected the notion of separation from their children. Maintaining this bond, far from being a form of denial, allowed them to assimilate the loss over time. Furthermore, it enabled them to accept the loss and integrate it into their cultural framework, where their children continue to hold a significant presence (García-Hernández, 2009, p. 329). The various images associated with the child: The child alive, their dead body, those from the events surrounding their death, preserved in photographs and videos that serve as memory mediators that “anchor the memory, like bodily traces or extensions of their bodies” (García-Hernández, 2009, p. 330).

Of course, there is no unanimity regarding the singular and catastrophic nature of the death of a child, as indicated by the classic studies of Scheper-Hughes, as cited in Pérez-Sales (2004), in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, mothers who lose their children at a young age do not even attend their funerals because they do not attach sufficient emotional value to suffer the loss. It is also worth highlighting the work of the French historian Philippe Ariès (1988), who is also a classic and points out that the perception of childhood is a relatively recent development in Western history.

Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.* (2008) proposed the following categories of analysis in their research:

Mummifying the child in memory; death and publicity: tracing two ways; enduring the child's death: attachment to spirituality; mother complicity: mothers of children murderers and mothers of murdered children and justice x impunity. (p.3)

Regarding the first category, mummification does not arise so much from the "denial" of the loss as it does from an intense attachment to the memory of the child and the preservation of a healthy bond with them, as demonstrated in García-Hernández (2009). In the second category,

the authors highlight the sensationalist nature of some media outlets that trivialize the tragedy and invade the privacy of the mothers. In contrast, others serve to denounce the crimes and become allies in the pursuit of justice. Regarding the third category, the authors point out the importance of religiosity for these mothers, which allows them to endure the experience of an unjust and cruel world. As for the fourth category, the authors reveal a surprising fact, which is the solidarity and compassion of these mothers towards the mothers of their children's killers, as they believe that these mothers also lost a child "to the world of crime" (Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.*, 2008, p. 6). Finally, in the category of justice x impunity, the authors highlight how the pursuit of justice and the investment in that ideal is not only about claiming it for themselves but for other mothers so that something like this never happens again; it becomes something that gives meaning to their lives, as found in the research by Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000).

Jiménez (2005), in her work with mothers of children murdered in District 13 of Medellín, finds, contrary to Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.* (2008), that for these mothers, there is nothing that could make sense of these deaths. They feel it is something for which there are no words, something they will hardly overcome, akin to their death. They cannot find, not even in justice or the actions of the State, anything that could compensate for the damage. In this sense, and in the absence of symbolic resources to deal with the loss, some sought justice through revenge, either on their own, intending to avenge their child but failing, others ordered the killer of their child to be murdered, and others fulfilled their wish when others killed the perpetrators. Those who did not resort to violent retaliation were the mothers, echoing findings from Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.* (2008), who identified with the mothers of the perpetrators and did not wish to inflict the same pain upon them or because their religious principles constrained them to grant forgiveness. An exceptional case was that of a mother who had received therapeutic support, which led her to adopt a non-violent stance towards the Violence she had experienced.

## 1.2 Conceptual references of the death of a child in contexts of Violence

Although there is a long theoretical tradition in psychology regarding grief, stemming from the writing of Freud's seminal work "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), we adhere to two particular perspectives: the psychoanalytic and the constructivist.

Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000) examine all the complications of the grieving process in war and armed conflicts. To do so, they revisit the task model that Worden (2013) proposed, which contrasts with the well-known stage model (Kubler-Ross, 1969). One of the tasks, for example, is "accepting the reality of the loss," which is often complicated by the absence of a body but mainly by the impossibility of holding funeral rites. The survivor's energy is claimed to care for other vulnerable survivors. Moreover, reality references are so distorted that they create a sense of overwhelming unreality in the face of death itself (Fernández-Liria & Rodríguez-Vega, 2000).



The absence of a “reality test” (Freud, 1917) has been extensively analyzed by Zorio (2011) and Díaz (2008) as a factor that hinders but doesn't completely prevent the elaboration of the loss of the loved one in contexts of Violence. For Díaz (2008), in her examination of cases of forced disappearance, the ritual facilitates the processing of a process that otherwise would remain stuck thanks to its symbolic efficacy. It is clear that rituals are often the result of previous individual or collective elaboration, but in other cases, they mobilize grief work (Mercado-Lenis, 2017). For Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000), the ritual not only serves to support the bereaved but also to structure a community that has been threatened. In this sense, the difficulties in carrying out these rituals have effects not only on the survivor but also on the possibilities of rebuilding the community by “reorganizing life for peace” (Fernández-Liria & Rodríguez-Vega, 2000, p. 9).

Regarding the task of “processing the pain of grief”, Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000) point out that cultures typically have “tools” to express feelings associated with loss and to take stock. Expressions of grief, usually prohibited, are permitted during funeral rites to mourners, and even specific collective manifestations of weeping and sorrow are induced, as is the case with mourners. Then, they are provided with relative isolation from the community to experience their suffering. Another task is “to adjust to a world without the deceased”. Similarly to the previous task, the authors note that cultures offer specific formal or informal mechanisms to help individuals cope with life's fundamental challenges without their loved ones. In wartime, social support networks are often disrupted, families are fragmented, and institutions are absent (Fernández-Liria & Rodríguez-Vega, 2000). In summary, for both tasks, the social and symbolic mechanisms that typically support the grieving process are severed due to the logic and dynamics of war itself.

The fourth task has been termed as “to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life” (Worden, 2013, p. 68), resembling what García-Hernández (2009) proposed in his doctoral thesis on how parents continued to maintain a bond over time with their deceased children, which, far from being a sign of “denial,” allowed them to process the pain of loss. Worden (2013) referred to this task very close to that of Freud (1917) when he spoke of how the Ego was liberated to invest in the world anew. It is about finding a lasting connection with the loved one in the psyche and reconstructing the world that had lost meaning based on the possibility of loving other “objects”. For Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000), war “provides alternative objects of love” (p. 19), and it is “prolific in fetishes that require all the energy one can generate” (p. 19). The authors refer here to the fact that people invest in helping other victims or the most vulnerable, and ideals such as the homeland, victory, or revenge occupy the place of alternative objects. For Díaz (2008), revenge would not facilitate the grieving process, as it would constitute a treatment of “the real with the real” (p. 10); the processing of the real through the symbolic would take place through ritual and justice of course, when it is effective.

Regarding the death of a child, some authors have highlighted its unrepresentable and unnameable nature (Bonnett, 2013; Roitman *et al.*, 2002). The latter points out how there is no designation for someone who loses a child, whereas cultures provide terms like widow and orphan, for example, for those who lose their loved ones. According to Roitman *et al.* (2002), the death of a child is nothing more and nothing less than the epitome of grief.

What can be reaffirmed from the above is that the death of a child becomes the epitome of grief. We could anticipate unresolved grief because children have become, in the West, at least in the last century, what Freud (1914) termed His Majesty the baby, the center of interest, pampering, and attention from adults in Western families. Conversely, when the death of a child is inconsequential, it occurs under extreme conditions of poverty and Violence, where it does not acquire sufficient emotional value unless the child has already survived to a certain age. This is the exception rather than the norm.

As known in psychoanalytic theory, human relationships are marked by the ambivalence of love-hate (Freud, 1917). Parent-child relationships are a clear example of this, as parents are often a source of incredible frustration for their offspring. At the same time, parenthood itself entails a considerable set of sacrifices and renunciations. In this sense, guilt incubates in a dynamic where repressed hostile feelings turn against oneself following the loss (Freud, 1917), and this applies not only to pathological, “melancholic” mourning, as Freud pointed out, but also to many forms considered “normal” (Leader, 2012; Mercado-Lenis, 2017).

Allouch (1995, cited in Umpiérrez, 2015) argues that losing a loved one implies a loss of a part of oneself. This is related to the fact that many mothers perceive their children as a part of themselves, even after childbirth, and also to the narcissistic constitution of the Self, in which the other plays a decisive role. Although the author is not explicit in this regard, he refers to the emergence of the Self in Lacan's mirror stage, as there is talk of this narcissistic dimension of loss experienced as a “descent into hell” as “the ultimate test that a human being can undergo” (Umpiérrez, 2015). There is a sense of emptiness and a need to rebuild oneself through dialogues and encounters only possible by mentioning the child's name. This is similar to what García-Hernández (2009) pointed out. Roitman *et al.* (2002) also indicated the narcissistic dimension of this mourning as it implies the rupture of the “generational continuity” of the (unconscious) idea of “immortality of the Self” since children contribute, to some extent, to sustaining that idea as they are a narcissistic projection of the parents and, therefore, a consolation in the face of one's death. In turn, parental identity is sustained by the existence of a child; once this is terminated, such identity dissolves, leading to anxieties of disintegration and loss of temporal continuity.

Due to the contextual relevance already highlighted, as well as the findings of other research, we can conclude that the grief experienced by mothers of individuals murdered in contexts of Violence constitutes one of the most significant psychosocial and mental health issues in our country. This is not only due to its immediate impact and its effects in the medium and

long term on individuals and communities but also because of its potential significance at the intergenerational level. Understanding this problem can provide professionals and institutions with tools for the psychosocial approach to women who have experienced the loss of their children. Additionally, it can offer hints to institutions and governmental entities regarding the extent to which forms of reparation contribute to the mental health and psychosocial well-being of violence victims in Colombia.

Given these circumstances, the purpose of this research was to understand the grieving processes of mothers who lost children to acts of Violence belonging to an association of victims of the armed conflict in the city of Cali. To achieve this, a methodological strategy was implemented aimed at: 1. Understanding the subjective elaboration of loss due to violent death in these mothers. 2. Investigating the role those sociocultural aspects play in their grieving processes. 3. Analyzing the role that truth, reparations, and justice processes play in their experience of loss.

## **2. Methodology**

This research adopted a qualitative epistemology in which knowledge has a constructive-interpretative character (González-Rey, 2006). This means that the research is not conceived as a process aimed at uncovering a reality already there, ready to be apprehended. Instead, through investigative practice, areas of meaning are produced that allow for more excellent intelligibility of the subject studied. This type of research to which we subscribe also asserts the value of the singular as a valid object of study and of subjectivity as a legitimate subject of psychological inquiry (Cano, 1988; Gilliéron, 1988; González-Rey, 2006).

Following Vygotsky (1978), although it refers to the individual, subjectivity is nurtured within interindividual, that is, social matrices. This exchange is made possible through the artifacts provided by culture, particularly symbols. According to González-Rey (2006), the symbolic and emotional processes that give rise to the subjectivization of human experience cannot be understood through standardized processes that exist outside the spaces where they occur, that is to say, outside the social exchange. This is why we initially proposed a group rather than an individual approach.

For this purpose, we employed convenience sampling (Mendieta-Izquierdo, 2015) and contacted a victim association in the Aguablanca District of Cali. There, we expected to find the profiles we needed, namely, mothers of children murdered in acts of sociopolitical Violence. As we got to know the group and the life stories of the participants, we found it necessary to broaden our notion of motherhood, as most fit the profile not only because they had lost biological children but also other loved ones they considered as such: a nephew, a son-in-law, and the unborn baby of a fellow captive. The group consisted of a variable number of participants, ranging from 8 to 10 people, primarily women, who regularly attended the meetings. Occasionally, two men and a



young transgender woman participated. We did not find it appropriate to exclude the men, as the exchange of experiences from different subjective positions seemed extremely valuable to us.

In our approach to the group, we initially followed what González-Rey (2006) terms the “research scenarios” phase. We held initial meetings, first with the group leader and then with the entire group. Our intention was not to present what we “were going to do” but to share the purpose of our research and make them participants. In this setting, we discussed the topics that would be addressed in the meetings, ensuring they met both our needs as researchers and theirs as a group.

Thus, the topics defined by consensus were: 1. Trauma and Resiliency. 2. Family tree and body. 3. Migrations and geographies 4. Violence, grief, and loss. 5. Emotions and self-care: guiding and helping without hurting. 6. Psychological first aid. 7. Justice, rituals, and reparation. Each theme responded to the research needs, to those expressed by the group, or to both. For example, themes 1, 2, and 4 responded to the need to understand the subjective experience of loss, themes 2 and 3 to the sociocultural aspects of grief, and theme 7 to the role played by the processes of truth, reparation, and justice in their experience of loss. Meanwhile, themes 1, 4, 5, and 6 were related to the needs expressed by the participants. However, once the workshops were held, it was found that all of them provided relevant information for the research.

These meetings were conducted in that order under the workshop modality. Each workshop was facilitated by the principal investigator, a co-researcher, and one or two student interns, who rotated through each workshop. Each workshop lasted approximately two and a half hours, and the frequency was weekly and sometimes biweekly, given the availability of the group. The group phase lasted three months, as some topics required more than one session.

Various methodologies were used to develop each theme: drawings, sketches, role-plays, tracing of life trajectories on a map of Colombia, discussion based on chronicles of Violence, etc. These methodologies aimed to facilitate the participants' words, the expression of emotions associated with their experiences, and the exchange of experiences and opinions on the different topics discussed. The role of the facilitators was, in principle, to introduce some theoretical or technical elements when necessary, but, above all, to circulate the word and provide some elements of subjective and group elaboration of what the group expressed through questions, paraphrases, empathic reflections, recapitulations and, very eventually, interpretations.

Therefore, the research design was phenomenological, as it sought to understand and describe the phenomena from the point of view of each participant, as well as from that which was constructed collectively (Salgado-Lévano, 2007). By listening to the group and individual discourses, the researchers attempted to capture the meaning of the participants' experiences through their skills and clinical expertise.

## 2.1 Ethical considerations

Regarding the ethical implications, we were aware that topics that could have an emotional impact on the participants would be addressed at some point, as it involved bringing painful memories to mind. She was informed of this possibility in prior discussions with the group leader. The respective informed consent was also obtained, and we committed to providing emotional support if needed. Nevertheless, the design of the workshops aimed to avoid re-victimization, as they were not only intended as a means of expression but also as a space for reflection, where tools for emotional self-care and mutual support were provided. Participants were also offered individual sessions if necessary, although none opted for this alternative. The workshop methodology focused on ensuring the group's and its members' emotional stability. At the end of the group phase, thanks to the feedback received, we confirmed that the space was considered positive, enriching, and healing.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Traumatic grief

Firstly, to comprehend the narratives of the participants, we had to resort to the category of traumatic grief (Lachal *et al.*, 2003). They all spoke of a senselessness, an inability to grasp the event, to put it into words. They also mentioned, on an emotional level, an impossible pain. For instance, Ana<sup>1</sup> She asserted that this (the death of her son-in-law, whom she considered a son) “has locked itself in my mind, it does not fade away; it's branded in me like cattle” (Ana, personal communication, July 2, 2022); also, regarding the death of her nephew (who had a cognitive disability), she said: “it is an inexplicable experience” (they handed his body to her in a small box, in pieces). Diana, on her part, said, regarding her son's murder: “the past does not erase; this marked a before and after” (Diana, personal communication, July 2, 2022). These elements reflect notions of trauma; both the names used here are pseudonyms to preserve the identity of the participants. Classical ones conceive it as an emotional overflow, an energetic or affective imbalance resulting from the breach of the psyche (Freud, 1920), and more recent ones refer to a confrontation with the reality of death (Lebigot, 2009). That experience of being close to it, whether one's own or that of a loved one, enters the psyche as raw data without a representation to embrace or transform it (Lebigot, 2009).

In the same vein, and to the extent that this experience becomes entrenched in the psyche without a connection to other representations, it does not transform typical memory. Therefore, when mothers talk about the event, they feel “it happened yesterday”. Ideas surrounding the death of the child are fixed, repetitive, and invasive.

---

<sup>1</sup> All names used here are pseudonyms to preserve the participants' identities.

Once established in memory, the traumatic image can last for days, months, years, or a lifetime (Lebigot, 2009). That is why mothers refer to it as something that does not fade, that continues anchored in the past, “like the first day”.

### **3.2 An “impossible pain”**

Many of the participants suffered from medical conditions, some chronic, others of a certain severity. However, the common denominator was the pain. Cecilia said: “He went out and was shot in the head. That is unspeakable, that pain is impossible, it is like walking on air” (Cecilia, personal communication, May 14, 2022). Ana mentioned: “He (her son) took the wrong path, and the guerrilla in Caguán killed him”. However, we never had the body. Currently, I do not know if he is dead or will return. Since then, my whole body hurts” (Ana, personal communication, May 28, 2022). Cecilia adds: “I am not able to look at his photo. It happened four years ago, but it feels like yesterday, the first day; who can cure that? It is like someone had torn out my insides” (Cecilia, personal communication, May 28, 2022). Lucía is a particular case; she had two strokes, one during the time she was held captive by an armed group and the other one recently. Nevertheless, this physical pain, linked to the psychological, could not be attributed to a single one of the acts of Violence nor the losses suffered. Lucía, whose parents and uncle were murdered, said, “It is as if I felt everyone's pain, multiple pains from head to feet” (Lucía, personal communication, June 11, 2022). The metaphors related to the death of the child, expressed by the mothers at the moment they received the news or recovered their remains, helped us understand the experience of the body about that particular loss. The one of an emptied body as they “ripped out the entrails” (Julia, personal communication, May 28, 2022), an experience of the emptiness of a body that floats, that walks on air (Ileana, personal communication, May 14, 2022) or a body, on the contrary, heavy, losing its support and collapsing. The participants' reference speaks of an intimate, highly organic, and narcissistic connection with the child as an extension of the mother's body, mourning as the result of the rupture of intercorporeality (Freitas & Michel, 2014). Expressions such as “born from the womb” or “flesh of your flesh” refer to cultural imagery that links the mother to the child more on the biological side than on the cultural side (Freitas & Michel, 2014).

### **3.3 The enemy other and the loss of essential trust**

The other perpetrator embodies at least two dimensions: there is the concrete human being who caused irreparable harm and is impossible to forgive. Lucía said, in a moment of reconciliation with her tormentor: “I am not able to forgive; he (the paramilitary) is the devil incarnate. I told him: You killed my parents when I was eight years old. I do not forget you. If I had a gun, I would kill you right now” (Lucía, personal communication, June 25, 2022). Additionally, it emerged in the narratives of the mothers in an internalized dimension, omnipresent in all situations of conflict and tension. The enemy could be anywhere or anyone,

they said: "No one can be trusted". The actions of the violent were unpredictable and arbitrary; this "other" was perceived as omnipotent, leading to a constant state of apprehension. During the sessions, abundant narratives of the violent actions hindering life from unfolding in a "normal" manner in the social sphere were recounted. In other words, it is what Benyakar (2016) termed "disruptive environments": a succession of disruptive events that distort the environment and limit people's abilities to make decisions and agency in life.

While this enemy was not only the murderer of the child but also included those who had violated them and others, the narratives of Violence that affected the mother-child bond were particularly gruesome and horrifying to the group. The group recounted the case of a mother who was forced to eat her child's flesh or another mother who was murdered, beheaded, and whose head was displayed as a "gift" for her son. The massacre of several young individuals (children) in Buenaventura, numerous accounts of dismembered bodies and false positives, and the fact that bodies were not allowed to be recovered or mourned. All of this aligns with what we have termed in another work (Mercado-Lenis, 2017) as "traumatization techniques", as they attack the pillars of the human psychic constitution and the psycho-cultural supports that enable individuals to face tragedy. For example, the mutilation of the body regresses the survivor to a moment before the mirror stage, prior to the imaginary constitution of the Self (Sampson, 2000). Given the degree of sacredness that the mother-child bond holds, its perversion, for instance, "forced cannibalism", undermines the deepest foundations of humanity. These tales of horror, with which they identified, united them in a community of suffering mothers.

Lachal *et al.* (2003) mention a fundamental identification with the human species based on ontogenetic and phylogenetic humanization processes. This identity is reinforced throughout development, but it is threatened in contexts like the one we are describing. While the perpetrators aim to "destroy the humanity within the human" (Lachal *et al.*, 2003), they possibly achieve the fracturing of basic trust in others, which is essential for social bonds. In the initial approach to these mothers, breaking through this generalized distrust was not easy, as it was reinforced by the way they were treated by the receiving community and institutions when they were displaced.

### 3.4 How the human emerges from inhumanity

How the human arises in inhumanity This loss of essential trust, evident with strangers, is starkly contrasted by a solid in-group identity with members of the association and those who share their condition as victims. They expressed solidarity, stating: "The same pain unites us". Among these identifications with other victims, the connections with mothers who have lost children stand out. We observed a profound sense of empathy, in its affective form, which led them to feel the pain of other mothers as their own. This strong identification with other victimized mothers is also found in the research by Jacinto-Alarcão *et al.* (2008) and Jiménez (2005), whose participants decided not to seek revenge to avoid causing the same pain to the



mothers of the killers. This identification translated into concrete actions and attitudes; many participants demonstrated a high degree of altruism and selflessness, which had a reparative effect.

In this dimension and the strength of the group, we find an astonishingly resilient process because, despite the humanity that has been deeply wounded, the participants have managed to reinvest love in other “objects” that have suffered misfortunes. Regarding the grieving task “to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life” (Worden, 2013, p. 68), they have been able to strongly invest in the ideal of altruism, of helping the most in need. Fernández-Liria and Rodríguez-Vega (2000) stated in that:

War does not provide alternative objects of love. However, it is abundant in fetishes that require all the energy one can generate. Sometimes, it is the assistance to other victims, sometimes the salvation of weaker individuals who depend on one, but above all things like the homeland, victory, our people, or revenge are suitable candidates to occupy that place. (p. 201)

### **3.5 Failed reparation and the value of testimony**

The failed reparation and the testimony of the other the narratives of the mothers about their experience of the conflict reflect what Benyakar (2016) termed “disruptive environments”, referring to contexts where the rules governing every day are inverted, and the relationships between people and the social world are distorted. According to the participants, the armed groups are masters and lords in the territories and dictate the rules arbitrarily. There is an institutional desert, and those who should protect civil society often also perpetrate Violence or act as accomplices to illegal groups. As victims, they have perceived the reparative processes as insufficient and feel that the crimes they suffered have gone unpunished. Peace negotiations have been seen as a reward for the violent, and reconciliation meetings with perpetrators are a theater dominated by hypocrisy because they do not believe in their repentance. Lucía said: “I didn't see the sincerity in the reconciliation spaces; I hate the government. None of the assistance compensates; I hate the political agreements; they (the armed groups) received benefits in exchange for disarmament” (Lucía, personal communication, June 25, 2022).

This bleak panorama does not favor the processing of the real through the symbolic (Díaz, 2008), but, on the contrary, the condition of victimhood can acquire an ontological status, a way of life. When justice fails to operate or becomes corrupt, it becomes a victimization factor and perpetuates pain and mourning (Mercado-Lenis, 2017).

However, during the group sessions, we observed how the participants expanded on the narratives about the Violence they experienced. Complaints, indignation, and demands often accompanied these narratives. We understood that they found a way to voice their grievances

and provide testimony despite the lack of factual or legal consequences in that space. As outsiders, we became recipients of what had not had yet to be heard or overlooked. For Lachal *et al.* (2003), testimonies are narratives that, due to their profound human intensity, necessitate responses primarily centered on providing comfort in the active sense of the term. According to Leader (2012), for a loss to evolve into mourning, it must first be acknowledged. By acknowledgment, we mean offering them empathetic listening that recognizes and grants their narratives a rightful place, especially acknowledging them as victims of atrocious Violence, something that institutions have failed to provide.

As Lira (2010) points out in her work with victims of the dictatorship, testimony usually has a relevant therapeutic value in victims of violence, especially in the elaboration of emotions such as rage when the crimes to which they have been subjected do not occur. They are recognized as such in society. In our case, we discovered that this space was healing and comforting for mothers.

#### 4. Conclusions

Our investigation explored grief in two conditions that, according to previous research, often have a complicated evolution: namely, the loss of a child and losses in contexts of Violence. These investigations have yielded findings that align with ours; however, we identified aspects that previous studies may not have fully addressed, and that is the dimension of trauma. Regarding the subjective elaboration of grief due to violent death in these mothers, we concluded that the subjective dimension of such mourning cannot be grasped without resorting to the notion of traumatic grief, which allowed us to understand the absence of meaning, the ineffable, and the quality of presentism (actuality) that accompanies this experience. It is also essential to consider the bodily experience marked by the rupture of intercorporeality (Freitas & Michel, 2014), leaving that body empty, unraveled, and suffering. While in other griefs, guilt plays a vital role as a form of hostility towards oneself, in these griefs, it is located in the other (enemy), which sometimes becomes an internalized otherness, a source of fundamental distrust towards others, strangers, and practically towards all institutions.

Regarding psychosocial aspects, the above contrasts with an in-group solid identity and a sense of shared humanity and brotherhood with other victims, especially with other mothers who have lost children, which contributed to a resilient process. The reparative power of the victims' group, led by a leader who fights for their rights and altruistic acts for the most needy despite having few resources, became those ideals that they strongly invested in, allowing them to deal with horror. The value of the group dynamics conducted in the research is worth noting, as it functioned as testimony that, although without legal effects, allowed for an empathetic and reparative listening of the pains suffered. Finally, regarding the role played by truth, reparation, and justice processes as possible contributors to their emotional recovery processes, it must be said that, as experienced by the mothers, they have only deepened their sense of hopelessness



and desolation. This leads us to think about their multiple failures in our country and how psychosocial processes can contribute, when carried out genuinely, well-intentioned, and free from bureaucratic logic, not only to the reconstruction of the lives of those who have suffered atrocious Violence but also to give voice to the victims in the dimension of testimony.

## Funding

The article is a product of the research project “Proceso de duelo en madres de personas asesinadas en contexto de violencia Sociopolítica” developed at the Universidad del Valle, Cali-Colombia. The author states he received no resources to write or publish this article.

## Authors' Contribution statement

Diego Fernando Mercado: conceptualization, formal analysis, research, methodology, writing (original draft), writing (review of the draft and revision/correction)

## Conflicts of interest

The author unequivocally states that there is no conflict of interest in the writing or publishing of this article, reinforcing the integrity and impartiality of the research.

## Ethical statement

The authors do not have any type of ethical implication to be stated in writing and publishing this article.

## 5. Bibliographical references

- Agudelo-Patiño, L. F., & Sánchez-Villada, P. A. (2013). *Exploración del proceso de duelo en familiares de personas víctimas de la desaparición forzada en el Valle del Cauca* [Undergraduate work, unpublished]. Universidad del Valle, Buga campus.
- Alianza Inicial de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz [IMP]. (2007). *Análisis sociodemográfico de las víctimas del conflicto armado: brechas de género*. Corporación Casa de la Mujer Trabajadora.
- Ariès, P. (1988). *El niño y la vida familiar en el antiguo régimen*. Taurus
- Benyakar, M. (2016). *Lo disruptivo*. Biblos
- Bonnett, P. (2013). *Lo que no tiene nombre*. Alfaguara.
- Cano, F. (1988). La subjetividad como objeto de la psicología y los modos de investigación. *Cuadernos de psicología*, 9(2), 87-111.



- Comisión de la Verdad. (2022, 11 de julio). Cifras de la Comisión de la Verdad presentadas junto con el Informe Final. *Comisión de la Verdad*.  
<https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/principales-cifras-comision-de-la-verdad-informe-final>
- Díaz, V. E. (2008). Del dolor al duelo: límite al anhelo frente a la desaparición forzada. *Revista Affectio Societatis*, 5(9), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.affs.5323>
- Fernández-Liria, A., & Rodríguez-Vega, B. (2000) Trabajo de duelo o trastorno por trauma: Modelo para la actuación en situaciones de guerra o violencia política. *Revista de la Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatría*, 20(74), 189-2005.  
<https://www.revistaaen.es/index.php/aen/article/view/15692>
- Freitas, J., & Michel, L. (2014) A maior dor do mundo: o luto materno em uma perspectiva fenomenológica. *Psicologia em Estudo, Maringá*, 19(2), 273-283.  
<https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-737222324010>
- Freud, S. (1914). *Introducción al Narcisismo*. Amorrortu.
- Freud, S. (1917). *Duelo y melancolía*. Amorrortu.
- Freud, S. (1920). *Más allá del principio del placer*. Amorrortu.
- García-Hernández, M. A. (2009) *El significado de perder un hijo. La construcción discursiva de padres y madres* [Doctoral thesis, Universidad de La Laguna]. Digital file.  
<https://riull.ull.es/xmlui/handle/915/9788>
- Gilliéron, C. (1988). La validez en psicología ¿Primera, segunda o tercera persona? *Cuadernos de psicología*, 9(1), 1-33.
- Gobernación del Valle del Cauca. (2015). *Desplazamiento Forzado en las Comunas de Santiago de Cali: Análisis Espacial de Efecto Vecindad*. Departamento Administrativo de Planeación.  
<https://www.valledelcauca.gov.co/loader.php?lServicio=Tools2&lTipo=viewpdf&id=28753>
- González-Rey, F. L. (2006). *Investigación cualitativa y subjetividad*. Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala-ODHAG.
- Jacinto-Alarcão, A. C., De Barros-Carvalho, M. D., & Pelloso, S. M. (2008). La muerte de un hijo joven. Comprendiendo la vivencia de la madre. *Revista Latino-Americana de Enfermagem*, 16(3), 341-347.  
<https://www.scielo.br/j/rlae/a/JYbmHvhHc3jkDgm6bdjCjgp/?format=pdf&lang=es>
- Jiménez, B. I. (2005) La muerte violenta de un hijo: ¿Continuar o romper con el ciclo de la violencia? *Trabajo Social*, (7), 33-46.  
<https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/tsocial/article/view/8474/9118>
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. Macmillan.
- Lachal, C., Ouss-Ryngaert, L., & Moro, M. R. (2003). *Comprendre et soigner le trauma en situation humanitaire*. Dunod.
- Leader, D. (2012). *La moda negra. Duelo, depresión y melancolía*. Sexto Piso.
- Lebigot, F. (2009). Le traumatisme psychique. *Stress et trauma*. 9(4), 201-204.
- Lira, E. (2010) Trauma, duelo, reparación y memoria. *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, (36), 14-28.  
<https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/815/81514696002.pdf>

- Mendieta-Izquierdo, G. (2015). Informantes y muestreo en investigación cualitativa. *Revista Investigaciones Andina*, 17(30), 1148-1150.  
<https://revia.areandina.edu.co/index.php/IA/article/view/65>
- Mercado-Lenis, D. F. (2017). El duelo en contextos de violencia. Aportes desde el psicoanálisis y la perspectiva transcultural. *Revista Lumen Gentium*, 1(1), 35-43.  
<https://doi.org/10.52525/lg.v1n1a3>
- Pérez-Sales, P. (2004). *Psicología y psiquiatría transcultural: bases prácticas para la acción*. Desclée de Brouwer.
- Registro Único de Víctimas [RUV]. (2023, 31 de enero). *Víctimas por Hecho Victimizante*.  
<https://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Cifras/#!/hechos>
- Roitman, A., Armus, M., & Swarc, N. (2002) El duelo por la muerte de un hijo. *Aperturas Psicoanalíticas. Revista Internacional de Psicoanálisis*, (12).  
<https://www.aperturas.org/articulo.php?articulo=0000216>
- Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres. (2013). *La verdad de las mujeres. Víctimas del conflicto armado en Colombia*. Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres.  
<https://rutapacifica.org.co/documentos/versionresumidacomisiondeverdadymemoria.pdf>
- Salgado-Lévano, A. C. (2007). Investigación cualitativa: diseños, evaluación del rigor metodológico y retos. *Liberabit, Revista Peruana de Psicología* 13(13), 71-78.  
<http://www.scielo.org.pe/pdf/liber/v13n13/a09v13n13.pdf>
- Salinas, P. (1994). *Poesía*. Alianza
- Sampson, A. (2000). Reflexiones sobre la violencia la guerra y la paz. En A. Papachini, D. Henao y V. Estrada (Eds.), *Violencia, guerra y paz. Una mirada desde las ciencias humanas* (pp. 71-99). Universidad del Valle.
- Umpiérrez, G. (2015). *El duelo en madres que pierden hijos* [Trabajo de pregrado, Universidad de la República del Uruguay]. Archivo digital.  
[https://sifp.psico.edu.uy/sites/default/files/trabajos\\_finales/archivos/tesis\\_-\\_duelo\\_en\\_madres\\_que\\_pierden\\_hijos\\_-\\_gaston\\_umpierrez.pdf](https://sifp.psico.edu.uy/sites/default/files/trabajos_finales/archivos/tesis_-_duelo_en_madres_que_pierden_hijos_-_gaston_umpierrez.pdf)
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *El desarrollo de los procesos psicológicos superiores*. Grijalbo.
- Worden, W. (2013). *El tratamiento del duelo: asesoramiento psicológico y terapia*. Paidós Ibérica.
- Zorio, S. (2011) El dolor por un muerto - vivo. Una lectura freudiana del duelo en los casos de desaparición forzada. *Desde el Jardín de Freud*, (11), 251-266.  
<https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/jardin/article/view/27261/27536>