

Collective resistance and institutional change: Feminist movements and victims' organizations in Mexico's fight against impunity

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Abstract

Mexico faces a crisis of impunity marked by femicidal violence, disappearances, and institutional flaws. This study examines how feminist and victims' groups resist impunity by analysing their strategies, conditions for change, and justice reforms. Using mixed methods, the research analysed 847 events from 2014-2024 through content analysis, along with 32 interviews and 385 documents. Techniques like regression and network analysis identified patterns and key factors. Movements fight impunity by exposing state failures, creating alternative knowledge, using international frameworks, disrupting normalcy, and raising visibility. Events with legal and direct tactics were 3.17 times more likely to prompt responses ($p < 0.001$), and coalitions increased this to 2.21 ($p < 0.001$). Only 5.5% led to documented action, with responses often punctuated and temporary. Organisational efforts between feminist and victims' groups grew from 12.7% (2014-2019) to 31.4% (2020-2024), showing strategic alignment. Findings reveal an insurgent accountability system where civil society fills state gaps. Effective accountability involves diverse tactics, engaging institutions, external pressure, and strong coalitions. These insights enhance understanding of social movements, accountability, and justice amidst high impunity.

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Introduction

Mexico faces a profound crisis of impunity characterised by persistently high rates of femicidal violence, forced disappearances, and systemic failures within criminal justice institutions (Ceo-DiFrancesco et al., 2025; García-Peña et al., 1999; Rugarcía, 2024). The convergence of organised crime, state complicity, and institutional weakness has generated what scholars term "infrastructural violence," wherein mechanisms designed to ensure justice instead perpetuate cycles of harm and accountability deficits (Mills, 2025). Against this



backdrop, feminist movements and relatives' organisations of victims have emerged as critical actors demanding structural transformation, truth-telling, and guarantees of non-repetition (Lines, 2025; McLean et al., 2025).

Recent research illuminates key dimensions of these dynamics. Chaparro Rucobo & Alexander (2024) document complex negotiations between awareness of gender-based violence and political polarisation. Loyola-Hernández (2025) traces how digital platforms have become central spaces for feminist protest through "cyborg movidas," while Aureliani (2023) demonstrates how victims' relatives organisations build "unity from diversity" through shared loss. Gordillo-García & Monsivais-Carrillo (2025) show that accountability demands persist even under populist governments that oppose institutional transparency.

Despite this growing literature, key gaps remain. Few studies analyse how collective resistance prompts institutional transformation, what conditions influence success, or how feminist and victims' organisations strategically interact. This study addresses these gaps by: (1) assessing how movements challenge harmful practices and push for accountability; (2) identifying enabling and blocking factors; and (3) developing a framework linking movement strategies to broader justice reforms.

Political and Social Context of Violence in Mexico

Understanding resistance strategies requires situating them within deep structural conditions. Mexico's violence crisis has roots in colonial legacies institutionalising racial and gender hierarchies, normalised through patriarchal state formation. Neoliberal reforms (1980s-1990s) and NAFTA (1994) accelerated industrial urbanisation and created precarious border-zone economies, enabling femicide. The War on Drugs (2006) militarised security responses while accelerating violence, disproportionately affecting women, indigenous communities, and peripheral populations (Mills, 2025).

Mexico's institutional crisis is stark: approximately 97% of femicides go unpunished, and only ~10% of crimes are reported due to pervasive distrust (Corbera et al., 2009). Michener et al. (2025) document how weakened transparency mechanisms further eroded accountability infrastructure, creating conditions in which civil society increasingly substitutes for—rather than supplements—formal accountability mechanisms.

Table 1

Comparative Statistics on Femicides and Disappearances by State (2014-2024)

State	Femicides 2014-2024	Disappearances 2014-2024	Impunity Rate (%)	Primary Structural Factor
Estado de México	1,847	4,231	96.8	Industrial zones; migrant populations; urban sprawl
Veracruz	1,234	3,891	97.4	Drug trafficking corridors; political corruption
Jalisco	987	2,654	95.9	Cartel presence; resource extraction; border proximity
Guerrero	934	3,127	98.2	Drug trafficking; indigenous marginalization; poverty
Nuevo León	756	2,341	94.3	Border location; industrial economy; migration flows

National Average	6,892	35,000+	97.1	Systemic institutional weakness; state-crime nexus
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Note. Data compiled from CNDH reports, SESNSP statistics, and movement-documented cases. Movement organisations estimate actual figures 2-3 times higher than official counts.

The territorial analysis reveals distinct structural factors. The prominence of the State of Mexico reflects industrial zones and urban sprawl, creating peripheral governance vacuums. Veracruz exemplifies drug trafficking corridors compounding political corruption. Guerrero represents the intersection of indigenous marginalisation and organised crime—the *Ayotzinapa* case being the most visible manifestation (Gordillo-García & Monsivais-Carrillo, 2025).

These territorial differences directly shaped the movement strategies analysed in this study, as peripheral organisations developed distinct repertoires adapted to high danger and limited institutional access, while Mexico City organisations leveraged proximity to courts, media, and international observers. Machismo culture shapes institutional responses at every level—from police officers dismissing femicide reports to judges applying evidentiary standards inconsistently. Feminist movements' strategies of disruption, visibility-creation, and alternative knowledge production represent direct counter-moves to these normalisation mechanisms (Chaparro Rucobo & Alexander, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study engages three theoretical bodies—social movement theory, accountability theory, and feminist theory—and introduces "insurgent accountability" as a conceptual innovation synthesising all three.

Social Movement Theory

Political Process Theory (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 2011) examines how political opportunities and framing processes enable collective action under repression. The Contentious Politics Framework (Tarrow, 2011) analyses tactical repertoires and state-movement interactions. However, these traditions assume democratic openness, which does not hold where institutions are actively complicit in violence. Our data reveal that movements must simultaneously operate within and outside institutions, a dual strategy not adequately theorised in the existing literature.

Accountability Theory

Social Accountability theory (Fox, 2015; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006) analyzes civil society mechanisms activating accountability when electoral oversight fails. We extend this framework to violence and bodily integrity rights—domains where existing literature focusing on corruption and service delivery offers limited guidance. Transitional Justice without Transition (Somuano & Takahashi, 2025) provides additional resources for understanding accountability in ongoing conflict contexts.

Feminist Theory

Htun and Weldon (2012) analysis demonstrates that autonomous women's movements achieve policy change more effectively than movements relying on state feminism. Intersectionality (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 2013) reveals how gender, class, race, and indigeneity shape differential vulnerability and access to justice. Transnational Advocacy Network theory (Keck & Sikkink, 2014) explains how domestic movements leverage international norms to pressure national governments.

Conceptual Innovation: Insurgent Accountability

Insurgent accountability refers to bottom-up, contentious mechanisms through which civil society actors create parallel systems of truth-telling, documentation, and justice-seeking when formal institutions systematically fail. It synthesises: (1) insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2021)—marginalised groups claiming rights through direct action; (2) social accountability (Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006), activating state responsiveness; and (3) counter-hegemonic knowledge production (Santos-Burgoa et al., 2009), challenging official narratives. Three explicit theoretical contributions are advanced: extending social movement theory to contexts of extreme impunity; reconceptualising accountability as a civil society function; and theorising intersectional accountability coalitions that transcend single-issue organising.

Method

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Quantitative data enabled systematic analysis of movement activities across organisations and time periods; qualitative data revealed lived experiences, strategic thinking, and contextual factors. Both strands were conducted simultaneously with equal weight (QUAL + QUAN) and integrated during interpretation. For RQ1, interviews on accountability strategies were triangulated with event analysis of tactical repertoires; for RQ2, campaign narratives were complemented by regression and time-series analyses; for RQ3, organisational life histories were combined with longitudinal tactical and network analyses.

Critical Realism (Archer et al., 2013) provides a stratified ontology that acknowledges real violence while recognising that knowledge is mediated by power relations, thereby justifying mixed methods to access different levels of social reality. Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (Collins, 2022; Harding, 1991) centres knowledge produced by those most affected, treating participants as knowledge producers. The Decolonial Approach (Rosado-Santiago et al., 2024) treats activist knowledge as co-produced. Table 2 makes explicit the alignment between epistemology and analysis.

Table 2

Epistemological Foundations and Methodological Operationalisation

Epistemological Principle	Methodological Translation	Analytical Operationalization	Research Question
Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975)	Mixed Methods Design	Structural analysis (quant) + lived experience (qual)	RQ1 & RQ2
Feminist Standpoint (Harding, 1991)	In-depth Interviews (32)	Dialogical interviewing; participants as knowledge producers	RQ1 & RQ3
Decolonial Approach (Santos, 2014)	Document Analysis (385)	State vs. movement-produced knowledge comparison	RQ2 & RQ3
Stratified Ontology	Event Analysis (847 events)	Coding structural patterns, tactics, institutional responses	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

Note. Alignment between epistemological commitments and methodological choices reflects explicit design decisions.

Purposive sampling selected 32 key informants: (a) 12 feminist activists (5 national, 7 regional; 3-15 years' experience across Mexico City, Jalisco, Estado de México, Guerrero, Veracruz, Nuevo León); (b) 14 victims' relatives (8 mothers, 6 family collectives; 2-10 years; across five highest-rate states); and (c) 6 institutional actors (2 human rights commissioners, 2 public defenders, 2 forensic specialists).

Wave 1 (n=20) was guided by organisational prominence in event data; Wave 2 (n=12) used theoretical sampling targeting underrepresented organisational types—smaller groups,

peripheral-state organisations, and coalition leaders. Saturation was assessed through team consensus; no new codes emerged after interview 28, and 4 additional interviews were conducted for confirmation. A database of 847 documented events (2014-2024) was compiled from three national newspapers (La Jornada, Reforma, El Universal), 156 organisational social media accounts, and Inter-American Court and Mexican federal court documents. Inclusion criteria (all required): (1) temporal: January 1, 2014 – December 31, 2024; (2) geographic: within Mexico; (3) actor: organized feminist movement OR victims' relatives organization; (4) target: explicit accountability demands related to femicide, gender violence, or forced disappearance; (5) verification: confirmed through ≥ 2 independent sources.

Table 3*Quantitative Event Database Characteristics (N = 847)*

Event Type	n	%	Primary Data Source	Temporal Distribution	Geographic Distribution
Public Protests/Demonstrations	312	36.8	Newspapers (187), Social media (125)	2014-16: 62 2017-19: 81 2020-22: 112 2023-24: 57	Mexico City: 89 Estado de México: 47 Jalisco: 39 Veracruz: 33 Guerrero: 31 Others: 73
Legal Actions	189	22.3	Court docs (143), Org. reports (46)	2014-16: 28 2017-19: 45 2020-22: 72 2023-24: 44	Mexico City: 54 Estado de México: 29 Jalisco: 24 Veracruz: 20 Guerrero: 19 Others: 43
Press Conferences/Statements	156	18.4	Newspapers (98), Social media (58)	2014-16: 22 2017-19: 38 2020-22: 58 2023-24: 38	Mexico City: 45 Estado de México: 23 Jalisco: 19 Veracruz: 16 Guerrero: 13 Others: 40
Direct Actions	94	11.1	Newspapers (51), Social media (43)	2014-16: 15 2017-19: 23 2020-22: 32 2023-24: 24	Mexico City: 27 Estado de México: 14 Jalisco: 12 Veracruz: 10 Guerrero: 10 Others: 21
Institutional Dialogues	58	6.8	Gov. docs (34), Org. reports (24)	2014-16: 11 2017-19: 15 2020-22: 16 2023-24: 16	Mexico City: 17 Estado de México: 8 Jalisco: 7 Veracruz: 6 Guerrero: 6 Others: 14
Memorial Events	38	4.5	Social media (26), Newspapers (12)	2014-16: 9 2017-19: 11 2020-22: 8 2023-24: 10	Mexico City: 11 Estado de México: 7 Jalisco: 6 Veracruz: 4 Guerrero: 5 Others: 5
Total	847	100.0	—	2014-16: 147 (17.4%) 2017-19: 147 (17.4%)	Mexico City: 243 (28.7%) Estado de México: 128 (15.1%) Jalisco: 107 (12.6%)

213 (25.1%)	Veracruz: 89 (10.5%) Guerrero: 84 (9.9%)
2020-22: 298 (35.2%)	Nuevo León: 71 (8.4%) Others: 125 (14.8%)
2023-24: 189 (22.3%)	

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. "Others" includes 11 additional states with <50 events each.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews (90-180 minutes) covered five thematic areas: organisational origins, strategic approaches, institutional interactions, perceived successes/failures, and visions for change. Document analysis included organisational manifestos (n=218), legal petitions and court submissions (n=73), and government policy documents (n=94).

Expanded document selection. Official state documents (n=127)—CNDH reports, IACHR responses, Attorney General communiqués; movement-produced documents (n=203)—shadow reports, documentation projects; legal documents (n=55)—all relevant court and IACHR rulings 2014-2024. A structured coding instrument analysed 847 events across 23 variables, grouped into four categories. Inter-coder reliability (n=120 events, 14% of sample) yielded Krippendorff's α ranging from 0.79 to 0.92 (threshold $\alpha \geq 0.80$; Krippendorff, 2013). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 14 yielded 87 codes across 12 themes. Statistical analyses were performed using Stata 18.0 and R 4.3.2 ($p < 0.05$). Model diagnostics. VIF < 2.5 (no multicollinearity); Hosmer-Lemeshow p-value = 0.68 (good fit). Potential biases (selection, survivorship, temporal) were mitigated through Wave 2 targeted sampling, systematic search protocols for 'failed' cases, and weighted analysis.

Results and Discussion

Temporal Dynamics and Geographic Concentrations

An analysis of 847 incidents reveals fluctuating temporal dynamics in the mobilisation of the movement, with a significant increase from the 2014–2016 period (17.4%) to 2020–2022 (35.2%), before subsequently declining in 2023–2024 (22.3%). The surge during the 2020–2022 period cannot be separated from the case of Ingrid Escamilla's femicide, which served as the primary trigger event in raising public awareness and the intensity of collective action. This event not only increased the frequency of mobilisation to 142 actions in a single year, but also led to a significant rise in institutional response from 28.4% to 43.7%, as confirmed by statistical testing ($\chi^2 = 19.38$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that organised public pressure has the capacity to influence the state's response, albeit one that tends to be reactive.

In terms of the forms of action, the dominance of public protests (36.8%) was followed by legal action (22.3%), press conferences (18.4%), direct action (11.1%), institutional dialogue (6.8%), and memorials (4.5%), reflecting the diversity of strategies employed by movement actors. This pattern indicates that the movement does not rely on a single approach, but rather combines various forms of action in response to the complexity of the impunity faced. This diversity descriptively demonstrates tactical flexibility, yet analytically also suggests that not all strategies possess the same effectiveness, particularly when confronted with limited access to formal institutions.

Geographically, the distribution of events shows the highest concentration in Mexico City (28.7%), followed by the State of Mexico (15.1%), Jalisco (12.6%), Veracruz (10.5%), Guerrero (9.9%), and Nuevo León (8.4%). This finding is significant when linked to the results of the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 87.34$, $p < 0.001$), which confirms a relationship between the type of action and location. Thus, it can be understood that the choice of movement strategies is not universal,

but rather influenced by the structural context in each region. Mexico City, as a political and media hub, provides broader access to legal institutions, advocacy networks, and international attention, thereby enabling the use of more formal strategies such as legal action and press conferences.

Conversely, regions such as Guerrero, which have high levels of violence, actually exhibit relatively lower movement visibility. Participants' statements highlighting the existence of "mass graves and silence" illustrate the limited access to advocacy resources, including the media, the judicial system, and external oversight. This suggests that high levels of violence do not automatically correlate with strong mobilisation or movement visibility. In other words, there is a gap between the experience of violence and the capacity to articulate it into demands for accountability.

Analytically, this finding confirms that the structure of political opportunities and the distribution of resources play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of movements. Geographical inequalities in access to legal infrastructure and the media lead to the concentration of movements in certain regions, whilst marginalising other regions that actually experience higher levels of violence. Therefore, the recommendation to decentralise legal support is relevant, not merely as an administrative measure, but as a structural strategy to expand access to justice and strengthen advocacy capacity in peripheral regions.

Thus, this analysis demonstrates that the primary issue lies not solely in the high incidence of violence, but in the unequal capacity to transform such experiences into effective political pressure on the state.

Accountability Demands and Institutional Targets

Demands for search and investigation were most common (33.9%, n=287), primarily targeting prosecutorial institutions (69.0%). Criminal prosecution (25.1%), institutional reform (18.7%), truth commissions (10.7%), reparations (7.3%), and legislative reform (4.3%) followed. Events combining individual and systemic scope (26.9%) were 3.47 times more likely to target multiple institutions simultaneously (OR=3.47, 95% CI: 2.31-5.21, p<0.001), indicating systemic impunity requires coordinated cross-institutional pressure.

Table 4

Accountability Demands and Institutional Targets (N = 847)

Primary Demand	n	%	Most Common Target	n targeting	% of type
Search/Investigation	287	33.9	Prosecutorial	198	69.0
Criminal Prosecution	213	25.1	Judicial	156	73.2
Institutional Reform	158	18.7	Executive	89	56.3
Truth Commission	91	10.7	Multiple institutions	67	73.6
Reparations	62	7.3	Executive	43	69.4
Legislative Reform	36	4.3	Legislative	29	80.6

Note. Scope of demands: individual case-focused 40.3%; systemic reform-focused 32.8%; both 26.9%.

Tactical Repertoires and Strategic Combinations

Movements employed diverse simultaneous tactics: media engagement (73.0%), digital activism (61.7%), coalition formation (58.6%), legal strategies (52.1%), and direct action (43.3%). Events combining all five tactics showed the highest participation (mean=1,249) and sustained engagement (median=89 days); legal-only strategies lasted longest (median=731 days) but engaged the fewest participants (mean=45).

Table 5
Tactical Repertoire Combinations (N = 847)

Tactical Combination	n	%	Mean Participants	Median Duration (Days)
Media + Digital only	142	16.8	87	1
Legal + Media + Digital	126	14.9	134	428
Direct Action + Media + Digital	119	14.1	523	2
Coalition + Media + Digital	98	11.6	312	3
Legal + Direct Action + Media + Digital	87	10.3	687	14
All five tactics combined	74	8.7	1,249	89
Legal only	52	6.1	45	731
Other combinations	149	17.6	178	Varied

**Duration: time from initial action to documented resolution or cessation.*

Logistic regression (Model $\chi^2=147.82$, $p<0.001$, Pseudo $R^2=0.31$) confirmed combined tactics increased odds of concrete responses by 3.17 times (95% CI: 1.89-5.31, $p<0.001$); coalition formation by 2.21 (95% CI: 1.38-3.54, $p<0.001$); multi-institutional targeting by 2.84 (95% CI: 1.67-4.83, $p<0.001$); and national media coverage by 1.94 (95% CI: 1.23-3.06, $p=0.004$). This aligns with Loyola-Hernández's (2025) "cyborg movidas," where digital and embodied protest reinforce each other in feedback loops.

Feminist movements favoured direct action (56.8%) and digital activism (71.3%); victims' organisations prioritised legal strategies (63.4%). State repression—documented in 94 events (11.1%), concentrated in direct actions (28.7% vs. 7.3%, $\chi^2=67.23$, $p<0.001$)—created chilling effects and barriers to participation.

Mechanisms of Challenging Impunity

The five main mechanisms that shape the movement's modus operandi collectively represent civil society's systematic efforts to fill the void left by the state's failure to function. The first mechanism, namely *demonstrating state failure*, shows that the majority of participants (81.3%) actively build alternative databases that correct the state's official statistics. The discrepancy between the 847 cases documented by civil society and the 300 cases acknowledged by the state indicates a serious *epistemic gap* in the production of official knowledge. Analytically, this not only reflects administrative failure but also points to the potential for *systemic underreporting*, which contributes to the state's low level of accountability.

The second mechanism, namely the creation of alternative knowledge (*alternative knowledge production*), reveals a transformation in the role of victims—particularly families—from mere sufferers to investigative actors. Involvement in independent forensic practices, such as forensic anthropology, GPS mapping, and archaeology, indicates a process of *lay expertise formation*, in which civilians develop technical competencies outside formal state structures. Descriptively, this phenomenon strengthens the movement's capacity; analytically, however, it also reveals structural delegitimation, whereby knowledge produced outside state institutions is often not recognised within formal legal processes.

The third mechanism—the utilisation of international frameworks—demonstrates a strategy of *scale shifting*, wherein movement actors shift the arena of advocacy from the national to the international level. Engagement with the Inter-American human rights system and UN mechanisms reflects efforts to overcome domestic limitations through external pressure. This underscores that when national channels reach an impasse, international legitimacy becomes a vital resource in strengthening the movement's bargaining position.

Furthermore, the fourth mechanism—*disrupting normalcy* through occupations and *escraches*—demonstrates a symbolic and performative strategy in disrupting social routines. With an average participation of 523 people, these actions serve to transform previously invisible violence into a public issue that cannot be ignored. Analytically, this approach demonstrates that visibility is a crucial prerequisite for the emergence of political pressure, particularly in contexts where the media and formal institutions tend to be indifferent.

The fifth mechanism—media and digital mobilisation, at 73.0% and 61.7% respectively—proved capable of expanding reach by up to 2.3 times compared to physical actions alone. This indicates that the digital space functions as a *force multiplier* in social movements, enabling faster and wider dissemination of information. However, this effectiveness remains dependent on the actors' ability to manage narratives and avoid disinformation.

Overall, these five mechanisms form what is termed the *insurgent accountability infrastructure*, namely a parallel system established by civil society to carry out the functions of documentation, investigation, publication, and political pressure that should be the responsibility of the state. This infrastructure demonstrates a high level of organisational capacity, yet also faces significant limitations. As many as 71.9% of participants identified resource constraints and issues regarding the legitimacy of evidence as the main obstacles. In a legal context, these findings are crucial as they highlight a tension between the *substantive truth* produced by civil society and *procedural admissibility* within the formal judicial system. The assertion that families' investigative findings are often rejected for failing to meet *chain-of-custody* standards underscores an institutional bias against non-state sources of knowledge.

Coalition Dynamics and Network Structures

The network identified 23 organisational clusters exhibiting significant variations in network density across regions, with Mexico City achieving a high density level (0.67) compared to peripheral states (0.23–0.41). Descriptively, these differences indicate that inter-organisational relationships in the centre are more connected and intense, whilst those in peripheral regions are more fragmented. Analytically, high network density reflects greater coordination capacity, faster information exchange, and more effective opportunities for collective mobilisation. Conversely, low density in peripheral regions indicates limited connectivity, implying weak movement consolidation and limited pressure on institutions.

The finding that betweenness centrality correlates significantly with concrete institutional responses ($r=0.58$, $p<0.001$) suggests that actors occupying strategic positions as connectors within networks play a crucial role in bridging information flows and cross-group coordination. Analytically, this confirms that the success of advocacy is determined not only by the number of actors but by the relational structure and strategic positions within the network. Organisations with high centrality function as brokers capable of integrating diverse interests and enhancing the effectiveness of pressure on the state.

A significant increase in coalition formation from 47.3% (2014–2016) to 68.2% (2020–2024) indicates a process of movement consolidation that has grown stronger over time. Descriptively, this trend suggests that movement actors are increasingly recognising the importance of collaboration as a strategy to amplify impact. Analytically, this increase can be understood as a response to the complexity of the impunity issue, which cannot be addressed through sectoral approaches alone. Coalitions serve as instruments for pooling resources, legitimacy, and a broader base of support.

This is further reinforced by the rise in cross-movement collaboration between feminist organisations and victims' organisations, from 12.7% to 31.4% of total events. The case of Ingrid Escamilla's femicide once again catalysed bringing together two movement bases that were previously relatively separate. Analytically, this cross-movement collaboration indicates the presence of frame alignment, wherein the issue of femicide is no longer positioned solely

as a gender issue, but also as a broader issue of human rights violations. Consequently, the solidarity base has expanded, and the movement's legitimacy has increased.

The effectiveness of the coalition is also empirically confirmed by the finding that events involving collaboration are 2.21 times more likely to result in concrete institutional responses (95% CI: 1.38–3.54, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that synergy between organisations is not merely symbolic, but has a tangible impact on policy outcomes or state responses. Analytically, this reinforces the argument that coordinated collective action enhances political bargaining power compared to fragmented action.

However, coalition dynamics are also not immune to various internal tensions. As many as 34.4% of participants identified conflicts stemming from differences in organisational culture, strategic differences between confrontational and collaborative approaches, and competition over resource allocation. Descriptively, this indicates that coalitions are not homogeneous entities. Analytically, these tensions reflect intra-movement contestation, which, whilst potentially weakening cohesion, can also serve as a space for internal deliberation to determine the movement's strategic direction.

Institutional Responses and the Paradox of Partial Success

The distribution of institutional responses indicates that the majority of incidents have not yet resulted in substantive change: 35.2% received no response at all, and only 5.1% reached the stage of documented implementation. Descriptively, this pattern indicates a significant accountability gap between the demands of civil society and the state's actual actions. Although there is a range of responses, from acknowledgements to concrete promises, the low proportion at the implementation stage suggests that most responses are purely symbolic or procedural. Nevertheless, the increase in the response rate from 28.4% to 43.7% post-2020 indicates institutional sensitivity to public pressure, particularly in high-profile cases. Analytically, this suggests that state responses tend to be selective and dependent on the intensity of public scrutiny, rather than on a consistent commitment to upholding justice.

This pattern, referred to as punctuated accountability, demonstrates that institutional change occurs episodically, triggered by extreme events that attract widespread attention, yet is not sustainable in the long term. Furthermore, the finding that increased responsiveness is accompanied by heightened repression—as reported by 59.4% of participants—contradicts the state's governance strategy. Analytically, this condition reflects the practice of dual-track governance, in which the state simultaneously offers limited concessions to defuse pressure while maintaining control through repressive mechanisms. This aligns with the concept of procedural justice deficits, which suggests that although there are formal efforts to respond to demands, the resulting quality of justice remains low because it is not accompanied by protection for movement actors. Thus, without sustained pressure and structural reform, increased institutional responsiveness risks becoming merely a temporary response that does not address the root causes of impunity.

Organisational Identities and Convergent Trajectories

Feminist groups used significantly more tactics per event (mean=4.3 vs 3.1; $t=8.47$, $p < 0.001$), attracted larger mobilisations (mean=387 vs 198 participants; $t=6.23$, $p < 0.001$), but sustained shorter durations (median=3 vs 21 days; $U=34,782$, $p < 0.001$). Feminist activists framed femicide as evidence of systemic patriarchy (Participant F11); victims' families emphasised case resolution while recognising systemic dimensions (Participant V09).

The increase in joint feminist-victims' events from 12.7% to 31.4% reflects organisational learning: 'We learned that individual cases reveal systemic issues, and systemic analysis strengthens demands for justice. We need each other' (Participant F12). Successful accountability movements require both quick case resolutions and enduring structural change—managed through coalition-building rather than resolution of underlying tensions.

Significant differences in the number of tactics, scale of mobilisation, and duration of action between the feminist group and the victims' families indicate complementary strategic orientations. Feminist groups, with a higher average number of tactics (mean=4.3) and greater mobilisation (mean=387 participants), tend to prioritise a high-intensity mobilisation approach focused on public visibility and short-term political pressure. Conversely, victims' families, who employed fewer tactics (mean=3.1) but maintained a longer duration of action (median=21 days), reflect a sustained advocacy approach focused on case support and the attainment of concrete justice. Analytically, these differences do not indicate a weakness on either side, but rather a division of strategic functions within the movement that strengthens overall resilience and effectiveness.

From a framing perspective, the differing emphases between the construction of femicide as a manifestation of systemic patriarchy by feminist groups and the victims' families' focus on resolving individual cases reveal a duality in the articulation of demands. Feminist groups operate at the structural level by constructing a macro-narrative regarding gender injustice, whilst victims' families operate at the micro-level by demanding concrete accountability for specific cases. However, the victims' families' recognition of the systemic dimension indicates a process of frame bridging, in which individual perspectives begin to integrate with structural analysis. This strengthens the movement's legitimacy by connecting personal experiences with broader public issues.

The increase in collaboration between the two groups from 12.7% to 31.4% reflects a significant process of organisational learning, in which movement actors are beginning to realise that the effectiveness of advocacy depends on integrating short-term case resolution with long-term structural change. Participants' statements affirming "we need each other" indicate a collective awareness that the movement's success does not lie in eliminating strategic differences, but rather in managing and synergising them through coalitions. Thus, it can be analytically concluded that the tension between confrontational and collaborative approaches, as well as between individual and structural focuses, is not a major obstacle, but rather a source of dynamism which, if managed well, can enhance the movement's capacity to achieve substantive and sustainable accountability.

Conclusion

This study examined Mexico's collective resistance from 2014 to 2024, analysing 847 events, 32 interviews, and 385 documents. Five mechanisms of challenging impunity were identified—demonstrating state failure, building alternative knowledge, leveraging international frameworks, disrupting normalcy, and amplifying visibility—collectively forming an 'insurgent accountability infrastructure.' Combined legal and direct tactics boosted response likelihood by 3.17 times, coalition formation by 2.21, and multi-institutional targeting by 2.84. Yet only 5.1% of events yielded implementation, confirming the paradox of 'punctuated accountability.'

Three theoretical contributions advance the literature: (1) extending social movement theory to extreme impunity contexts where the inside/outside institutional strategy distinction dissolves; (2) reconceptualising accountability as a civil society function when state mechanisms systematically fail; and (3) demonstrating how intersectional accountability coalitions transcend single-issue organising through shared structural critique. The concept of insurgent accountability offers a framework for understanding parallel accountability systems built under conditions of state failure.

Limitations include systematic underestimation of undocumented mobilisation, reliance on public response data, and cross-sectional constraints on causal inference. Future research should employ process-tracing and ethnographic methods in peripheral areas and comparative analysis across Latin American contexts. Despite profound violence and entrenched impunity, Mexican feminist and victims' movements demonstrate that organised collective action can

challenge state failure, sustain accountability demands, and contribute to incremental institutional change.

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Ethics Approval

This study received ethics approval prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent after being fully informed about research objectives, methods, possible risks, and their right to withdraw at any time. Trauma-informed practices were embedded throughout, including participant-controlled topic navigation, psychological support referrals, and emotional check-ins. Data security protocols included encrypted file storage, separate storage of identifying information, and password-protected servers. Audio recordings will be destroyed five years post-publication.

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