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MHPSS Guidelines for Working with the Families of the Missing in Lebanon

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List of Acronyms

MP	Missing person
FOM	Family of the missing
AL	Ambiguous Loss
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
CFKD	Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ACT	Act for the Disappeared
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
ADD	Ante-disappearance data



Preface

General introduction

On April 13, 1975 a war broke out in Lebanon for over fifteen years claiming more than a hundred thousand lives, leaving thousands injured, disabled and disappeared. The war came to an end with a national reconciliation agreement known as the Tae'f accord. Among the war's numerous victims are the missing and forcibly disappeared whose victimhood carries on to this day as the injustice is perpetuated by the absence of answers for the families. Mothers, fathers, siblings, wives, husbands and relatives are left in the dark about the fate of their loved ones.

Families suffer consciously, while communities suffer silently as the absence of answers over these crimes of enforced disappearances stand in the way of reconciliation and peace between the different communities. The International Committee of the Red Cross gives a comprehensive definition of a missing person:

“A missing person is a person whose whereabouts are unknown to his/her relatives and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, has been reported missing in accordance with the national legislation in connection with an international or non-international armed conflict, a situation of internal violence or disturbances, natural catastrophes or any other situation that may require the intervention of a competent State authority”

Since the end of the war, the file has gathered many advocates, both international and local. First and foremost, the “Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared” (CFKD) created in 1982 by the family members themselves, which has the longest standing history in the efforts for answers. ACT for the Disappeared (ACT) was founded in 2010 as a Lebanese human rights association seeking to support the families of the missing and disappeared in their demand to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones and to enhance peacebuilding and reconciliation by bringing recognition to the victims, enabling collective healing and restoring social cohesion.

In November 2018, after nearly three decades of struggle and demands from the families of the missing, and with the support of these actors, the Lebanese Parliament passed the Law for the Missing and Disappeared that provides for the creation of a national commission to investigate the fate and whereabouts of the missing. The Commission was established in June 2020 and will be in charge of clarifying what happened to the missing, locating and exhuming burial sites, identifying human remains and giving them back to their families as well as providing reparations to the families. The Commission will implement a truth-seeking process for the search for the missing, including the exhumation of gravesites.

The families of the missing continue to endure severe psychological harm caused by prolonged uncertainty regarding the fate of their loved ones, as well as economic, legal and administrative difficulties

due to the disappearance. For decades their needs were not addressed, as they invested all their efforts to search for the missing, not receiving any information from successive governments.

Purpose and scope

Today, as different stakeholders partake in the truth-seeking process, there is a risk of re-traumatization, for the families, especially when burial sites will be exhumed, which is why it is crucial for all actors involved in the search process to adopt a cross-cutting, trauma-informed Mental Health and Psychosocial (MHPSS) approach to avoid causing further harm to the families. This document contextualizes the plight of the families of the missing in Lebanon starting historically, then experientially and psychosocially to finally deliver guidelines on approaches in dealing with the families on a micro level as part of larger communities.

The aim here is to support the Commission and other stakeholders and accompany their work in any truth-seeking effort which can have a disruptive impact. It is vital to ensure that every action that is undertaken is designed and developed by taking into consideration their potential impact at the individual, familial and communal levels to ensure that these actions are reparatory in nature for the victims.

To summarize, this handbook aims to:

Give a brief overview of the history of the Lebanese war and the plight of the families of the missing through the Lebanese war and the steps that led to Law 105 to contextualize the second part of the handbook.

Provide guidelines and recommendations from a trauma informed viewpoint to specific moments through the truth-seeking process.

Why a trauma-informed approach?

A trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive approach is the core of this handbook. It will be developed and expanded on throughout the document because it is very contextual to specific experiences. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), trauma is defined as when an individual person is exposed “to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”² According to “*The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)*”, an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)”, which provides a comprehensive definition of trauma, it is “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

“The definition of psychological trauma is not limited to diagnostic criteria, however. In fact, some clinicians have moved away from considering trauma-related symptoms as indicators of a mental disorder

- (1) Re-traumatization is the reliving of the original trauma due to literal or symbolic triggers, causing the reliving of difficult emotions experienced at the time of the initial event or circumstances

- (2) American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 309.81 (F43.10).

and instead view them as part of the normal human survival instinct” or as “adaptive mental processes involved in the assimilation and integration of new information with intense survival emphasis which exposure to the trauma has provided”³. These normal adaptive processes only become pathological if they are inhibited in some way, or if they are left unacknowledged and therefore untreated⁴.

Trauma has been characterized more broadly by others. For example, Horowitz (1989) defined it as “a sudden and forceful event that overwhelms a person’s ability to respond to it, recognizing that a trauma need not involve actual physical harm to oneself; an event can be traumatic if it contradicts one’s worldview and overpowers one’s ability to cope.”^{5, 6}

The families of the missing of the Lebanese war have endured a cumulative exposure to life-threatening incidents accompanying the disappearance (such as war, genocide, torture, terrorism, forced migration, mass incarceration, police violence, poverty, and systematic oppression or discrimination), which categorizes their trauma as complex and sequential with events perpetuating the initial traumatic event. In parallel to the continuous effects of disappearance, the relatives bore the events of war and sometimes life-threatening experiences in the search for the missing.

Complex trauma or complex psychological trauma is defined as “resulting from exposure to severe stressors that are repetitive or prolonged ...” . It can occur when an individual has been exposed over a period of time to persistent abuse, neglect, violence or abandonment. The individual may have experienced multiple traumas.

The trauma is also transmissible, can spread over several generations and can impact whole social systems.

Historical trauma is the sum of complex traumatic experiences that, over many generations, impacts a community or social subgroup.

The variety of traumatic experiences is the main driving factor towards a trauma-informed approach rather than a trauma-specific approach. Had the disappearance taken place outside the context of the war, then a disappearance specific approach would encompass the situation but in the case of the missing of the Lebanese war, it doesn’t.

Subsequently, what is a trauma informed approach?

It is an “*approach that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment*”(Hopper, Bassuk, and Olivet, 2010, p.82)

- (3) Turnbull GJ. A review of post-traumatic stress disorder; part I: Historical development and classification. *Injury*. 1998;29:87–91.

- (4) Scott JC. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press; 1990.

- (5) Horowitz MJ. American Psychiatric Association Task Force on Treatments of Psychiatric Disorders, editor. *Treatments of psychiatric disorders: A task force report of the American Psychiatric Association*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association; 1989. *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*; pp. 2065–2082.

- (6) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Section 1, A Review of Literature.

To uphold the integrity of this specific approach, the following core trauma-informed principles are vital:

- Safety – The conditions of interaction with the families ensuring their emotional and physical safety
- Trust – The stakeholders accountable to their actions with the families, the families feel reliability in the stakeholders' actions
- Choice – The families are provided with choices during specific moments, they are given this feeling of control
- Collaboration – The families are being engaged in the activities leading to the truth-seeking process
- Empowerment – The families and their choices and opinions are validated and affirmed even when they are not applied
- Respect for Diversity – The diverse origins of the families are respected

Learning objectives

To achieve the reparatory approach, the document aims to:

- Educate stakeholders from multifaceted backgrounds on basic mental health and psychosocial definitions which are key to understanding the experience of disappearance on the individual, family and community levels.
- Describe the common experiences of the family members from the historical, psychosocial, legal/administrative, health and financial facets.
- Help stakeholders understand the risks faced in unraveling the truth and the opportunities for trauma processing and perhaps even reconciliation within communities.
- Help stakeholders devise a strategy to every step of the truth-seeking process considering a trauma-informed approach.
- Support stakeholders in helping them understand the impact of these efforts on their own psyche or mental state.

Chapter 1: Brief history of the Lebanese war, the missing and the complexity in terms of the truth-seeking process

The history of the Lebanese war is one that teeters from one side to another depending on its narrator. Often it is the victor who writes the historical events, as they are in power, but in the case of the Lebanese war, there are different versions of the events since there was no clear ending to it, but rather an accord which brought the clashes to an end. The common agreement is that devastating losses were endured by all sides of the conflicts.

“Societies do not have the luxury of not dealing with their past. If not dealt with proactively, the past will always haunt post-conflict societies”

Paul van Zyl, 2006,

The armed clashes stopped in 1990 but today, more than 30 years later, the war goes on in different ways, having left behind many victims with no justice and an ambiguity over the reality of the events that took place and the numerous versions of each event.

A brief historical overview of the Lebanese war

Lebanon is a country whose people come from different cultural and religious confessions where one of the main reasons of internal conflict is fear of becoming a minority.

Prior to the start of the Lebanese war, tensions increased over the threat of existence. Rival camps began the race for arms with support from regional forces, which soon led to the start of the war. On **April 13, 1975**; Pierre Gemayel, the Christian Militia's leader, was the target of a failed assassination attempt by gunmen as he left church. Later that day, Militia gunmen ambushed a bus with mostly Palestinian civilians, killing 27 of them, leading to clashes between Palestinian-Muslim and Militia forces putting the Lebanese war into gear. The rival powers fought to gain control over areas they each perceived as rightfully theirs.

What started out as a civil war soon after had forces from neighboring countries take part supporting internal forces. Several coalition forces entered the country as well with the objective of putting an end to conflicts but would eventually reach only temporary solutions. As the situation deteriorated, all deals brokered and war deterrent forces failed at forcing peace, institutions of the government became increasingly fragmented. The number of militias engaged in war had grown exponentially and intra-sectarian conflicts sprung in areas of control of each major sect; the fighting no longer had clear objectives.

- (7) Paul van Zyl, Director of ICTJ, Daily star, December 5, 2006

On **September 22, 1989**, the Arab League brokered a cease-fire, and Lebanese and Arab leaders met in Saudi Arabia. The Tae'f accord which is named after the area where it was signed, laid the groundwork that ended the clashes, by redistributing governing power between the different sects.

Then on **August 26, 1991**, the Lebanese government adopted a general amnesty law forgiving all war crimes committed, therefore leaving little space for accountability or transitional justice for the victims and survivors of the crimes including those subjected to enforced disappearance. Even though the crime of enforced disappearances is a continuous crime giving way for legal recourse for the relatives of the missing, the Amnesty law along with the fear of reprisals, plays as a strong deterrent for families to bring legal action against perpetrators⁸.

The case of the missing in the Lebanese war

“There can be no justice without truth and no justice without reconciliation”

Ghassan Moukheiber, 2006⁹,

During the 15 years of armed conflicts, thousands went missing leaving behind tens of thousands of loved ones yearning for answers, unable to move on from the painful history they had endured. The ambiguity over the fate of the disappeared is the result of numerous factors. To name some:

The ambiguity over the motive of the kidnapping: kidnapping and enforced disappearances could have been sectarian, political or personally motivated.. When it was the result of a militia action, it could be the result of a deliberate action or an action by rogue fighters.

The unknown location of the disappearance: People went missing at checkpoints with identity checks, off the streets, from their home or during invasions of areas of control belonging to the opposing militia. During the war, arbitrary detentions, extra-judicial executions and disappearances were common practice.

The diversity of perpetrators: perpetrators were from numerous backgrounds. Some believe their missing were killed on the spot or soon after their abduction but were hidden (often in mass burials) to traumatize their enemies; as a form of torture. Other relatives believe their missing relatives ended up in Syrian or Israeli prisons. The victims were from many backgrounds, Lebanese and Palestinians, as well as from various Arab nationalities, Europeans and Americans.

The ambiguity caused by rumors: Rumors over the fate of missing people thrived at the time of the war and were fueled by political groups/militias to add to the fire of sectarianism and in the hearts of young fighters at the frontlines.

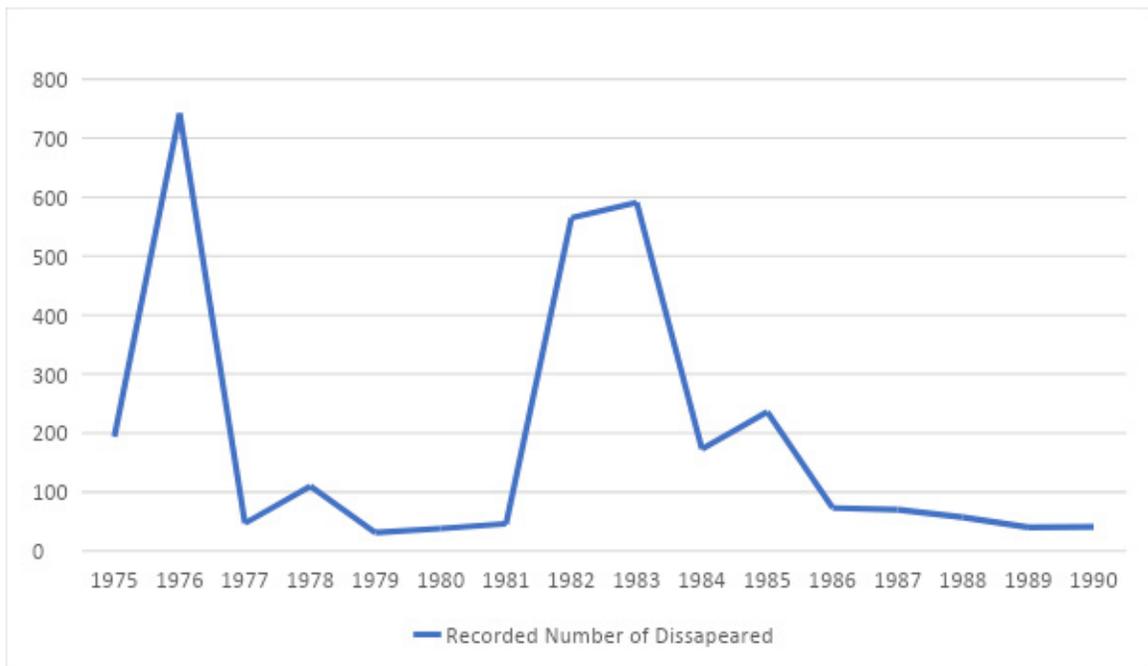
In the absence of accountability, the major powers which etched injustice in the events of warfare, would later become the governing parties of the “post-war” country.

- (8) Amnesty cannot apply to perpetrators of ongoing crimes, and the crime of disappearances is an ongoing one as long as the fate of the disappeared has not been disclosed», see Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, Lebanon Enforced Disappearances and Incommunicado Detentions, February 21, 2008, P.36, http://www.rightsobserver.org/files/CLDH_Enforced_Disappearance_EN_2008.pdf

- (9) Ghassan Moukheiber, Lebanese member of parliament, Washington post, Jan 2nd, 2006

THE MISSING IN NUMBERS.

OUT OF 1,562 RESEARCHED CASES



Major events leading to disappearances

Enforced disappearances happened throughout the civil war, beginning with the first few years of the war, where sectarian-based violence and Lebanese-Palestinian violence fueled these trends of abductions and enforced disappearances.

The numbers of missing persons recorded here are an approximation based on data from various sources¹⁰. More importantly than the specificity of the numbers are the trends, where it is noticeable that large numbers of individuals went missing.

Some of the major events linked to these three observable peaks in the chart above are:

1. Sabet El Aswad – Black Saturday 1975

Four Christian men are killed and in retaliation Christian militias invade the Beirut port area and massacre Lebanese Muslims and Palestinians.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: around 300-400.

2. Khamis el Aswad – Black Thursday 1975

Beginning of a wave of widespread sectarian killing and executions and abductions, in retaliation to the killing of a Palestinian man in downtown. Both sides setup roadblocks and commit massacres.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: around 50.

3. Karantina Massacre 1976

Christian militias rampage the karantina slums exterminating all Muslim presence.

Estimated deaths and disappearances: around 1500.

4. Damour Massacre 1976

In retaliation to the Karantina massacre, Palestinian militias invade the town of Damour and surrounding towns annihilating all Christians.

Estimated deaths and disappearances between 500 and 600.

5. Tal El Zaatar and Jisr El Basha 1976

Following a siege of the Tal El Zaatar and Jisr El Basha Palestinian refugee camp, Christian Militias take over. During the siege and the onslaught that followed, thousands of Palestinians were killed or executed during their exodus before reaching west Beirut and were abducted.

Estimated deaths and disappearances between 1500 and 5000.

6. Sabra and Chatila 1982

Following the assassination of the president elect Bachir Gemayel, Christian militias with the help of Israeli army put Sabra and Shatila camps under siege for three day and then massacring its Palestinian inhabitants.

Estimated deaths and disappearances around 3500.

- (10) [Act for the disappeared database](#)

- [International Committee of the Red Cross database](#)

7. Hareb El Jabal – War of the Mountains 1983

Following the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from central Lebanon to the border, the war between Christians and Druze militias intensified, killing a few thousands and enforcing the disappearance of an estimated 2700 civilians

Estimated deaths and disappearances between 3000 and 4000.

8. Christian civilians executed in Jiyeh, Alman, and in at least 13 other villages 1985

Undetermined number of civilians enforcedly hidden in an invasion of mostly Christian coastal villages south of Beirut

9. War of the camps – 1985

Clashes between Lebanese Shiite militias and Palestinian Liberation Organizations started in 1984 and peaked 1985. An estimated 3800 were killed and abducted.

The events which lead to disappearances linked to the Lebanese war span a few years before its beginning and after its end. However, the events mentioned here are the major internal ones. This general overview frames the situations which were breeding grounds for the injustice brought on by enforced disappearance. The people of Lebanon were highly reactive, tribal, and grudgeful from prewar injustice and prejudice in the form of sectarianism. The presence of foreign armed organizations and the interest of the neighboring countries aggravated these mentioned crises.

Efforts to uncover the truth and steps taken by the authorities

Years after the end of the war many families are still actively searching for answers.

The major actor representing a large number of families of the missing is “*The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared*”(CFKD). A radio call made by Wadad Halawani, the wife of the missing *Adnan Halawani*, to other relatives of the missing to gather was a first step leading to the creation of the committee on **October 25th, 1982**.

Since then, the Committee has been lobbying for the truth, through open sit-ins in Beirut, and weekly ones in the Council of ministers. They have met with and sent letters to many Presidents, Prime ministers, Ministers of Justice etc... and organized press conferences at every relevant political authority quarters. The modes of action of the Committee expanded and became more elaborate over the years, until it adopted a legal modus operandi in 2009 and lobbied for the draft law of the missing. This draft law was developed over the years and came into fruition in 2018. The main objective of Law 105 is the creation of an independent and non-discriminatory National Commission with a humanitarian mandate to clarify the fate and whereabouts of people who went missing in Lebanon.

Prior to the Law 105, several fruitless attempts were made by the authorities to either clarify the fate or permanently shut the file, as follows:

Special committees were created in 1984, 1985 and 1987 to investigate the disappearances. The committees didn't produce any tangible results except for a report of 764 detainees.

A police report made public in 1991 declared the number of disappeared at 17,415. This number was and is highly debated as the list held by the authorities later showed to have duplications and missing

persons whose fate was later found etc.

A law adopted in May 1995 detailing procedures that can be taken by the families to declare their missing dead.

In the year 2000, following pressure from CFKD, the government established the “*Official Commission of Investigation into the Fate of the Abducted and Disappeared Persons*”. 2046 families filled out applications, and within 6 months the committee made a public statement that all the missing persons had passed away and that their families should declare them as such. The committee confirmed the existence of mass graves and made mention of a few. A list of the disappeared was sent to Syria and Israel through the ICRC, both of which denied having any information about them.

In 2001, another commission was established and received requests for 700 missing persons, but no official statement was made.

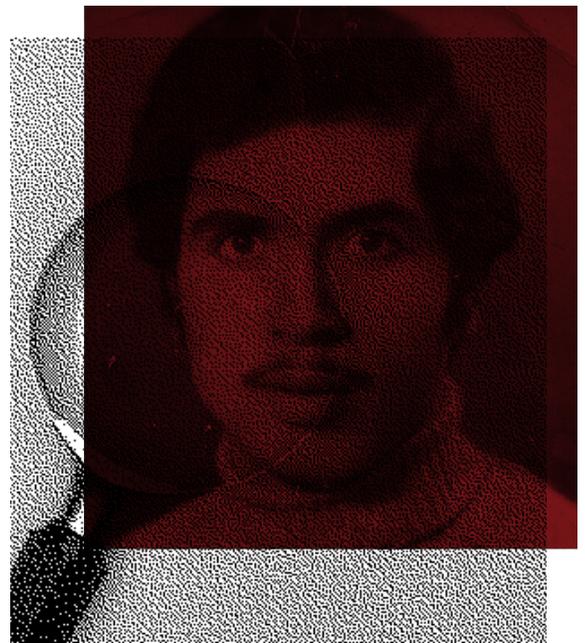
In 2005, a joint Lebanese Syrian committee was established to investigate the fate of around 600 missing who were supposedly imprisoned in Syrian prisons and report back to the council of ministers, but no public statements were made.

That was the last commission tasked by the Lebanese authorities with uncovering the fate of the missing until the recent law was passed.

In 2018, Law 105 was passed by the parliament and legally validates the right to know the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons, as well as the right to compensation and to non-discrimination.

The main aim of Law 105 is to establish an independent National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared with clear objectives aiming to provide the families of missing persons with answers through operational guidelines to uncover the fate of the disappeared. The law also emphasizes the need for preventive measures of future missing persons, and the identification and protection of the deceased according to international standards.

As time passes, the older generations closest to the missing persons have become or are becoming elderly and the burden of memory they hold of their loved ones becomes heavier calling for imminent action. The file is now more solid with collected data, consolidated lists, biological reference data, samples and the support of many actors each specialized in their own field ready to support the recently established commission.

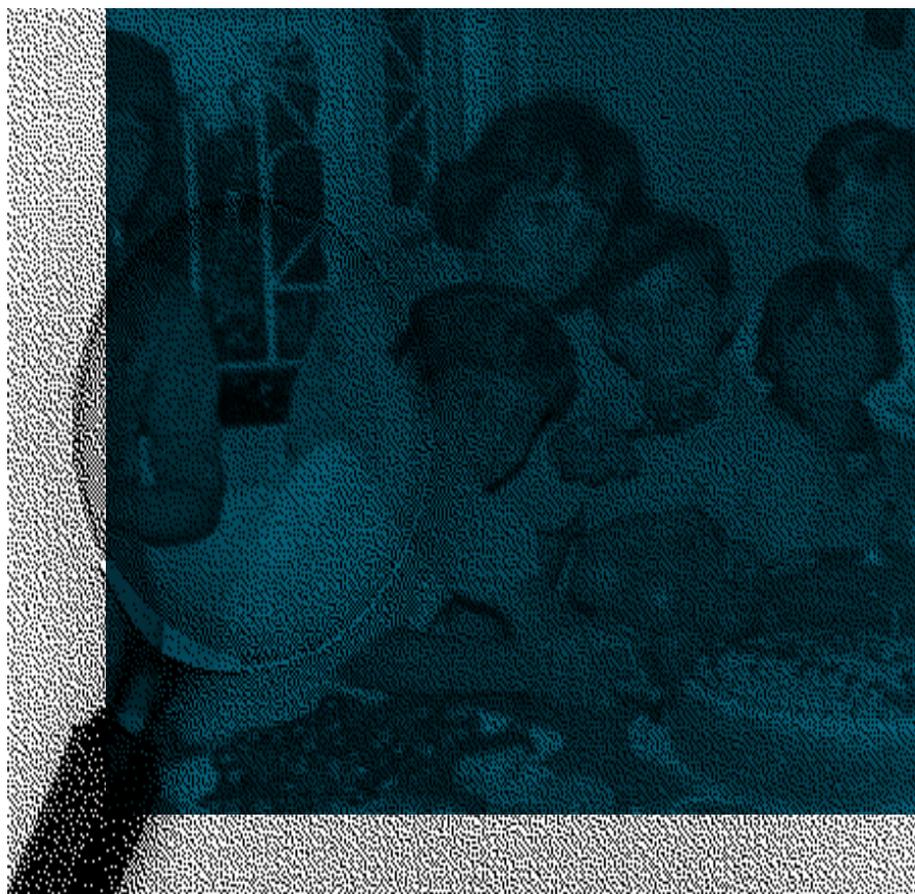


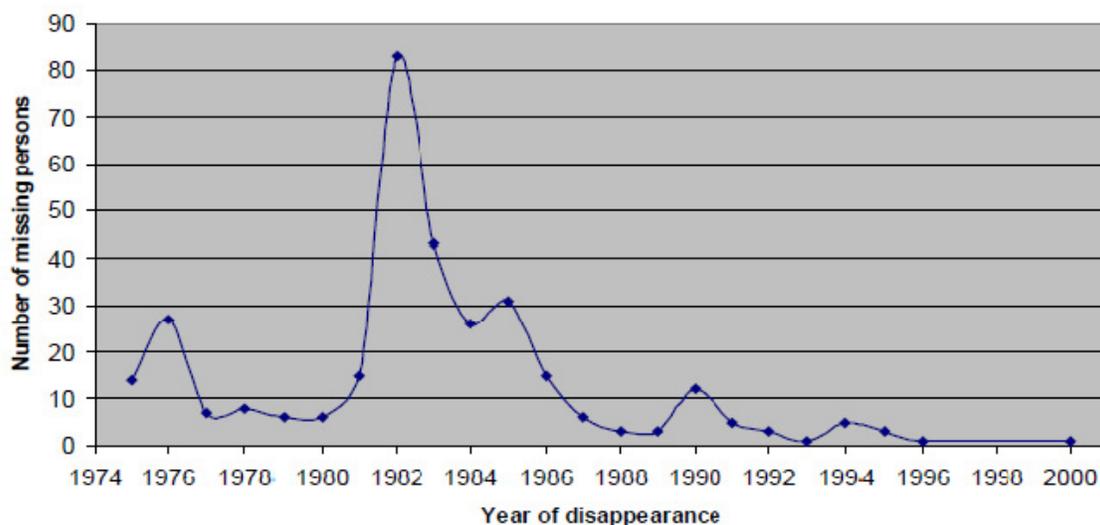
- (11) An individual’s DNA is inherited directly from their parents. Each has their own unique DNA composition except for monozygotic or identical twins.

Chapter 2: Scope of needs of the families of the missing

In this chapter, the findings and recommendations of two hands-on needs assessments are presented. The first family needs assessment came as a first step taken by the ICRC to identify the needs of the families more than 20 years after the end of the Lebanese war. The ICRC aimed to lay the grounds for a missing file in Lebanon with the authorities and other stakeholders. The second assessment was done by ACT for the disappeared in 2021 after the passing of the Law 105 and the appointing of the national commission to have tangible recommendations for reparative actions. The excerpts are taken out of the original documents as they were written.

ICRC Family needs assessment findings - 2013





The present report reflects the needs of the families of missing people in Lebanon, as assessed by the ICRC between August 2011 and June 2012. It presents the main findings in order to give insight into the families’ needs. It also sets out recommendations on how to meet those needs. The findings of the assessment were already shared with the Lebanese authorities, followed by a series of recommendations specifically addressed to them.

The ICRC supplemented its own information on missing people with information from other organizations working on the issue and names received from the authorities. This combined list ultimately contained over 3,500 names and formed the basis for the selection of a representative sample of families interviewed by the ICRC for the family-needs assessment. As far as possible, the sample reflects geographical proportionality. It contains only cases of missing people for which the contact details of a family member were available.

The information from the families was collected on questionnaires that had been adapted to the Lebanese context and translated into Arabic. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and open-ended questions on the disappearance, the difficulties faced by the family as a result of the disappearance (including psychological, social, economic, administrative and legal problems), the search already carried out, and any action taken by the authorities in response to the family’s situation.

Interviews with 324 families were conducted between September 2011 and January 2012 by specially trained ICRC staff. In addition, three group discussions were held, focusing on the families’ needs in their social environment and on what they expected from the authorities.

Before conducting the interviews, the families were informed about the general purpose of the information collection and the ways the information would be used.

Stress was laid on the confidentiality of the individual data. Each participant received a leaflet explaining these points and written individual consent was requested from all interviewees. Participation was voluntary.

Despite the diversity of the people interviewed in terms of social background, geographical location,

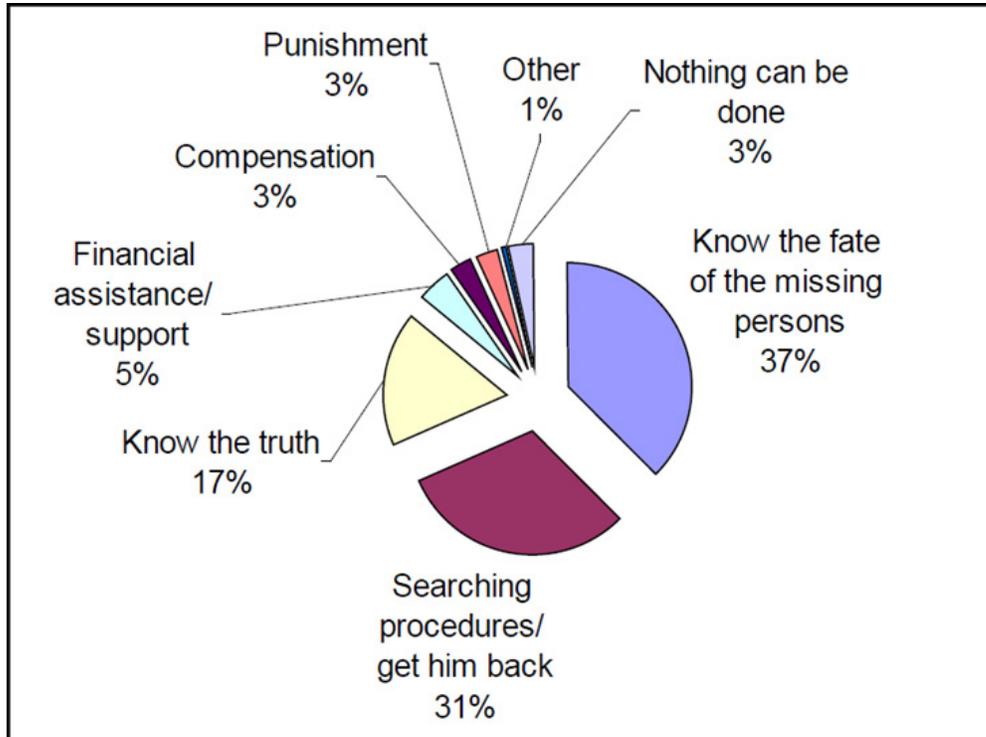
age, gender, etc., and given that the disappearances occurred over a long period of time (1975-2000) in markedly varying circumstances, the interviewees' replies regarding their needs were extraordinarily consistent.

The main problem facing the individual family members was the emotional distress created by the absence of their loved one and the psychological difficulty of coping with uncertainty about his fate. This is particularly remarkable given the average time elapsed since the disappearance. The peaks were, as mentioned above, in the 1970s and 1980s, i.e. more than 25 to 35 years ago. Yet these families were still suffering emotionally and psychologically and having difficulties within their social environment. The aforementioned demonstrates that it is impossible for the families to find relief without answers about the fate of their loved ones.

However, all initiatives to search for the missing have so far been futile and remain unpromising in the near future. Thus, "doing something to find him and get him back" and "hearing the truth" were the major needs expressed by families and were always mentioned before any other request, especially before requests for financial or material support.

Main Findings

Figure 3: Action preferred by the families



Need to know

We need to know, we can't just stay lost and uncertain. If someone told me anything, I wouldn't believe it and I will remain lost until I see the body.

(Sister of a missing person)

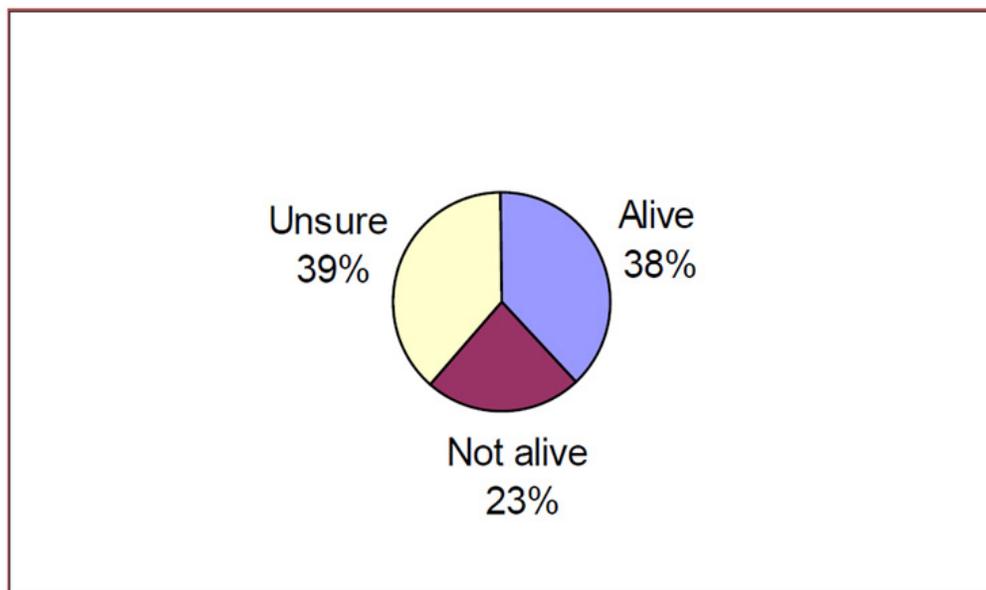
I want to know the facts, to find the truth. What happened, happened. But they should check whether he is still alive somewhere. If he is, they should help us. If there are any prisoners left alive, bring them back to us.

We've heard from people we trust that there have been people who were released from Syria after 15 years of detention.

(Brother of a missing person)

While the families of the dead can mourn their loss and move forward by rebuilding their lives, the families of the missing often see no end to their suffering. Families without news are often reluctant to accept or even consider the possibility that their loved ones are dead. As a result, they live in a wavering state of intermittent hope and despair. Obviously, this condition seriously affects their own lives.

Most interviewees believed that their missing relative was still alive or were at least unsure about what had happened to them (77%, see pie chart below). Though they realized that the probability of them being dead was high, this second group refused to give up hope of seeing them alive again. Only 23% of the interviewees thought it probable that the missing relative was dead, this often because they had received credible but unconfirmed information from others (former detainees, hired professionals...). What the families thought happened to their missing relative



Almost all the families interviewed (97%) had actively searched for their missing relative at some point – the few who said that they had not searched (only 10 of the 324 families) had not been able to do so because of the security situation or because they did not know how to go about it. Searching meant spending considerable amounts of money and time travelling from one place to another – including Syria. Unfortunately, some family members put their faith in strangers who claimed to have information on their missing relative but were, in fact, trying to make money from unconfirmed information. The families exhausted all avenues of research, approaching the police, the army and judicial authorities as well as political parties and religious figures. Some families had been searching for decades, and roughly half (45% of those interviewed) confirmed that they were still searching today. Others had given up at some point after losing hope of finding their loved one by themselves, or because they had other – mostly health-related – problems that prevented them from searching.

When appropriate, the interviewees were asked what they would require if it turned out that their missing relative was indeed dead. Sixty per cent replied that they would like to see the body. This would necessitate identification of gravesites, exhumation and identification. For three out of four families, it was important to find the gravesite or, if the relative was still alive, at least to learn where they were. Almost 70% said it was “very important” for them to receive the body of their loved one, both for religious and psychological reasons.

All these findings show that concrete and credible information on the fate and the whereabouts of the missing person is of utmost importance to the families.

Until they receive satisfactory information that allows them to come to terms with the disappearance, the families’ convictions regarding their missing relative should be respected.

Psychological and emotional needs

I became a mother and a father at the same time.

(Wife of a missing person)

I used to envy anyone who had a father. I always felt that I somehow wasn't complete because I didn't have a father.

(Son of a missing person)

The interviews showed that the families of missing people were deeply affected emotionally and psychologically. Their description of the difficulties they faced, their efforts to overcome them and their struggle to cope with the loss of their loved one were striking and poignant. Their suffering manifested itself in specific problems.

Between 60% and 85% said they often suffered from headaches, sleep problems, nervousness, excessive worry about small things, general fatigue and general unhappiness. They attributed their suffering directly to the uncertainty about their missing loved one. In particular, brothers and sisters of missing people often said that sadness had helped cause the death of parents, who never learned what had happened to a son or daughter.

While for the majority of interviewees (around 60%), the relationship within their family and with social circles had not been negatively affected, others expressed situations of long-lasting and unaddressed relational difficulties with family members and/or with neighbours, colleagues or others.

Various burdens were involved: having to search alone, dealing with the many practical consequences of the disappearance, the alternating hope and fear, and – as time passed – the disappointment and growing despair. The interviewees described feelings of mistrust towards others, of guilt, and of regret. Whether these families were shunned by other members of the community or whether they themselves simply lost interest in community life – or both – the result was the same.

Wives of missing men faced particular difficulties shouldering responsibility for their family alone. Their status was unclear: wife or widow? People often lacked understanding for their plight. They suffered social rejection, disrespect and sometimes even harassment from those around them. Many found their lives gradually reduced to the search for their missing husband and the struggle to meet their children's needs.

Slightly more than half of the interviewees mentioned religion and religious rituals as their greatest comfort. Most interviewees (67%) said they were able to share their personal difficulties not only with their families but also with the broader social circle. However, 80% said that issues relating to their missing relative were discussed only within the family circle.

The interviewees were reluctant to bring such a sensitive and potentially stigmatizing issue outside of the close-knit domestic realm. While many found that discussing their feelings within the family was enough to adequately deal with the emotional implications, others needed additional support. Even when they did not express an explicit desire for psychological or psychosocial support, the results showed a need for this in some cases.

Financial distress

Just when my father went missing, my mother suffered a stroke and went into a coma for 20 days. Her continuing ill-health meant that my sister had to work to support our family. Both my sister and brother left school because we weren't financially able to pay for further education. There was no-one to support us – we had lost the family's only breadwinner. My father's employer gave us his monthly pay for a whole year afterward, but then it stopped.
(Daughter of a missing person)

My husband owns land, but in order to be able to sell it or put it to use we need to pay the taxes and provide a death certificate. The house we are living in now is also my husband's property and we have the burden of paying taxes on it. If we don't, the government may decide to seize it, and then we will be without a roof. So far, we haven't been able to settle the inheritance issue because the procedures involved are expensive and include issuing of a death certificate, which I refuse to have done.

(Wife of a missing person)

Although the economic consequences of the disappearances were difficult to establish in the limited framework of this study, especially after so many years, 78% of the families interviewed said they had financial problems due to the disappearance.

The interviewees said the disappearance had had definite, major financial consequences mainly on two levels.

First, the family had often lost its breadwinner.

Half of the missing people whose families are included in this assessment were married at the time of their disappearance and left behind a wife and three to four children.

Second, 72% of the missing people concerned by this assessment were employed, had their own business, or earned their money as day laborer's. Only 10% of the missing people were unemployed, and 16% were students.

Of the 254 families who stated they had had financial problems, two thirds said those problems were due to the loss of the breadwinner, an absence that sometimes, for example, prevented the remaining parent from offering their children the best possible education. Some children would have to stop school and contribute to the family income instead. In the longer run, this generally meant a lower income for those children than what they would have had if they had received more education.

Furthermore, the disappearance of a potential breadwinner, especially a son who could help his parents when they grew old, negatively affects parents economically today.

At the same time, the search for the missing person incurred considerable costs for the families, money that could have been spent to meet other important needs. Half the families confirmed that they had spent sizable sums on search-related travel as well as on informants who promised details about the fate and whereabouts of the missing person or offered to sell them supposed personal belongings of the missing person.

Any money spent in this way was then unavailable for other expenses.

Another financial burden involved taxes on properties of the missing people, which continued to apply after the disappearance, before the families were able to transfer them to their name. Owing to the lengthiness of the procedures involved, people ultimately inherited huge, cumulated tax bills. Some people were obliged to sell possessions or take out a loan to pay those taxes. Many were still struggling to pay overdue taxes.

As mentioned above, family members suffer psychologically from the disappearance of their loved one, but they also frequently suffer physical illness. Many attributed this directly to trauma caused by the disappearance.

These health problems created an additional strain on the family budget and were the first issue mentioned when the families were asked how they manage to meet their basic needs such as housing, food and water, education and health care. Two thirds of the interviewees mentioned health care as the most pressing economic need (over half of the interviewees were receiving regular treatment). This posed difficulties even for families who had medical insurance. And the need for medical care will only increase in the future as the family members grow older.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES

In order to put an end to the families uncertainty and in keeping with Lebanon's obligations under international humanitarian and human right law, the ICRC urges the authorities to take steps to prevent the disappearance of people in the context of armed conflict or other violence, to clarify the fate and whereabouts of those who have disappeared during armed conflict since 1975, and to attend to the needs of the families concerned and provide them with the support they require.

The ICRC encourages the authorities to consider ratifying, and incorporating into the domestic legal system the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

Establish a mechanism to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons

The ICRC supports the efforts made by the Lebanese government to set up a mechanism to search for the missing people, to clarify their fate and whereabouts, and to inform their families. The ICRC recommends that any such mechanism should work in the best interest of the families of missing persons and that it should incorporate the following elements:

- The mechanism should have a clear mandate focused on the humanitarian objective of giving answers to all the families regarding the fate and whereabouts of their missing loved ones.
- That mandate should be non-discriminatory. The mechanism should ascertain the fate and whereabouts of all people reported missing in connection with armed conflict – international or non-international – or of other situations of violence.
To ensure that all families' need to know is met, the ICRC advocates the use of the broad term "missing people". While this term includes enforced disappearances, it also covers those "missing in action" (armed forces personnel and combatants from opposition groups whose families have no news of them), as well as anyone else who is reported to have disappeared in direct connection with armed conflict or a situation of violence.
- The mechanism should draw up a centralized and comprehensive list of all people missing as a result of armed conflict – international or non-international – or of other situations of violence. That list should be based on different sources such as government records, families and family associations, and non-governmental organizations.
- The information gathered by the mechanism should remain confidential and be used exclusively for the purpose for which it was obtained, i.e. to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing people. Personal data collected should be handled and processed in a manner consistent with internationally agreed principles on data protection and national legislation.
- The mechanism should be granted the necessary resources and powers. It should be able to coordinate, support and supervise the process of tracing missing people and informing the families accordingly.
- The mechanism should have the skills and resources needed to collect information on and search for burial sites, i.e. individual or mass graves.
- The mechanism should set up a comprehensive strategy for the search, recovery and identification

of human remains, according scientific best practices adapted to the context, including the relevant provisions for the return of identified remains to the families and proper burial of remains that stay unidentified or unclaimed.

- The mechanism should also engage in a dialogue with the authorities of the other countries concerned to bring about a search for people presumed to be in another country.
- The mechanism should ensure regular dialogue with the families and proactive communication about its objectives, work, procedures and results.
- Ideally, the mechanism would also have the mandate to support the families in meeting their different needs, as outlined in the following recommendations. The ICRC is currently supporting the collection and storage of “ante-disappearance data”, including a planned collection of biological reference samples. This should help preserve information that could ultimately lead to identification. For the ICRC, the handover of information to such a mechanism will be conditional upon the latter’s non-discriminatory and humanitarian mandate, as per the requirements set above, thus ensuring that it must act always in the best interests of the families. Take the measures needed to address administrative and legal concerns
- The authorities should establish a clear and recognized status for the missing people, which allows their families to address any issue arising from the absence of their loved one, i.e. access to social benefits, property rights, inheritance, marital status, health care, education, etc., without having to declare the missing person dead.¹³ An “absence certificate” documenting the status of the missing person should have the same legal force as a death certificate. It should be obtainable by families who desire it by means of a simple, free-of-charge procedure. (This simplicity should apply to any judicial approval required, investigations and notices published in newspapers.)
- The families should be able to obtain from the local authorities (mukhtars) all information and support needed for the absence certificate. The authorities should ensure that the local civilian authorities are well aware of those procedures and the advantages of an absence certificate compared with a death certificate, and instruct the families accordingly.
- The setting up should be considered of an official, centralized information and support service for the families. It would provide administrative and legal counselling to help the families solve administrative and legal problems arising from their loved one’s disappearance: managing property (inheritance), pensions, social security, marriage, etc.
- Once a functioning mechanism is in place, such an administrative and legal counselling service could be made part of it.

RECOMMENDATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The following recommendations need the understanding and the active support of the civil society and all stakeholders, in particular family associations, non-governmental and international organizations involved in programs to assist families of missing people, as well as donors who finance those programs.

Ensure psychological and psychosocial support

- The authorities and the civil society organizations should recognize the importance of facilitating access for family members to psychological and psychosocial care and ensure that the families are aware of these services, which could be provided by specialized state facilities and/or other entities.
- The authorities and all organizations involved should ensure that relatives who so wish have easy access to these services.
- The authorities, with the help of the civil society organizations, should develop a psychosocial support network to be operated by local government facilities, family associations, non-governmental or international organizations.
- The authorities, with the help of the civil society organizations, should ensure the availability of appropriate psychological support for family members in need. To be of real value, that support, which can consist of individual, family or other group therapy, should be based on a sound understanding of the families “uncertainty” about the fate of their missing relatives.

Ensure access to health care

- The authorities, with the help of the civil society organizations, should ensure at least that all families of missing people benefit from insurance that guarantees them free health care.

Acknowledging the families plight

- The ICRC calls upon the Lebanese authorities and the Lebanese society as a whole to recognize and acknowledge the long-lasting suffering of the families of missing people and the families’ right to assistance and information.
- The ICRC encourages civil society organizations to continue their efforts to support the families in public events and to keep calling for the families’ rights to be respected and requests to be heard.
- The ICRC urges all stakeholders to support the implementation of the above recommendations because, in addition to their practical value for the families, they all serve to acknowledge the decades of suffering and particular needs.

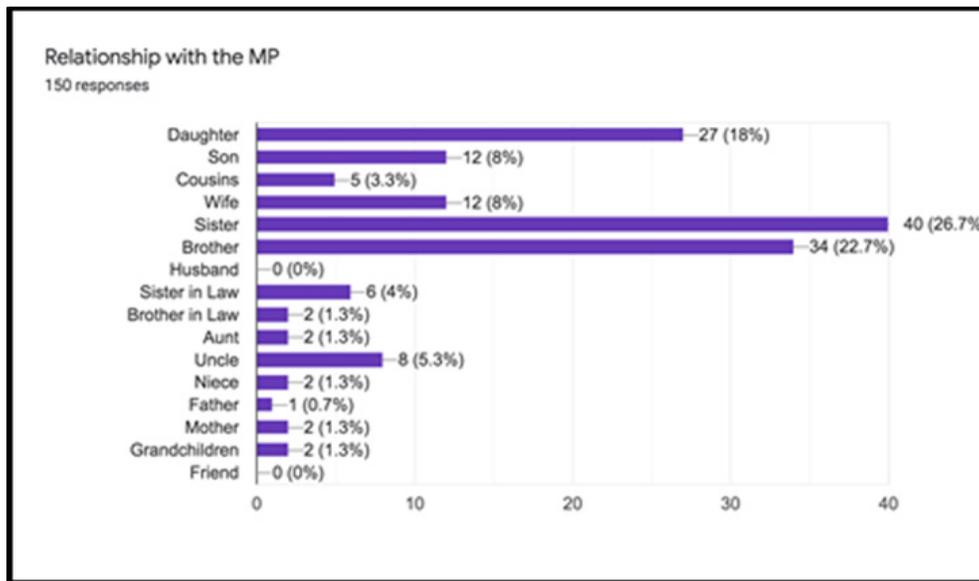
Act for the disappeared Family needs assessment findings and recommendations-2021

In 2021, Act for the Disappeared began a consultation aimed at understanding the different impacts of disappearance on family members and assessing their needs. The consultation also aimed to understand the needs and expectations of the families of the missing and disappeared from the newly appointed National Commission. Based on the results, recommendations for reparations will be developed.

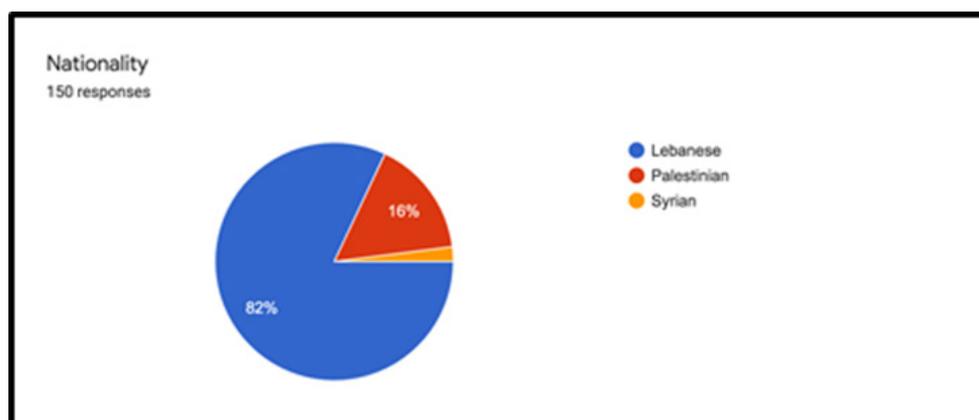
For the consultation ACT contracted four field officers to act as focal points for families in the different communities and districts in Lebanon. They conducted both online and in-person interviews with the family members of the missing and collected information about their needs and sociodemographic characteristics.

Facts and Figures

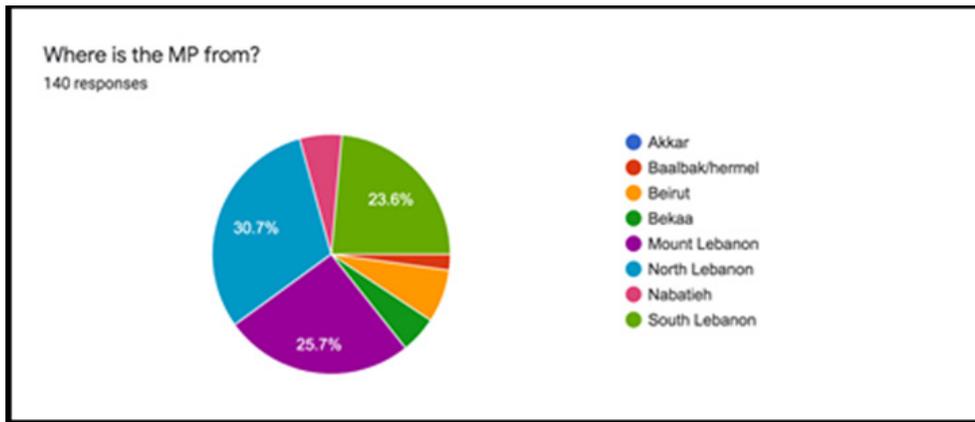
The consultation reached 150 family members with different sociodemographic characteristics. ACT interviewed participants that are related in different ways to missing persons. The majority of the people who participated in the consultation were siblings and daughters of the disappeared as portrayed in the figure below.



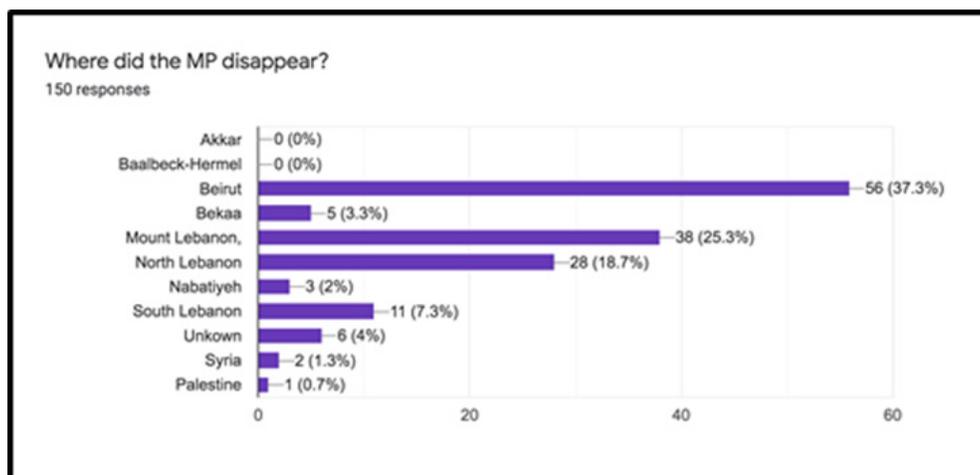
Most of the families were Lebanese (82%), and the remaining were Palestinian and Syrian.



The majority of the people who participated in the consultation process were from the North, South, and Mount Lebanon governorates.



Most of the disappeared were civilians (89%), and the rest were either soldiers in the Lebanese army or fighters within one of the many armed groups that were fighting at that time. Most of the abductions and cases of missing persons happened in the regions of Beirut (37.3%), Mount Lebanon (25.3%), and North Lebanon (18.7%).



Impact of the disappearance

The consultation revealed that the families' greatest struggles link back to social difficulties, both with family members (72.7%) and community members (36.6%), and financial difficulties (24.6%). The assessment also showed that some are still facing legal challenges (24.6%).

Impact on the parents:

The parents of the missing stated how the disappearance of their child had a significant impact on the parents' social and emotional roles and on the continuity of the family. Many reported that their parents and siblings suffered from physical pain, psychological anguish, and emotional burden due to the loss. They were also susceptible to economic disempowerment and social discrimination.

Impact on the children:

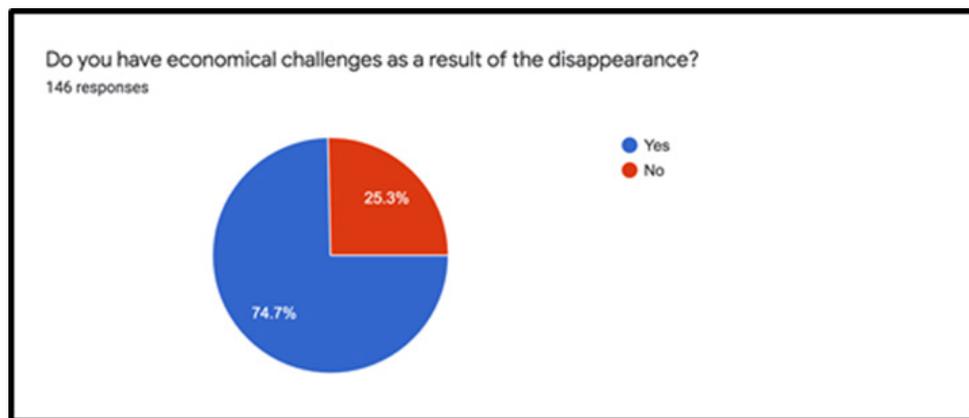
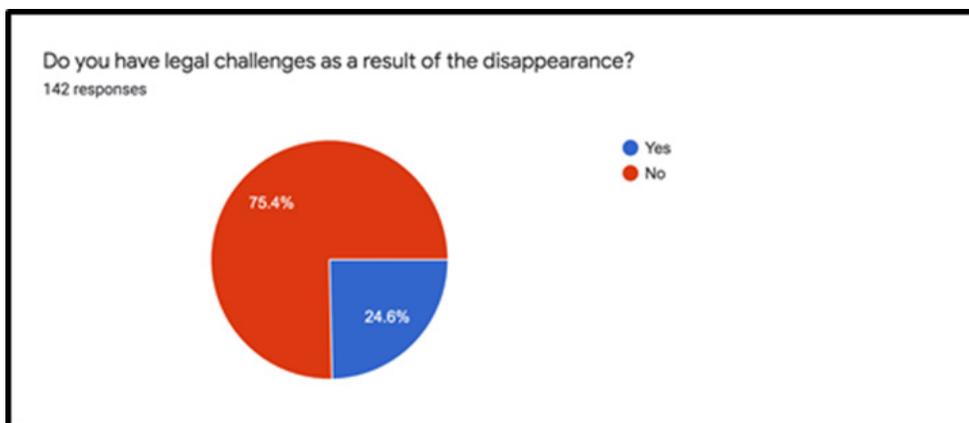
Some children of the missing had to leave school to work and provide an income for their families changing their role within the family. Others were sent to orphanages or lost all their savings in paying

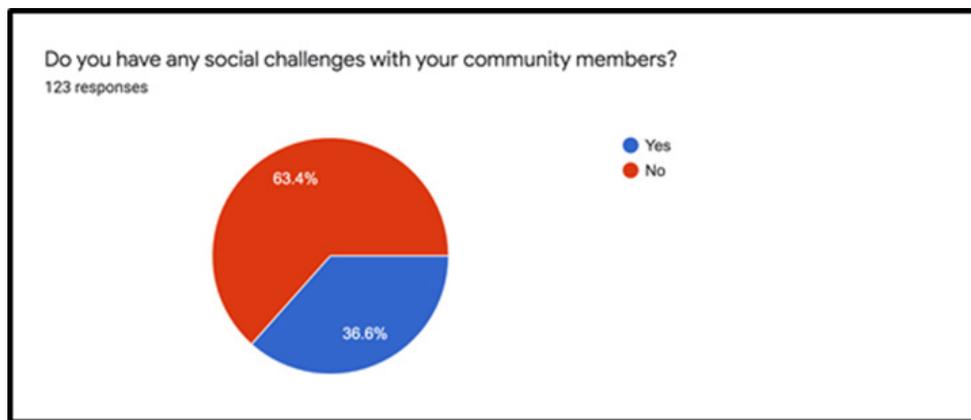
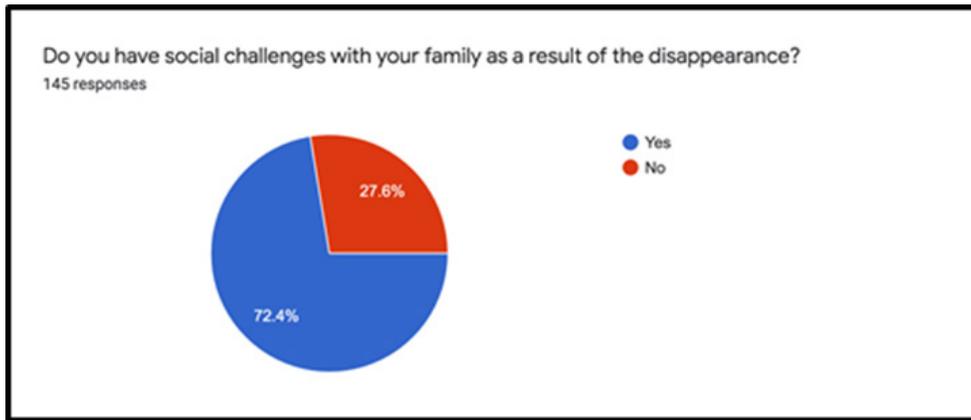
for people who promised to help them find the missing person. Family life became very difficult and full of sadness. The feeling of uncertainty was a major stress which led to physical and mental exhaustion. The wives of missing men struggled to take responsibility for their family alone. Their status was unclear and often suffered from social rejection, disrespect or harassment.

The majority often suffered from headaches, sleep disorders, nervousness, excessive worry about small things, general fatigue and general unhappiness. Many of them mentioned that the loss helped them become closer to family members in their families such as a sibling.

Legal challenges:

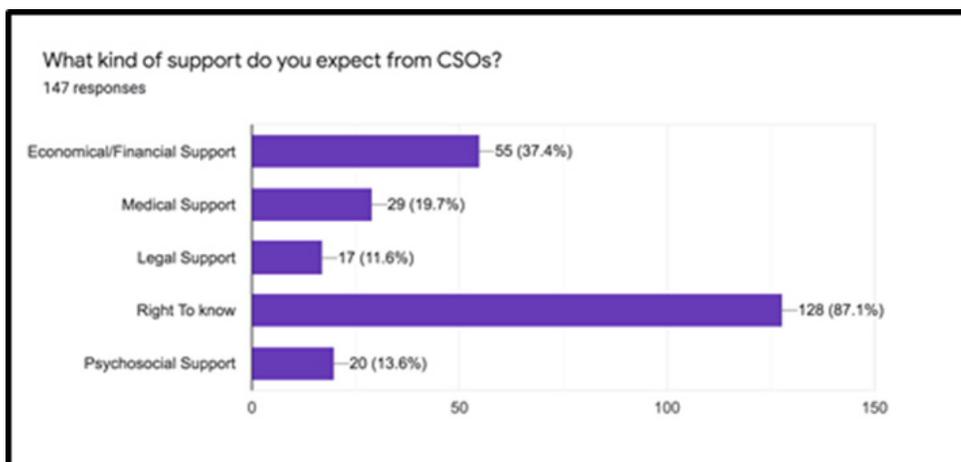
This consultation highlighted the legal challenges that contributed to creating more financial difficulties due to the absence of a legal status for the “missing”. This legal gap caused a wide array of problems related to property and inheritance rights, pension and social security rights, the right to enter a new union, parental rights, issuing death certificates etc. At least 10% of the families shared that in order to overcome these problems, the only option they were left with was to declare their missing loved one dead to get a death certificate. Most of them refused to do that and still face the legal challenges mentioned above.





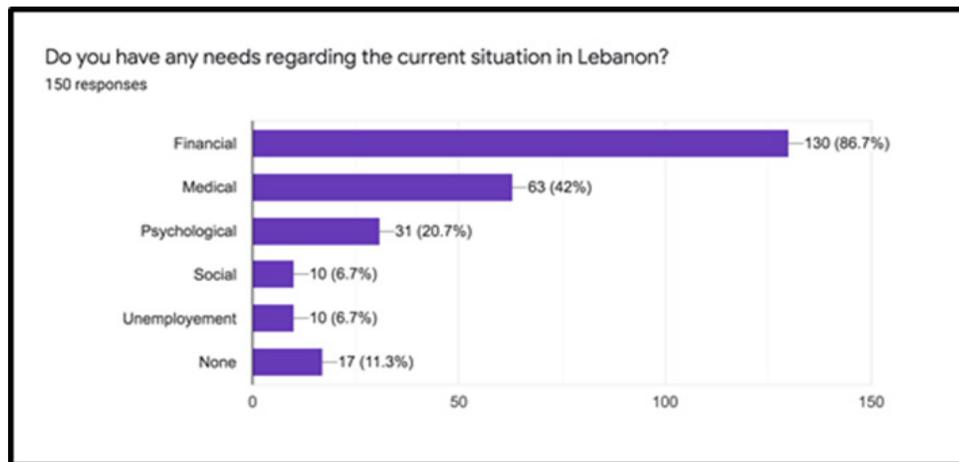
The Families' Needs and Expectations from CSOs and the National Commission

The consultation created an opportunity for the families to express their needs and expectations from the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the National Commission. It brought attention to the right to know since most of the family members still consider the right to know as a priority and need (87.1%). The rest had stopped the search after losing hope searching alone or because of health-related problems that prevented them from doing so.

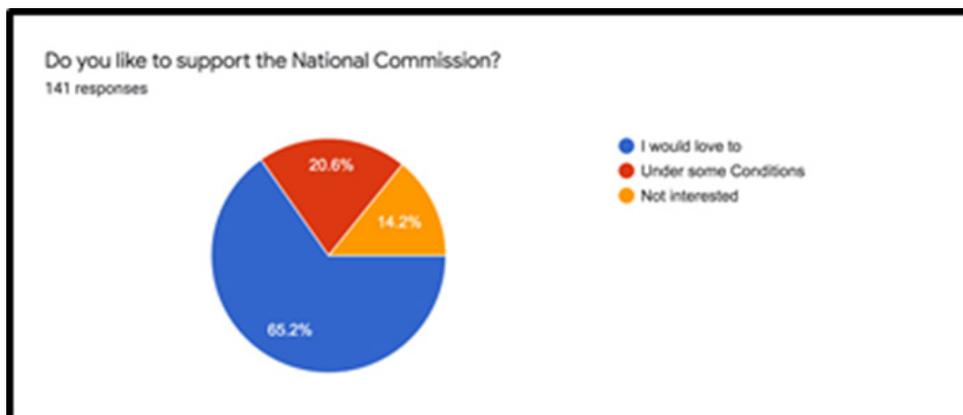


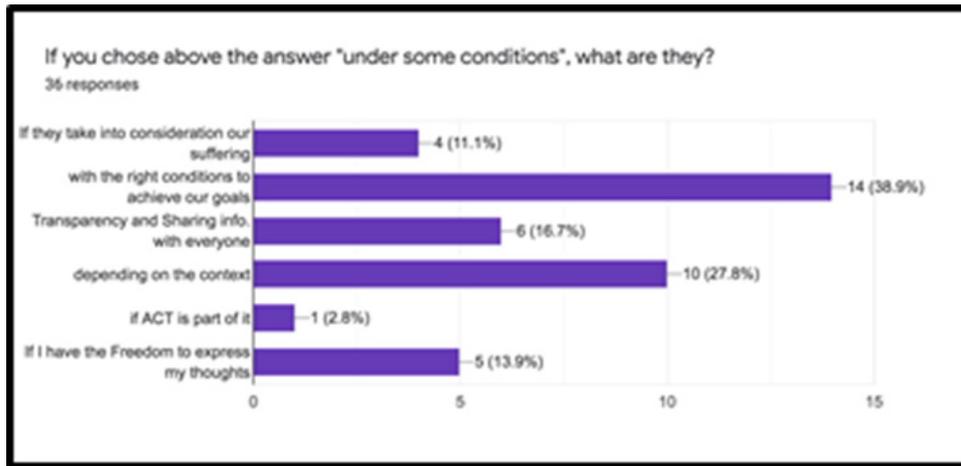
Further, 86.7% of participants expressed interest in receiving financial help especially with the current ongoing economic and political crises. Many of them lost their jobs or their salaries are otherwise not enough for them to afford their basic needs. Also, in the case of children of the missing, many were not able to continue their education as described above leaving them now more prone to job loss because of the economic collapse.

Many also asked for medical support (42%) as medication is currently expensive due to the lifting of subsidies and very hard to find due to hoarding and dollar shortage because of the Lebanese currency crisis. It is particularly difficult for those who suffer from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.



The needs assessment provided an opportunity for the families to express their views about the establishment of the National Commission. 92% of the families shared that the appointment of the Commissioners made them feel happy and hopeful. 65.2% of the families stated that they are ready to support the commission if certain conditions are taken into consideration such as transparency and the type of context (see graph below).





Recommendations

The families of the missing and forcibly disappeared have various needs that must be addressed by the State and civil society actors working to support them.

These needs include the need to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones, the need to receive economic, psychological and psychosocial support, the need for justice and reparation and the need to conduct commemorative rituals.

The actions that will be taken by the National Commission once it is operational should be based on a clear understanding of the demands and needs of the families and should be adapted to each context. The actions should adopt a cross-cutting psychosocial perspective. It means that every action undertaken should be designed and developed by taking into consideration their potential impact at the individual, familial, community and social levels in order to ensure that these actions are reparatory in nature for the victims (direct and families) and society.

This perspective should be adopted by the different stakeholders and professionals, institutional and civil society actors in each of the intervening fields (forensic specialists, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, doctors, criminologists etc.).

Right to know

Families of the missing and disappeared have the right to know what happened to their loved ones, to have them released if they are alive and to retrieve their body or remains if they are dead. It is a right enshrined in international law. The right to the truth is further defined by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances as the right to know the fate and the whereabouts of the disappeared persons, the circumstances of the disappearances, the cause of death and the identity of the perpetrator(s).

The search process itself can either have a reparatory effect or further exacerbate the harm suffered by the family members. It is therefore crucial to use an approach that minimizes the risk of negative impacts, and to adopt a context and trauma informed approach throughout all phases of the process. The search therefore requires special procedures, experience and knowledge that meet the needs of vulnerable persons. It should be organized efficiently and coordinated well in order to avoid requesting the same information numerous times and risk re-victimization of family members.

Upon completion of the necessary investigative procedures, the body or remains of a disappeared person should be handed over to the family members under decent conditions, in accordance with the cultural norms and customs of the victims.

Psychological and psychosocial needs

Families of the missing and disappeared are particularly vulnerable and they should be supported and protected during the different phases of the search process.

People responsible for the search should consider the risks of physical and mental health that families and their community may face throughout the search process, especially those stemming from the discovery, or failure of, the fate of their loved ones.

The search should therefore include psychological care and psychosocial support to prevent their re-traumatization and should follow clear protocols.

The design should take into consideration the different types of vulnerabilities and different discriminations suffered by the victims (family members and communities). It should incorporate a gender focus, which implies having a proper understanding on the differential impact that the disappearance has on women and men, as well as the differential impact as a consequence of the search processes.

This requires sensitivity to the issue and to the local contexts and an understanding of the impact of the disappearance and the search on the families.

Such an approach should be taken at all steps of the search, until the identification and handover of the disappeared person to his/her family.

Economic, legal and administrative needs

Families of missing persons endure severe economic and social problems.

Victims have a right to comprehensive reparation which includes the right to monetary compensation for damages caused, medical and psychological care and rehabilitation for any form of physical or mental damage, as well as legal support and social rehabilitation.

Financial compensation should be provided for any economically accessible damage, as appropriate and proportional to the gravity of the violation and the suffering of the victim and the family resulting from it (physical or mental harm, lost opportunities, material damages and loss of earnings, moral damage, costs required for legal assistance, medical services and psychological and social services).

But it is important to note that financial compensation is only one of many different types of material reparations that can be provided to victims. Other types include restoring civil and political rights, erasing unfair criminal convictions, physical rehabilitation, and granting access to land, health care, or education.

Appropriate steps should also be taken with regard to the legal status of the disappeared persons whose fate and consequently that of their relatives has(ve) not been clarified. The families of the missing should receive support in terms of social welfare, financial matters, family law and property rights, without having to declare their loved ones dead.

Reparation measures need to consider victims' specific cases, given that what may be an appropriate

measure in one case may be inappropriate or even counterproductive in another. Women and men, for example, experience the disappearance in significantly different ways.

The modalities of reparations should therefore be adequate and proportionate and both gender and culturally sensitive.

To be effective and able to address the consequences of the disappearance, the families should be part of the design and implementation of reparations measures.

Need for justice

Families of the missing may need those responsible for the disappearance of their loved ones to be held accountable. Knowing the facts, identifying, and prosecuting the people responsible for the disappearance is also a form of reparation for the families.

The right to justice for victims of disappearance and their relatives is recognized in the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It establishes that the State should take the necessary measures to ensure that enforced disappearance constitutes an offence under its criminal law and that the offence should be punishable by appropriate penalties.

The status of limitation is not applicable to the crime of enforced disappearance which constitutes a continuing offence and an ongoing violation of human rights as long as the fate and whereabouts of the victim remain unclear. Thus, the period of limitations can only begin once the disappearance has ceased, meaning when the fate or whereabouts of the victim have been established.

Need for acknowledgment, remembrance and rituals

One of the main struggles the families of the disappeared encounter is to have the disappearance of their loved ones officially recognized by the authorities and society, as well as acknowledging the suffering they endured. They also need to promote and honor the memory of the disappeared.

Symbolic acts, like public apologies, memorials and commemorations can be as beneficial, healing, and meaningful as material reparations.

Any memorialization initiatives should be based on consultations with families and communities affected and honor the dignity of the disappeared as well as the struggle of their relatives.

It is to be noted that memorials to honor the disappeared should not formalize the acceptance of death, but on the contrary to remind the State of its responsibility to unveil the truth about their fate and whereabouts and to seek justice.

Need to participate

Families of the disappeared should have the right to participate in official and civil society-led efforts to search for the disappeared and should be given the space to support the mission of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon. 65.2% of the participants showed interest in helping the work of the commission under some conditions such as providing transparency and the freedom to express their thoughts. The families should be at the forefront of all the truth-seeking and peace-building activities and should be consulted throughout all processes.

The participation of the persons and communities affected should also be ensured in the design of reparation measures or mechanisms. It should take into account their language, values, customs and

right to take part in the policies that concern them.

In this regard, it is crucial to encourage the creation of spaces/platforms/groups where the family members can organize themselves, be empowered, exchange information and views in order to make well-informed decisions. Differentiated measures should be adopted to ensure a large participation of families in the search.

The protection and security of the family members should be guaranteed, regardless of the level of involvement that they choose to have in the search. All necessary means should be made available to protect their physical integrity and their dignity, as well as the information obtained throughout the process, from evidence and proof to testimonies and confidential personal information.

Reparation can be monetary or collective or individual restitution of a status or a right. Since the last ICRC needs assessment was conducted, families have become more vocal about their personal needs, such as justice and economic restitution beyond the right to know. For many families, and due to the current situation of the country, basic needs have become unmanageable. However, material reparation is only one side of the coin; the families of the missing specifically and the Lebanese population have a need for symbolic restitution from the injustices of the Lebanese war.

Examples of such symbolic acts can be official apologies, assurances of non-repetition, memorials, memorial ceremonies and so forth.

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Chapter 3: Ambiguous Loss: A psychosocial timeline and shared experiences by family members of the disappeared

“Yes, ambiguous loss is traumatic because it is painful, immobilizing, and incomprehensible so that coping is blocked. It is akin to the trauma that causes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in that it is a painful experience far beyond normal human expectations. But unlike PTSD, it remains in the present; that is, the traumatizing experience (the ambiguity) often continues for years, a lifetime, or even across generations as with slavery or the Holocaust. Because there is no social or religious ritual to deal with such losses, people are stuck alone in a limbo of not knowing, with none of the usual support for grieving and moving forward with their lives.”

Pauline Boss, 2009¹²

The experience of having a loved one disappear is uncommon. It is hard to pin down the emotional experience of having a missing person for someone who has not lived it; therefore it is crucial to define it in detail and explain what the families experience.

Some may confuse the experience of the families with “chronic” grief or identify it as a state of “frozen” grief (an inability to begin grieving) but the absence of answers and finality on the fate of the person makes the acknowledgment of the loss impossible.

The construct that best describes this situation of ambiguity is “ambiguous loss” (AL) which is “a loss that remains unclear and without resolution. It has no closure or finality because the loss is ongoing.” Dr Pauline Boss is the theorist who identified the experience of Ambiguous Loss (AL) while working with families of US soldiers¹³ missing in action during the 1970s and first coined the term in 1984.

She coined two types of AL:

A physical absence and psychological presence, where the physical absence is compensated for by a psychological presence due to a sudden and unexpected disappearance which can be due to many different reasons such as migration, kidnapping and enforced disappearance etc.

A psychological absence and physical presence, where the person is psychologically unavailable despite being physically present due to neurological diseases such as dementia or brain injury, stroke, coma or drug addiction.

- (12) Pauline Boss - The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss (2009)

- (13) Boss, P., & Greenberg, J. (1984). Family boundary ambiguity: A new variable in family stress theory. *Family Process*, 23(4), 535-546.

Our focus in this handbook is on the first type of AL because it is the one that impacts the families of the missing.

The following is a hypothetical scenario portraying the experiences of having a person gone missing. It is the sum of the stories of many relatives of missing persons collected through years of support group sessions reports¹⁴ with the families of the missing. It is in fact the product of two different therapeutic exercises:

A systemic therapy exercise called the Game of the Goose which aims to help create a shared reality between members of a system such as a support group or family by having members of the group agree on phases of the disappearance, giving a title and symbol for each phase and then giving a title to the coming future phase

A narrative exposure therapy exercise called a narrative timeline which is similar to the Game of the Goose, where group members each set up a timeline on which they highlight the major events in their lives since the disappearance and describe obstacles and growing moments. In this timeline members also leave a part for the future and describe the tools which they will use from their past to deal with the ambiguity of the future.

The way the disappearance is experienced by each individual is specific to them and that is why the way experiences are described in the story are not set in stone, each person will have their own “vécu”¹⁵. However, this narrative is an excellent way to describe the complexity and the extent to which the disappearance impacts the lives of the family for anyone.

The story will be useful to reflect on the following aspects of disappearance:

The impacts of disappearance on the individual, familial and social level

A timeline to describe the evolution of the ambiguous loss

Common experiences of family members

The missing person is an adult male (Walid) who's the breadwinner of the family, as a majority of the disappeared in the Lebanese war fall into these criteria.

“Leaving without a goodbye”

“A young couple struggles to survive while raising a family of three children in a country that is slowly falling into war. The wife (Nahla) fantasizes a lot about the future to cope with her financial and familial struggles which are exacerbated by the situation of the country. She thinks a lot about her three children growing older and her and Walid retiring and moving to the suburbs. The area they live in is not close to the armed clashes but still, she and Walid calculate the risks of the trips they make outside their home.

- (14) ACT for the disappeared conducted psychosocial support group sessions for the families to be able to process the ambiguity, these reports were used throughout the document as a resource to give live examples
- (15) French expression pointing to the individual experience, an event as it is experienced by the individual

On a night like any other, the clashes drew near, this is the first time they heard the shooting this near. The couple is unsure if they should stay in or grab their belongings and run. They decide to make a run for it to their relatives' house in a town nearby. They grab their essentials and gets in the car and drive towards safety. As they near the borders of the town, they are ambushed by a roadblock; the armed men ask for identification of all the passengers. As soon as the armed men check the identification papers the husband is taken out of the vehicle. Nahla becomes panic-stricken, but she is reassured that her husband will return home after routine investigation and is asked to move along. She argues with the men but they become aggressive and wave their guns inside the car pointing them towards her children as they yell at her.

Fearing for her children, the wife decides to get her kids to safety and come back for her husband., When she drops off her children and goes back searching for the roadblock, it is nowhere to be found and she now realizes that she has no way of contacting the armed men, or her husband.

She keeps the children at the relatives' house while she and Walid's family start their vein attempt looking for him in hospitals, jails, police stations, the Red Cross and finally visits to the headquarters of the militia which has control over her area. She speaks to the leader who tells her that most likely her husband is a victim of enforced disappearance and that he will make a few calls to try and find him. She is unable to process or accept that this could happen to her beloved Walid. The family goes on for months looking for him in everywhere, sometimes putting themselves in danger, and getting assaulted as they visit dodgy detention places. Nahla feels guilty for neglecting her children, and burdensome for relying on her relatives for expenses. She soon gets a job while raising her children, to whom she lied about what happened to their father and as time goes by, the lie grows with her longing. Although his parents and siblings have been supportive, she sometimes feels they resent her for not doing more on the night he was abducted, but it could be that she's projecting onto them because she already feels guilty for not having done more. In fact, the whole family feels this way guilty time they have something to eat or go to bed. Now that several months have passed, they also blame themselves for not having found him yet and this fuels their efforts for searching for him every day even though they are burnt out. His father retreats into a depressive bubble and develops a heart condition and other chronic diseases, while the mother stays at home in case he returns to her especially on days he used to come by to visit or have a meal. She even puts out a plate for him on those days. Walid's siblings live in the shadow of their brother and his disappearance, it's all their mother talks about and they are ashamed of the ambivalent emotions,¹⁶ they feel towards him.

The whole family is confused, they are unable to accept what happened to their loved one, but the active search goes on for years. It deprives them of many aspects of their lives, including their health, their finances, their family rituals and their ability to enjoy things. They were victims of fraud as well by people who claimed to know Walid's whereabouts

- (16) The simultaneous existence of contradictory feelings and attitudes, such as pleasantness and unpleasantness or friendliness and hostility, toward the same person, object, event, or situation. American Psychological Association

and promised to lead them to him in exchange for big sums of money.

A few years have passed, with the whole family submerged in the active search, they no longer feel comfortable talking to anyone outside their family about their missing person because they are usually met with lack of understanding and they feel angered by people who tell them to lose hope or wish him to rest in peace. They also feel completely isolated from society for being so detached from the daily life events that other people are experiencing.

Nahla has been working incessantly to raise her children the way she and Walid wanted to, but she is unable to keep up and finds herself forced to sacrifice her eldest son's education to ensure that they have a roof over their heads. She too harbors ambivalent emotions towards her husband who left her to raise the children alone but she cannot accept this anger consciously and instead vents elsewhere.

The children had gradually built an understanding of what happened to their father and they learned from experience that talking about their father brings tears to their mother's eyes, so they avoid the topic although they have a lot of questions on their minds. The eldest son had always felt the responsibility to fill his father's shoes, he matured at a young age and felt burdened to support his mother emotionally and listen to her talk about his father, specifically how difficult life is without him. None of the children ever experienced a normal childhood after the disappearance of his father, many of their needs are neglected. The two younger children who barely had the chance to meet their father, feel as if they aren't supposed to feel sad over his disappearance because they are unsure of what they had lost, they even avoid talking about him to their friends at school.

As time goes by, each family member internalizes their suffering even more to protect each other from the pain brought on by sharing. They oscillate between hopelessness and hopefulness sometimes several times a day, with every piece of news they hear. The war has now been "put out" and the actors of the war given amnesty, but the crime of enforced disappearance goes on. The family feels like they are imprisoned, each in their own way but they do share some aspects of this imprisonment.

The wife is unable to decide what to identify herself as in public, a wife or a widow or a divorcée... She is stigmatized at times for wanting to go back to life which she already feels guilty for wanting.

The storyline of the life of each relative feels like it is stuck at the time of the disappearance, they haven't engaged in many facades of life they could have, they are somewhat absent in their own lives.

The war has now been over for several years, the authorities have proved to be of no help. Some missing persons have been appearing here and there, returning from imprisonment in neighboring countries that took part in the conflicts; their sudden return brings the hopes of the family up. But after a few similar incidents, some of them decide to completely suppress their suffering in an attempt of returning to normal life, while others engage

themselves in civil society initiatives in the hopes of getting an answer.

Now almost 40 years after his disappearance, the family struggles with the idea of the death of their missing, they contemplate the idea but feel self-blame when they do.

His father has passed away, his mother's health is deteriorating quickly, his siblings and wife are the only ones with the burden of memory, the burden of being the last ones able to tell his story or identify him or his remains. They forget the issue of disappearance at times but feel guilty whenever they do, and the guilt sends them back into the memories they hold of him and the emotions that go along.

His children attempt to compensate for the absence of their father by being present for their children and tell them all what they know about their grandfather.

Guilt, self-blame, hopelessness, hopefulness, helplessness, anger and anxiety accompany their daily lives”

Phases of the evolution of the ambiguous loss

It is common practice in therapeutic work for the patient or client to be asked to make a timeline of their experiences, and although they are able to set their experiences in a linear fashion according to the passing of time, the true path to the development of an issue and the growth from it seems more spiral than it is linear.

The individual often revisits emotions repeating past or early experiences and their patterns (of thoughts, behaviors, emotions, physical sensations...) until they reach insight (awareness) on what they are experiencing and therefore become aware of the internal or external factors keeping them “stuck” and those that will facilitate growth.

In light of this idea, families of the missing do experience common phases linked to the time that has passed since the disappearance, and although the way in which they experience these phases are subjective to their individuality, there is a linearity in the sequence of phases.

As mentioned above, FoM revisit these phases over time until they develop the insight needed.

The following is the sequence of phases as experienced and then described by many families based on reports of experiential exercises from psychosocial support sessions run by mental health professionals and accompaniers¹⁷. It is essential to note that these experiences may vary greatly from one person to another within the same family depending on numerous factors (intrinsic and extrinsic). especially their perception of the loss and their ability to give meaning to it.

Active Search

“Beirut was divided into east and west, we couldn't cross from side to side and roam around asking about our MPs, we had contacts whom we'd ask and they'd tell us that

- (17) Person who is tasked to accompany and to be supportive to the families of the missing throughout their experiences , by building trusting lasting relationships

they're held captive at a certain building but I couldn't go I had children to care for"¹⁸

Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021

Once the family realizes that their loved one has gone missing, the absence of answers and the anxious desire to know drives the family members into a panicked state of searching. They invest all available effort, means and time to build any understanding or gather any bit of information.

The incessant and anxious search for the missing person (MP) is driven by fear for the wellbeing of the person, the need to be reassured that he/she is still alive and the burden of the time that has already passed without answers or reliable information, dreams, absence of efforts or answers from authorities or community references and even at time fortune tellers.

It is common for the “searchers” to endure terribly traumatic experiences that would threaten their own lives, wellbeing or dignity, such as visiting prisons, militia quarters, going through lines of fire, being harassed or exploited sexually, threatened to be killed if they continue their search, looking through dead bodies or digging up individual or mass graves, searching through groups of abducted persons...

Avoidance of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness

Throughout the cycles of active search, families tend to experience phases of burn out from the emotionally and physically draining search where they experience hopelessness they hadn't before. The intensity of hopelessness tends to increase with time, following each cycle of active search, and the return to the search is one of the ways the families avoid the fear of having permanently lost their loved one.

Avoidance is also present in encounters with their family members and close community who evade the discussion about the fate of the disappeared. Families avoid considering the possibility of a permanent loss and fear an emotional breakdown at the thought of it. They feel obliged to stay “strong” until they find the MP.

Pivoting from hopefulness to hopelessness

“He is alive in our hearts and dead in our minds”¹⁹

Brother of the missing, 2017

Oftentimes only many years after the disappearance, and only after having been part of psychosocial support sessions, can a person describe the incongruence between what he feels and thinks after the disappearance of a loved one.

Most relatives will do whatever they can to keep this hope alive but cannot help the pivoting back and forth between the two extremes of hopefulness and hopelessness. They suffer from the paradoxical stances on the fate of the MP, between how they feel and what they think.

They may feel hopeless and their mind will give them reasons to keep their hope alive or reversely feel hopeful and they begin to consider thoughts which may indicate the death of the MP.

- (18) *Interviews with FOMs*

- (19) *ICRC and ACT Accompaniment program PSS sessions*

Accepting that the MP has passed is similar to having murdered them themselves in their own thoughts.

“We would gather in front of the governmental palace, or in Sanayeh gardens, at Mathaf, with no results; they’d tell us that we’ll have news tomorrow and the day after and we still haven’t gotten any results but this gave us hope and the hope still lives on today”²⁰

Wafaa’, Sister of the missing, 2021

“ We don’t say may he rest in peace, we say “I swear on the absence of my father”²¹

Zahraa, daughter of the missing, 2021

Alertness and maintaining routines and rituals

Alertness is commonly experienced by close family members and is not limited to the time of the search, they are constantly on the lookout while watching the news, watching a movie, looking through newspapers or any media in fact.

Many mothers and wives described staying up at night, leaving windows open, never leaving the side of the phone (this is prior to cell phones), jumping out of bed at the sound of any noise during the night... to the point where they felt as if they were imagining things that weren’t there or misidentifying people in the media or on the street.

Often members of the family will maintain the rituals and routines they had with the missing person; activities such as dinner times, spring and winter cleaning of the missing person’s bedroom to ensure it’s ready for their return and clinging to whatever can make them feel the presence of the absent person. This is not to be confused with family rituals which often cease to exist such as family gatherings, celebrations, weddings etc... The family withdraws from familial and social situations where they may enjoy themselves or have to face others who could have different thoughts about the fate of the MP.

Alternation between hope and despair

As the families exhaust their efforts in getting answers often after years of searching, some individuals tend to hold onto hope whenever they begin to feel despair out of guilt, while others go through cycles of self-imposed loss of hope and develop psychosomatic forms of pain²², have in repetitive emotional breakdowns, or bouts of explosive anger. However, most tend to alternate between brief periods of despair only to cling onto hope again.

It was a common resolution of the Game of the goose for the families to state that their MP was: “Alive in their heart and dead in their mind”

This paradox of what they feel and think symbolizes the constant state of opposing thoughts and emotions and hence the ambivalence towards the missing.

- (20) Interviews with FOMs,2021

- (21) Interviews with FOMs,2021

- (22) of, relating to, involving, or concerned with bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbance. Definition taken from the Merriam-Webster dictionary

Desire to return to normal life

Perhaps the most shameful aspect of the experience of disappearance for the families is the desire to live normal daily lives without being preoccupied with the missing person. Whenever they catch themselves living normally, not having thoughts about the person for a while, which may happen for a day or two, they will automatically persecute themselves into reliving the intensity of the absence.

Pressures from authorities and family members

Over the years, as detailed in Chapter one, many attempts were made by the authorities to close the file of the disappeared in Lebanon. Part of these efforts were to incentivize the families to announce their MP as deceased.

Adding to those pressures are the legal/administrative/economic binds the families find themselves in due to a myriad of reasons where they are required to issue a death certificate. Examples are institutions who would only pay out the salary of the MP, allow families to benefit from the missing person's retirement plan, have access to their bank accounts or sell their property, etc. only if they have officially passed away and a death certificate has been issued.

This topic often creates a conflict within the family, as feelings of abandonment and betrayal surface when considering this decision, as though they were themselves “killing their missing loved one”.

This pressure was compounded at times by middlemen who are often con artists who extort the family for alleged information about the whereabouts or for a promise of returning the MP. Families were pressured into selling their properties and belongings and those of the MP; they couldn't bear the thought of not having paid all they could for the freedom or fate of their loved one.

Adjustment to the ambiguity

As the years pass, it is common for families together and for the individuals in the families to adjust their understanding of the disappearance which can create clashes between family members especially in the early years. Each person needs to adjust the theme of the ambiguity depending on their needs, for example, those who cannot fathom the idea of the MP being deceased will entertain ideas about incarcerations, whereas those who cannot cope with the anxiety of not knowing tend to choose an answer that would ease their mind with a scenario that “ends the ambiguity”. In fact their fears, their needs and reasoning are in a constant struggle of power.

Impact of the disappearance on an individual, familial and social level

“Ambiguous loss is unclear loss.

Ambiguous loss is traumatic loss.

Ambiguous loss is a relational disorder.

Ambiguous loss is externally caused (e.g., illness, war), not by individual pathology.

Ambiguous loss is an uncanny loss—confusing and incomprehensible”

Pauline Boss, 2009.

Ambiguous loss essentially expresses itself in the relational realm. This means the burden of the disappearance is on the relationships, the way members of the family relate to each other, to the missing person and to the world rather than on any one individual in these relationships. These relational issues can cause a boundary ambiguity.

Familial boundaries²³ are the distance at which we stand from each other. When boundaries are nonexistent or enmeshed, there is lack of clarity of the identity of the people involved (Where I end and the other starts is unclear and permeable), thus there is inability to differentiate ourselves from the other, our needs, our traits, our dignity, our thoughts, our emotions... rigid boundaries are on the other side of the spectrum. In this case, boundaries are not adaptive to situations and people, everyone is kept at a distance from the one with rigid boundaries.

We do not grow up choosing our boundaries, we grow into a system which has established itself on a position on the continuum from enmeshed to rigid boundaries and learn to relate to others in our family and later in the world as such.

On the individual level

Despite AL being manifested in the relational sphere, this doesn't mean that the individual suffers only in their relation to the missing and others in the family and society. The loss is also traumatic. As mentioned in the introduction, trauma that is prolonged or repetitive and has a continuous impact is categorized as complex trauma.

Dealing with the continuous nature of disappearance can lead to depression, anxiety, traumatic symptoms, guilt, self-blame, isolation, ambivalence, boundary, and identity issues.

These symptoms can be clinically significant due to their:

- 1- Hindering normal functioning
- 2- Long duration
- 3- Intensity

However ambiguous loss is not a disorder due to it being a normal reaction to the continuous event of disappearance.

Is ambiguous loss different from grief?

“When a loss is complicated by ambiguity, the grief process is frozen “(Boss 1999)²⁴, due to a situation which is outside the affected family's control and in fact shakes their feeling of control, ability to foresee the future and to know what to expect. Imagine waiting for an event happen but you have no indicator as to when the waiting will end. This is commonly compared to being stuck in the waiting room

- (23) a psychological demarcation that protects the integrity of an individual or group or that helps the person or group set realistic limits on participation in a relationship or activity. American Psychological Association

- (24) Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge: Harvard University. Paperback reprint in 2000.

for a doctor's appointment. The families of the missing are in the waiting room for the return of their loved one. They are coping to ensure their ability to wait, not to reach closure. The path to closure can only begin with answers on the fate of the MP.

Guilt and Self-blame

Relatives of the MP who were present at the time of the abduction, or had unsettled issues with the MP, tend to hold a heavy burden of personal responsibility for the disappearance. This burden is accompanied by feelings of guilt and self-blame for not having, in hindsight, prevented the disappearance, done something to stop it if they were there at the time, or have found the MP up to that point in time. These emotions are common especially for relatives of MPs who were engaged in combat, for not having gone to war instead of the MP or having raised them as patriotic or with a loyalty to their social group.

On the family level

When a relationship is ruptured physically while remaining psychologically ongoing without the possibility of reaching a meaning for its sudden cessation, it becomes problematic for the individuals who are in it.

In a family, when a member disappears, that relationship ruptures not only impacts the ties between the person and every member of the family but also the ties in between everyone else within this system.

In family systems theory, families aim for a homeostasis²⁵ to maintain their established organization and functioning over time. The family system resists change and when it occurs it aims for a new homeostasis. For example, when one of the children gets married in a family, the remaining members of the family will reestablish dynamics which aim to maintain the old homeostasis such as replacing the role of the person who has "left", both on conscious explicit terms such as redistribution of responsibilities and in implicit terms such as authority, alliances etc.

When it comes to disappearance, the family system needs to establish a new homeostasis but the change that occurred is unclear, it is not a common event that the family can cope with such as a marriage or an immigration or a new baby; it is a traumatic event of disappearance with no or little answers.

Immobilization and boundary ambiguity

Following the disappearance, and as the members of the family attempt to cope with the ambiguity, they struggle to find meaning to their unclear loss, and whatever narrative they can establish is often linked to each person's internal and external resources and their relation to the MP more than to the event of the disappearance itself. Therefore, it is normal for families to have different views on what happened to the MP and vary in levels of acceptance of the loss.

This process immobilizes families in their attempt to create a new systemic balance and conflicts arise from members' conflicting narratives on whether the loss is temporary or final.

- (25) a relatively stable state of equilibrium or a tendency toward such a state between the different but interdependent elements or groups of elements of an organism, population, or group. Definition from Merriam Webster dictionary

Some families may become stuck or immobilized in this situation because they are trying to find one meaning or one definition for the disappearance. The inability to accept the varying views halts the clarification of:

New family roles and rules

Boundaries between family members

Boundaries between remaining relationships, and therefore

Halts the adaptation of traditions and family rituals.

“My brother, may he rest in peace, went missing and I owe him so much, I am still searching for him now 40 years later in the hope to reach an answer... His wife and children forgot about him... He went missing so that my family could return safely to me”²⁶

Selim, Brother of the missing, 2021

Changes in the family system: New roles, new rules

“What is the form of the family now? Who is in the family and who is out?

Is the relative filling the shoes of the MP now playing a symbolic role or just a practical one?

What new roles does each person have to take?

Who decides these changes implicitly? and explicitly?

What new rules are now in place?

Who am I to the MP? Who are they to me?

When and if they return, are they the same person they were?

Am I the same person to them? Would they come back to the same position they held prior to their disappearance?”

More often than not, males of breadwinning age were the target of enforced disappearance during the Lebanese war. Women of the missing in Lebanon, especially wives and mothers, had to take on a double role in the family and it was common as well for children to take on the roles of their disappeared older sibling or father or mother.

At times they had one or more new roles to play for the continuity of the family and in order to maintain an equilibrium not so different from the one before the disappearance. Chronic physical, psychological/psychosomatic symptoms are common among those who carry these additional burdens.

Besides the practical roles taken by the family members, they also take on implicit and symbolic roles to fill the shoes of the MP, such as a child being the emotional supporter of the wife or the husband, being a reference (being a symbolic father for example) for their siblings and helping in raising them etc..

On the familial level

Common experiences shared by family members of the disappeared

The experience of having a person disappear from the nuclear family impacts individuals in ways which are common to all the members of the family. However, many factors impact how the individual will experience the disappearance personally, such as their position in the family, their age at the time of the disappearance, their role prior to and after the disappearance, their internal and external resources to cope with it and finally family dynamics etc.

The descriptions below are of common experiences as compiled from hundreds of hours of interviews with the families of the missing conducted by ACT for the Disappeared companions and a few interviews done with the families while drafting the handbook.

They are neither universal nor definitive, but they are common experiences shared by the immediate relatives.

Parents

Mothers of the missing are often at the center of media attention, especially in the Lebanese context. Often it was mothers who were present at every occasion or event to advocate for the right to know, while fathers tended to take a back seat. Although some fathers were active other than during the active search phase, they were commonly more silent than their wives.

Mothers of the missing in Lebanon have taken major roles in the fight for the right to know as well as the search for their children and this is highlighted in the Lebanese media.

“I often feel hopeful more than hopeless. If it weren't for the hope we wouldn't be still carrying on till this day with meetings and sit ins because we want to know what their fate is. If they're dead then we accept the will of God, I wouldn't have this constant feeling of maybe he'll come in the door every other moment. You always have hope, without hope humans would die.” ²⁷

Mother of the missing, 2021

The unclear loss of a child perhaps immobilizes the mothers the most, they tend to become debilitated on every front except for the search for the fate of their children. They are also often the ones in support groups who hold onto the hope of the return of the MP with an unwillingness to redefine hope which was part of the process of dealing with ambiguity through Pauline Boss's 6 therapeutic objectives.²⁸ They are the ones who most believed their sons and daughters were imprisoned somewhere. This frozen state is also evident in the behaviors of the mothers who tend to keep all the MP's belongings, to maintain their rooms intact and at times even keep their plate at the dinner table, not leaving the side of their telephone or even their homes for years on end.

- (27) Interviews with FOMs, 2021

- (28) 6 themes which are the core of psychological interventions with those suffering from an ambiguous loss

Wives

“Life changed drastically, life is hard, I was young and innocent before my husband disappeared, my children were very young, I would clean houses at first. Then I found a steady job at a newspaper. I’d go to work at 4 in the morning, come back home at 1030, make lunch for my children so they could eat when they’d be back from school. Sometimes I’d send them to my sister’s who had a son who disappeared, she would bathe them and comb their hair and send them off to school.”

“... I don’t feel like a widow or a divorcee because my husband may come back any day. I was only married for 3 years; I mean I’m still waiting for his return. I still dream about him, about him coming to me. We got married based on love...”²⁹

Enaam, sister and wife of the missing,2021

“ I worked for 15 years before my children started to support me, it’s been a difficult life for us”

Salam, wife of the missing,2021

Having a husband disappear often burdens the wives with new responsibilities. Adding to the weight of searching for the missing person at a time when women were not as empowered as they are today, wives who were mothers had to fill the shoes of the father financially, emotionally, and practically. It is common to read stories³⁰ about women who received blame from their in-laws and feared for the custody of their children due to the discrimination against women in Lebanese Law and therefore did not have their support to care for the remaining family.

“After my husband disappeared, my in-laws weren’t good to me, the relationship suffered, and they blamed me for the disappearance. I had my son and they saw him for the first time when he was two years old, they were cold. I suffered in this life to raise a family but I thank God that they turned out to be good people.”³¹

Enaam, sister and wife of the missing,2021

It is common as well for wives to “protect” their children by not telling them what happened to their father, by giving varying stories and always attempting to keep up the lie. This misconception that keeping the small ones sheltered from reality eventually puts more burden on the mother, putting her in even more difficult circumstances with the weight of the disappearance pushing down on her shoulders.

Some wives did however have the support of their in-laws in the search and the responsibility of rearing the children. However, wives commonly put themselves in risky situations to find the fate of their

- (29) Interviews with FOMs,2021

- (30) Living with the Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Disappearance on Wives of the Missing in Lebanon. Page 9-ICTJ - 2015

- (31) Interviews with FOMs, 2021

husbands as they were perceived less endangered of enforced disappearance than the male members of the family who would be leading or helping in the search. Their fears were valid as it was likely for a male to disappear while searching for their relatives, especially when visiting the kidnappers themselves, militias, and their detention locales.³²

Stigma against the wives is another major stressor, and it remains a taboo for many wives of the missing to speak about their needs as women, as individuals, and as partners. It is also a taboo for them to talk about themselves and their own needs in this area, especially with sectarian/religious bounds where they choose to stay so as not to lose the custody of their children to the father's family.

Siblings

*"I have six children but for years I only had one, my missing son replaced all of the others, I realized too late that I had emotionally neglected all my other children for years"*³³
A mother after 30 years of the disappearance, 2021

Siblings are often involved as well in taking on new roles within the family while remaining in the shadow of the MP. Guilt of children towards their parents for not being able to "save" them from the situation of ambiguous loss maintains their roles and incognito position within the family.

At times the implicit roles siblings take on are of problematic nature, such as being the scapegoat, or the hero or the clown... all of which are roles children can take on in problematic family systems.³⁴ (Wolter, 1995; Polson, Newton, 1984), further complicating and adding to the burden of having a sibling disappear.

Similarly to others in the family, ambivalence is highly prevalent in siblings. Ambivalent emotions are often a struggle to accept, and many tend to compensate for the unacceptable side of ambivalence with excessive emotions of love and admiration of the MP. In fact, ambivalent emotions emerge only with those who are valuable to us; disappointment, resentment and abandonment can only exist towards those we love, those we expect to understand us and those we need to be around.

Siblings resent their missing siblings for the love, care, and attention they give them, the desire they have to please them which goes unrecognized, hence the difficulty of accepting the paradox.

Guilt is not only experienced towards the siblings' parents but also towards the MP, over their continuous absence, over the takeover of the MP's role in the family, over having their parents beside them... Thus siblings enter a vicious cycle of guilt being reinforced by having to take on more responsibilities within the family, having more ambivalent feelings, and being beside their parents when the MP is not. Siblings will often overlook their needs over these feelings of guilt.

- (32) Living with the Shadows of the Past. The Impact of Disappearance on Wives of the Missing in Lebanon. Page 10- ICTJ - 2015

- (33) Interviews with FOMs, 2021

- (34) Forgiving Our Parents: For Adult Children from Dysfunctional Families by Dwight Lee Wolter c. 1995

- Polson, Beth; Newton, Miller (1984). Not My Kid: A Family's Guide to Kids and Drugs. Arbor Books / Kids of North Jersey Nurses

Children

"To this moment as we speak about my father, I feel choked up, I never experience his absence as death, some of the other children of the missing I met swear on the soul of their fathers, I can't say it, I say I swear on his absence"

Daughter of the missing, 2021

When one parent disappears, the caretakers who remain, such as the other parent and family members who take on parental roles, are the ones who decide the narrative that the child will hear. Based on this narrative, or narratives, the experience of children varies greatly. Often the narrative they hear is tailored to soften the blow for the children. Some are told their missing parent has travelled or is getting work done or any story that will keep them silent for a while. Some grow up believing their parents passed away at the time (of the disappearance) and may find out the truth at an older age.

Therefore, there aren't patterns or commonalities between children of the missing, they vary greatly depending on what they were told about the absence of their parents and if they had a person who played the role of the symbolic parent they had lost.

On the social level

Families of the missing often suffer to maintain ties with the communities surrounding them. In the absence of understanding of the disappearance and therefore the absence of social rituals, the families often become isolated as they are not validated neither socially nor religiously in their plight.

When a person passes away for example, social and religious rituals are a chief part of the support families receive but in the situation of disappearance people often become paralyzed in attempting to comfort the families, do they give hope of return or force the loss? They find themselves at a loss of how to deal with the family members, how to be supportive to them.

As years pass, the topic becomes a more awkward one to have, community members may avoid discussing the subject, which is at the same time the major preoccupation for these families. They have nothing else they would rather talk about and feel they are burdening their friends with the same stories and complaints.

With the lack or complete absence of understanding of disappearance, people become confused as to how to deal with the families or react to feelings of ambiguity. It is difficult to comprehend the confusion, the immobilization and the suffering of the family which drag on for so long after the disappearance.

Some people feel compelled to take a problem-solving approach and pressure families to acknowledge and attest to the passing of the MP or the impossibility of their return.

In the lack of opportunities for acknowledgement within society, families may even feel discouraged to advocate for their beloved MP publicly. They expect others to misunderstand them, not to empathize when it's been numerous years, they fear their own emotional reaction in public. They eventually find themselves alone within their family, their community and in their country.

Chapter 4: Mental health and psychosocial guidelines and considerations

Being a family of the missing is an arduous journey in itself; having to deal with the shortcomings of the authorities, lack of justice or truth are burdens that exacerbate the pain of disappearance.

The approach laid out below is essential to ensure doing no harm and that the families are engaged to the best of their capacity with the parties involved. This approach could therefore have reparatory effects when needs of the families are answered.

The engagement of the families is crucial to ensure these specific needs are answered.

The needs of families in regard to their missing vary greatly based on:

The geographical, historical, political, social aspects of the story

The circumstances of the disappearance,

The different narratives the families commit to

and the different family members who are the decision takers and their relation to the missing person.

For example, in small closely knitted communities, such as in a town where all the families know of the location of mass graves, they may not want any procedure other than exhumation and proper re-burial. Whereas in a town with a specific political affiliation, the families may be convinced not to open the graves for fear of political and social repercussions or of respect to the desires of a political group to whom they belong. It was common for militias to declare their missing persons as martyrs during the Lebanese war.

Another scenario could be that some family members do not want to revisit the past if they have successfully given meaning to the disappearance thereby accepting the loss, and there will be some who need to know the truth, and others who need to receive the remains...

These complex scenarios are part of a myriad of possibilities of the needs of different families and contexts on the need to know.

Therefore, efforts to answer the needs of the families while doing no harm can differ from one context to another and one family to another. Exhumation and return of the remains is not a “one size fits all” answer to the families’ needs.

For those who are in favor of having the remains exhumed, identified and returned to them, they will require first the trust of the party doing this work. The commission’s efforts on the file must be transparent through information sharing which is trauma informed.

This need to share information is crucial for several reasons:

1- The Lebanese families of the missing have had their fair share of struggle with the authorities which produced commissions aiming to close the file and put an end to the cause.

They are likely to have mistrust or very little trust in the efforts made by the current commission and transparency is key to build this rapport with the families through meetings, information sessions, possibly workshops etc.

2- Following decades of absence of answers, the news of the death of their MP is very difficult to accept and is technically difficult to prove as well.

Proving that a missing person has passed is difficult to achieve after this long period of time for families who are not always ready for this news.

Families will need to be informed of the lengthiness and complexity of exhuming and identifying remains, and that at times it won't be possible to neither exhume nor identify.

Then if and when there are answers, they will need to be informed of all the details at the disposal of the experts hands such as estimated date, place, circumstances of death and grave site. For some, the remains will be enough as a proof of death, others can be much more sceptical.

It's worth mentioning that many factors are at play defining the decision and readiness of the families to be engaged in the process of truth seeking.

One of these factors is their engagement in past activities organized by the different stakeholders such as information sessions, psychosocial support sessions, memorialization activities, advocacy workshops etc.

Past engagement with the families

Families of the missing in Lebanon vary greatly in their engagement and openness to activities on the missing and the truth finding process.

The CFKDL, Act for the disappeared, SOLIDE, ICRC, ICTJ to name a few entities who have worked on the missing file in Lebanon. The work on the file is not limited to the legal process and data collection; families have been in recent years often gathered to participate in various types of activities:

1. Information sharing sessions on all aspects of the file
2. Psychosocial sessions to process the ambiguity
3. Advocacy workshops to mobilize family committees in each geographic area
4. Memorialization activities to produce memorial objects which represent the person of the missing individual or the impact of their absence
5. Yearly events on the International day of the disappeared to spread awareness on the need of the families to know
6. Exhibitions of the memorialization products of the families
7. Advocacy events such as sit ins, petitions, marches etc and possibly other activities.

Based on the experience of meeting hundreds of families, their willingness to participate in these sorts of activities and the emotional capacity to advocate or discuss the issue of the disappearance vary

greatly from the first moment of contact and after having built a rapport with the accompaniers and processed their experiences in PSS groups.

Those who eventually participate in psychosocial support sessions and memorialization activities tend to develop a much higher tolerance to ambiguity and therefore are less reactive to the frustration of their ambiguous loss.

Psychosocial support sessions and memorialization activities

It is crucial to elaborate on the goals of the psychosocial support and memorialization sessions to show the impact of this work on the families as this can be a resource for the parties carrying on into the truth seeking process.

The objectives of these programs lead by ICRC and ACT from 2015 till 2020, are:

1. To establish a rapport with the families beyond that of pragmatic aspects of the work(data collection...)
2. To update families on the progress in the file by all parties putting efforts into it
3. To mobilize the families and create regional committees
4. To build a link in between the regional committees and the CFKD
5. Maintain a rapport with the families through the wide network of accompaniers spread out nationally
6. Support the families in building their capacity to cope with the ambiguity and process the experience of unclear loss up to the present
7. Create memorialization activities and memorials

The efforts made on the accompaniment program (run by ICRC and ACT) have established a solid base with the families that were part of it and some of those who weren't and only participated in the final events of group cycles.

Groups were formed from families by geographic area, they were first visited at home informed of the activity and invited to an information session where they learned about progress in the file on many levels, and then invited to a series of psychosocial support sessions which were designed to target the 6 therapeutic goals set by Pauline boss(2006) as follows:

1- Finding Meaning: As with any therapeutic intervention, it is up to each individual to find their own meaning for the experience of ambiguous loss. It's a process that is inherent to every stage of the 6 levels of interventions. Finding meaning creates a basis or capacity to build a present, to think hopefully. The meaning can be spiritual or religious such as "God is punishing me; I don't question the will of God..." or a patriotic meaning, "he had to disappear for the rest of us to live in peace, he is a martyr even if he is alive..." The process carries on all throughout the sessions and it eases much of the struggles of AL. At times, one meaning would be shared by several people in the group, they would inspire each other. Different meanings within the group helped participants accept the difference in meaning within their families of origin.

2- Tempering mastery: "Do I have control over what happens in my life and to what degree? Is life completely random and outside my control or is it within my control to a certain degree? How much

power over my story do I hold?”

The meaning that is attributed to life's event indicates our need for a sense of mastery for example, those who believe that bad things happen only to bad people or that if you abide by the laws of society then you will be safe, or that if you work hard and do well only “good” things can happen to you even when they are “bad”.

Assessing these meanings, can help ease the paradox that is there between the disappearance and the meaning.

3- Reconstructing identity: “Who am I to the MP now 30 or 40 years after their disappearance? Am I still a wife? Are they the person they were? If they return will we relate the way we did before?”

Believing that things will be back to the way they were is hard to give up on, but it keeps the relative in a state of relational limbo. Building foresight into how things can be different, allows the family to rebuild meaningful relationships despite the absence of the MP.

4- Normalising ambivalence: “They disappeared and left me behind, I hope they are alive but I wish I could be done with it[ambiguity]”, “He left me with all the responsibilities but I love him.”

Opposing emotions create guilt and confusion in the relatives of the MP, they feel unable to accept the opposition and this causes them to remain stuck. Normalizing the coexistence of both sides of these emotions helps to let go of anger towards themselves or vented onto others. This anger arises from a spiral of guilt and self blame.

5- Revising attachment: Hanging on to the attachment to the MP is a terrible burden. Families haven't seen the MP for more than 30 years, they are compelled to keep themselves reminded and let go at once. They forget at times and tend to feel immense guilt for doing so. To forget and let go, the loss has to be clear.

Understanding the role that guilt plays in having to be constantly in memory of the missing, helps the families let go of this burden, especially when they are able to concretely memorialize the person of the MP. They learn they don't need to end their attachment or reach “closure”.

6- Discovering hope: The whole process of the 5 previous levels are a prelude to rediscovering hope. Acknowledging the opposing forces of an ambiguous loss, the pain and absurdity of the situation, allows families to explore ways their life has been and can be meaningful despite the absence of their loved one and absence of closure.

The process of working on these 6 levels or objectives is not linear, it is a continuous effort which seeds were planted during the psychosocial support sessions and carried on into memorialization and future activism.

“We started the search in 1976, then with Wadad Halawani and the ICRC and ACT and if it weren't for COVID-19 we would still be gathering to push for answers”³⁵

Sister of the missing, 2021

Memorialization

“Though we may not be able to build something grand as the state can do, we would like to make

something on our own initiative even if the state did not do that. We want future generations to remember the contribution of [our brother] for the sake of the nation. People still remember the contributions of martyrs who lost their lives for the sake of the country even in the distant past.”

Brother of missing man, Gorkha, 18 June 2008³⁶

“People will know about the missing family because the name will be written on the board or in some other place: we will have peace if we could make it.”

Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 9 February 2011³⁷

In the absence of social or religious rituals to keep the memory of the missing person, families struggle alone and receive no acknowledgment or validation for their ongoing plight.

They hold the burden of memory, the pain of isolation and the struggle of communicating their situation to their communities.

Social and religious rituals help grieving families by :

Acknowledging their pain and validating the loss

Facilitating the processing of the loss on the individual and relational levels

Providing emotional support

Give meaning to the loss through religious lenses and social ones and through the support of the community

Memorialization fulfills the role of social and religious rituals, which are absent with regards to disappearance, by providing the families acknowledgement of their ongoing struggle decades after the event.

Families have been and are still part of memorialization activities of several types such as the “empty chair” and the “memory box” which aim to produce individual items representing the person of the missing and their absence, whereas collective memorials stand in the street as a reminder of the ongoing absence of the missing persons.

Exhibitions of memorialization products allow the families to express their pain without having to say a word, and if they do feel like talking to the visitors it allows them to start from a place where they are empowered.

The readiness and willingness of families to be part of the truth seeking process and to speak out about their cause is likely to be increased for those who were part of these mentioned activities. However, families need to be dealt with in a case by case approach and accompaniment is very essential at every moment and step of the way to ensure they have the best capacity to deal and process the changes happening and to come in their story with the MP.

“For families, remembering the disappeared is an act of resistance against perpetrators that redeems the humanity of the missing: to memorialise is to challenge invisibility.”

- (36) Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal, Simon Robins, Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit, University of York, United Kingdom

- (37) Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal, Simon Robins, Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit, University of York, United Kingdom

“Commemorations and acts of tribute give a positive meaning to families’ experience, affirming the value of the missing and of the family...”

“Memorialization allows families to revise attachment to a missing person by valuing his or her memory while distancing the MP from their everyday lives...”Simon Robbins, 2014 ³⁸

A trauma-informed approach

Adopting a trauma informed approach is a continuous learning process with some foundational principles, rather than a set of fixed guidelines. The most crucial aspect to ensuring this approach is well implemented is the continuation of the accompaniment activities with the families. Accompaniment *“operates on the premise that families can be helped through empathetic relationships and mutual support. To accompany means to “walk beside someone” and be supportive whenever necessary. The main goal of accompaniment is to strengthen the abilities of individuals and families to deal with difficulties related to the disappearance of their relatives and to eventually resume their social lives. They can do this by making use of their own resources and those available in the community – local and national – and by creating a supportive network of the families”* ³⁹

The relationship built over a long period of time is essential to engage the families in the steps forward, especially on a communal level. The trust and positive regard families hold towards accompaniers in each given community is a major resource to the commission’s work, because participation in group activities is a building block to a trauma-informed approach with the case of the missing.

Trauma-informed care had its origins in the medical treatment of battled-scared veterans of the Vietnam War in the 1970s ⁴⁰. In later years, the approach expanded to civilians.

As research on the impact of trauma on the psyche, body and nervous system grew, the approach gained momentum to where it is today.

A comprehensive definition of trauma-informed care is *“a strengths-based service delivery approach that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.”* ⁴¹

How does this definition apply to families of the missing?

Control is the core of the problem when dealing with ambiguity. The absence of a clear understanding of a situation leaves the individual unable to either deal (reach closure) or cope with it. Control is also

- (38) Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal, Simon Robins, Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit, University of York, United Kingdom

- (39) Accompanying The Families Of Missing Persons: A Practical Handbook

- (40) <https://www.iowawatch.org/2018/06/15/a-short-history-of-trauma-informed-care/>

- (41) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Definitions. SAMHSA News [Internet]. 2014; 22

at the core of a trauma-informed approach in the 4Cs model⁴² used here and detailed below. Why is control so important when dealing with trauma? Simply because traumatic events cause us to feel that things are out of our control despite our best efforts, we fight this randomness in life with meaningfulness such as a career, personal contracts, a family, friends, achievements... but how do we fight an inherently meaningless event?

Re-traumatization can occur in any situation or environment that is a reminder of or a trigger from the original experience of the individual, be it a symbolic or real. A trigger that makes them feel a loss of power, control and safety.

The potential for re-traumatization therefore resides in the relatives' feelings of loss of control with regards to finding the truth about their missing person.

The possible triggers for the families are those which may regress them to the enforced disappearance or its consequences which themselves were traumatic at times as discussed in the introduction of this book(Why a trauma informed approach?). The trauma of the families can be described as complex, ubiquitous and sequential.

The triggers could be sensorial(sights, sounds, smells), emotional, narrative, or attitudinal.

Examples of triggers⁴³ could be:

People: Seeing a person related to the event or having resembling traits to that person.

Thoughts and emotions: Emotions felt at the time of the disappearance or afterwards such as fear and helplessness.

Objects: Seeing an object linked to the event such as belongings of the MP or items that remind them of the event

Scents: Scents can be very triggering, such as the smell of a grave site to someone who had to look for their MP in between bodies during the active search

Places: Returning to the scene of the disappearance if they were present at the time, such as a location where the roadblock was or prisons etc.

Media: A news report or a video or image

Sounds: Specific noises, songs, or voices such as gunshots, the voice of the MP or songs they used to listen to...

Tastes: Food or beverages that may be a reminder for the event

Situations: Situations that may make the person or the family feel similar to the time of the disappearance such as feelings of helplessness, loss of control, fear...

Anniversaries: The date the families last saw the MP or a specific battle where they believe the MP went missing...

Words: Emotionally loaded words, especially when discussing the remains

The 4 principle guidelines to a trauma-informed approach promote a calm, supportive, non-judgmental, and resiliency-promoting intervention which gives this sense of control back to the lives of the traumatized families. These principles should serve the front liners in contact with the families and also

- (42) Kimberg, L., Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, in *The Medical Management of Vulnerable and Underserved Patients: Principles, Practice and Populations*. Talmadge King and Margaret Wheeler, Editors.

- (43) <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-are-symptoms-ptsd>

everyone working on the file and with the families. The families of the disappeared need to be part of every step of the design and execution of activities.

These 4 Cs are: Calm, Contain, Care, and Cope

Calm

Pay attention to how you are feeling when you are dealing with the families. Working with the families can be difficult for many reasons, including their chronic frustration and disbelief in what you may have to say to them, the little or absence of answers you have for them, the slow pace and progress of the file, the vicarious traumatization from the stories...

Learn and understand the story and traumas of the families and its impacts to promote a calm, patient attitude and their lack of trust in authorities, disillusionment in any truth-seeking efforts

Design workshops, information sessions etc, in a manner that promotes a tranquil environment, and clear/transparent/straightforward content

Cultivate understanding of how resilience, justice, and equity build peaceful and calm communities and environments

Contain

Avoid asking for purposeless repetition of the story of disappearance. Collection of information should be organized, purposeful and consolidated

Maintain positive regard with families but set healthy relationship boundaries

Earn the trust of the families by behaving reliably and giving direct answers

Remain outside the victimization cycle⁴⁴ through healthy boundaries:

Respect your limits, you have limits to how much you can help, You are not the savior of the families, Watch out for self-blame and guilt, you are not their perpetrator; if your ability to help is limited that doesn't mean you are inflicting harm

Watch out not to fall victim to the stories of the families, their story is not yours and there is a limit you set for your empathy

Normalize trauma responses in families by maintaining a safe distance yet positive regard towards them

Expect the families to react intensely at times, a trauma related symptom

Train accompaniers on advanced supportive skills

- (44) Becoming a victim or a savior or a perpetrator to a survivor of an event where they have not received justice

Practice self-assessment of needs to improve and adapt to ensure a trauma-informed approach, look for parts of the stories you may not know, learn as much as possible about the different historical and personal narratives

Form multi-disciplinary and multi-sector partnerships that reduce re-traumatization for families and stakeholders such as a cross-cutting task force of mental health, forensic anthropology and legal specialists

Care

Practice self-care and self-compassion while caring for others, it is normal to feel for the families, but to what extent?

Prioritize a supportive approach when families disclose information related to their traumas to other technical or practical goals

Normalize and de-stigmatize trauma symptoms

Practice cultural and religious humility (this further supports the choice of accompaniers to be from the respective community of families)

Enact policies that promote self-care, compassion, and equity within the commission, and the multi-disciplinary and multi-sector partnerships

Cope

Emphasize accompaniment interventions that build resilience such as PSS groups

Ensure accountability towards the families by establishing communication channels with them through regional family committees and accompaniment groups

Implement accompaniment activities every step of the way, even during “down time” to ensure that families are not isolated and receive social support

Support families’ needs which are identified in the needs assessment, these can exacerbate the weight of the absence

These guidelines and the foundational principles detailed in the introduction (Safety - Trust - Choice - Collaboration - Empowerment - Respect for Diversity) lay the ground of the trauma-informed approach, which will take a practical shape in the titles below.

How a trauma-informed approach is applied with the families of the missing

An answer on the fate of the MP is the first step of reconciliation between the relatives of the missing and their agonizing story with the MP. The truth on the fate of the missing can also play an essential role in the peace building process between communities.

Families will need to be involved in each step of the way; they are not a passive agent in this process. Their involvement is key to their trust in the parties involved and the feeling of control over their story. However, a delicate balance must be established in informing the families and giving them choices along the way. Therefore, as each stakeholder and specialist fulfills their role in the uncovering of the truth, families need to be accompanied and given choices over the process through information sessions and home visits etc.

“Some people saw the ones who were digging the holes in the ground and putting graves in them here in Beirut in what was a vacant lot but now there is no lot, it’s all covered with buildings, where are they going to dig and recover at this point?!”⁴⁵

Brother of the missing, 2021

Collecting data and biological reference samples

A first step of the process is the collection of data on the MP, the circumstances of the disappearance, biological reference data (DNA) and gravesite mapping. In Lebanon, ICRC primarily and ACT for the disappeared have been the parties taking on the role of the collection of this data.

In the steps of identification that follow, much like during the collection of Ante-disappearance data (ADD) and DNA samples, the key aspect of contact with the families is management of expectations. Families can be hesitant to participate and are likely to vent out their emotions of anger and frustration after years of being silent. In fact, some families did not accept to be part of one or both of these steps, some for personal reasons, others for political or communal restraints. Whatever the choice of the family, it is to be respected.

The collection of data is usually done by the authorities of the given country but in Lebanon the ICRC has taken on the role of the authorities and will handover the ADDs and DNA samples collected to the commission.

Recovering human remains

The fact that the families who are on board have already filled out their data, and that some have given biological samples, does not exclude that they will be facing painful moments and difficult choices as the process of recovery and identification goes on and that they will face facts for which they may not be prepared to face.

As discussed earlier, different meanings are common among the same family; individuals may present varying abilities to cope with the news they are about to receive. Some will stomach the news of death or the absence of news more readily than others.

Several layers of accompaniment will be needed, some may require only group and communal accompaniment such as group sessions, symbolic collective activities, while others may require individual accompaniment through home visits or care from mental health specialists.

- (45) Interviews with FOMs, 2021

Accompaniment is a major resource for the families, ensuring they are prepared for the steps ahead, that they are adequately informed and that they will be supported after the process has reached an end no matter the result. Therefore, accompaniers need to be trained and familiarized with every step and all possible results and reactions of the families.

The identification process can also be very difficult on accompaniers, especially those who may have known the families for a long time and have grown an authentic bond with them, or those who themselves are relatives of /or know missing persons.

The process of recovery of remains

Retrieving the remains is meticulous and often requires a long time to ensure the proper retrieval, transport and storage of remains, especially when digging out mass graves.

The informed consent of the family is essential every step of the way. Informing the family of the process is the delicate step at this point. Ensuring they fully understand the process and are making a conscious informed choice is a crucial matter.

*“Families ask for scientific details. The forensic anthropologist who is doing the analysis should be informing the families of these details. Transparency is key. There shouldn’t be withholding of information so as to protect the families’ feelings, instead there should be use of scientific terms, and they should be allowed access to reports to understand what methods the specialist used and the results. My grandfather is a missing person and the involvement of the family in the scientific process is essential so that families can be as specific as possible with the information they give and the lengthiness of the process because they will understand how complicated it is and they won’t feel so frustrated.”*⁴⁶

Joyce Nassar, 2021

*“We had prepared photos of past exhumations to explain the forensic anthropological aspect of the exhumations so that they (the FOMs) understand that the process can take a long time, months...”*⁴⁷

Claudia Rivera, 2021

A gradual exposure to the truth by choosing the media (photos and videos) and the words to explain to the families the process is delicate, choosing the right amount of information is the job of a forensic specialist and a mental health specialist.

Essential information includes:

The method through which the remains will be identified

The duration of the process and next steps

Who will have access to the remains and to the information gathered

That recovery does not guarantee identification

- (46) Interview with Joyce Nassar forensic anthropologist and Commissioner, 2021

- (47) From an interview with Claudia Rivera, Director of Forensic Sciences at the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, FAFG. October 2021

Where the remains will be stored
Whom to contact for more information
That only a part of the remains may be recovered and identified
What to expect about the condition of the remains

Showing the professionalism required for the recovery is reassuring for the families. They need to know the level of care, respect and meticulous technicality required. This can be portrayed through media materials such as photos or videos.

Communicating with the families on the recovery

- Ensure the use of scientific and/or neutral wording
- Avoid giving unnecessary information to the families beyond their need for understanding of the process
- Avoid emotionally loaded words⁴⁸ when speaking about the process, the remains, the MP etc.
- Avoid specifying the MP while describing the process, instead use a neutral word such as “the individual remains”
- Attempt to answer all the questions asked by the family
- Avoid giving specific time frames for the process
- Never make promises about the time frame or results
- Ensure all close family members are informed
- Ensure social customs and religious beliefs are respected by choosing companions and specialists who are aware of local culture
- ALWAYS offer a contact for later enquiries

The decision to have families present on site

Some families may ask to be present on site during the recovery of remains and this is quite controversial for the obvious triggers which may re-traumatize the individuals. Therefore, it is advised against having them present.

Some handbooks advise to allow families on site except for some who are known to be especially vulnerable, but this differentiation can create unwanted clashes., (Why them and not me?). The points made for the presence of the families on site are to allow the families to see the recovery with their eyes and help them out of the denial of the news. However, the families should not be forced to accept a reality which they may not be ready to acknowledge, they should do so at their own pace.

Receiving the news of the death of their loved one

Once the identification has been finalized, the families whose relatives were identified will need to be

- (48) words and phrases with strong connotations used in order to invoke an emotional response

notified of the news.

This is an especially delicate moment for the families, the notification can be done in groups for the families who have been in accompaniment support groups or individually with close relatives for those who haven't been in groups.

Receiving the news in a group allows for social support and the mirroring of the emotionality from receiving the heavy news. This may not be possible for groups from large cities or those whose MPs disappeared in various circumstances and therefore may not be identified from the same sites.

Delivering the news

- Give an indicator of the nature of the news at the beginning of the meeting or visit such as: "We are here today to deliver updates on the process which may be heavy or painful"
- Ensure the presence of family members who may be less reactive to the news such as grandchildren or others who can be supportive to those closest to the MP
- Specify the identity of the MP, the families need every bit of proof to process the news
- Provide all information on the identification and circumstances of death which may ease the concerns of the families when they are ready to listen
- You may choose to inform those family members less reactive to the news of the death, ahead of time
- Expect shock reactions such as denial and anger
- Expect intense reactions despite the family knowing that there is possibility that the MP has passed
- Expect no reactions or tears of relief
- Allow for silence
- Acknowledge the mixed emotions that may come from having an answer about the fate
- Do not offer reassurance by giving compromises, such as: "at least now you know" or "they are in a better place"; the meaning that the family needs to give to the news will stem from their story and their needs and beliefs
- Acknowledge the weight of the news on yourself, it can be a heavy burden to carry
- Ensure the respect of social customs and religious practices
- The speaker should be someone whom the families trust. This person could be a familiar face they have come to know throughout the process
- Allow time for families to ask questions on later steps
- Allow time before handing over remains, preferably after some time to allow families to process the news
- ALWAYS offer a contact for later inquiries

In group settings

- Ensure the presence of a mental health specialist and forensic specialist to answer questions
- Ensure the presence of a religious figure or a community leader in religious communities
- Ensure presence of the accompaniers of the given group
- Train accompaniers and key persons on supportive communication skills such as validation, show-

ing concern, communicating empathy, allowing and using silence, non-violent communication and de-escalation etc.

- Ensure that all the families have been able to understand the news of death
- Do not force the news on those who refuse it

Refusal to accept the news of the death of the MP

It is not uncommon for families to refuse to accept the news, and there are numerous reasons why the families may find it difficult or choose not to accept it.

In this case, the person tasked with delivering the news can:

Re-explain to the family the process and show understanding for their mistrust
Offer to put them in contact with other families who were in a similar predicament

However, the family's choice to refuse the news should be respected, and the aim of the future support should not be to get them to accept but rather to process and memorialize if they have not done so yet.

It can be very difficult for families to accept the death of a loved one, if they are not ready to do so; for example, if they have believed for very long that the MP disappeared as a hero or a martyr for the sake of his/her patriotism but the given circumstances contradict their beliefs.

This psychological resistance can be coupled with reasoning that supports it.

Pragmatically, the families may have information on the circumstances or events which contradict the information given now or have been handed only minimal remains.

Trying to get the families to accept the news when they are clear about their refusal is fighting their choice and their ability to process and therefore diminishing their resilience.

Receiving the remains of the loved one

No matter how much preparation precedes this moment, the experience can be extremely painful for the families. If there were belongings found on the person of the MP, they should be shown prior to this moment, preferably when the news is delivered to ease them into this day when the news "becomes real", much like the burial of a loved one or an open casket funeral.

Despite having shown images of remains during the information sessions, the moment of receiving their own can be very difficult especially if there are few remains, or there are signs of what the MP may have endured prior to their death.

The families may experience emotions like guilt for feeling relieved of knowing the truth.

Much like previous steps, it is preferable that families gather in their groups for this event for the aforementioned reasons. If not, even in a closed family setting, the accompaniers should be present as well as the family members or friends who can be a source of support for them.

The families in some cases need to be offered support for proper re-burial of the remains. This could mean a collective event for a group of families or the accompaniers being present to support the families on the day of the reburial.

*“When we go to the cemeteries in my hometown, I can’t describe how hard it is for me; this guy is praying for his deceased and the other is burying them... this is life, death is part of it. If this disappearance happened nowadays, maybe they wouldn’t have taken them. There is advocacy now but back then people lived chaotically, no one really cared, and people weren’t as aware as they are now, people were still naive, very very naive.”*⁴⁹

Enaam, sister and wife of the missing, 2021

Accompanying the families in adjusting to no longer having a missing person

In Lebanon, the FOMs have been waiting for 3 or 4 decades. They have been forced to return to and maintain a pseudo-normal life despite the ongoing disappearance. However, now accepting and becoming accustomed to “knowing” reverberates immensely on the lives of close family members. This is especially true for those who have sacrificed their lives or given meaning to their lives in the search of the missing. They now have to face a major change in their identity. Depressive symptoms or clinical depression may follow throughout the grieving process. The “emptiness” is created by knowing, by the loss of a cause, by the loss of a preoccupation of having a MP.

Families will need to be accompanied especially throughout this phase, as this can have further detrimental effects on their physical and psychological health.

Accompaniment group sessions can suggest meaningful activities for the families depending on their demographics and socioeconomic statuses such as handicrafts or a memorial activity or awareness raising activities etc.

Symbolic social and religious memorials or rituals

For the families whose missing person has not been found

The length of time that has passed, and the change in the locations of battles and massacres, the rebuilding of Beirut post war, and construction in rural areas make it less likely for MPs to be found or identified in those locations.

This needs to be clarified from the beginning of the process, that only a fraction of the families will have answers despite the best efforts of the commission and the specialists.

In reviewing numerous contexts where there have been efforts on uncovering the truth in regard to the enforced disappearances, the results vary greatly with regards to the numbers of MPs and the remains recovered and identified.

For the families who will have no news and no resolution to their struggle, symbolic actions or memorials could be a source of solace. The identity of the MP may be established individually or with the family, but for the society around, the MP is neither dead or alive, neither a martyr nor a prisoner... This ambiguity and enforced disappearance from the minds of the community burdens the families further. The work of Simon Robbins in *“Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialization of the Missing in Nepal”* (2014) answers the questions on and needs of the families in this impasse.

“Memorialization is a social process that can create meanings and reconstruct identities and, when performed locally, can collectively reconfigure the social space in which survivors live.”

“Rather than approaching memory after conflict through the trope of trauma, in which truth is something provided by an institutional process, such as a truth commission, that reconciles across the divide of the conflict, victims seek to reconcile themselves to what has happened and to their community, creating positive meanings that can provide hope for the future”

Activities which console families the most establish an identity for the MP, not only for them individually but also within their own communities. Much like memorialization programs, families at this stage will need to keep the memory of the MP alive in their communities so that they could even if briefly unburden themselves from the weight of being the Bearer of the “memory” of the MP.

“They (The families of the missing) also want memorialization to reshape the social spaces in which they live and in which many of the most extreme impacts of disappearance occur. This leads me to the concept of a therapeutic memorialization, one which serves not the interests of power or a party to the conflict but enhances the well-being of victims.”

This memorial or memorialization product can be the staple in a ritual the families uphold for their beloved missing, much like the International Day of the Disappeared (30th of August). The families will feel the compassion of others for a day every once in a while and establish whatever meaning or identity for the MP that they choose to portray in their product.

“Much work on memorialisation in transitional justice processes neglects the power relations that drive collective memory, in the sense of who remembers and how. The intervention described here (in the paper) sought to explicitly enable the agency of victims, engaging with their subjectivity and identity.

Memorialisation can boost psychological and emotional resilience and well-being: commemorations and acts of tribute give a positive meaning to families’ experience, affirming the value of the missing and of the family in the light of the devaluing impact of violations, and reinforce the identity of the families as families of the missing.”

For the families who do not want recovery of remains

Some families choose not to recover the remains of their loved one. The choice of the families needs to be respected, and these families still need to feel control over what to do to symbolically express and

commemorate their missing.

Some of these families are those whose MP was an elderly person at the time of the disappearance or confirmed dead but whose remains were not returned, or was murdered on the spot in armed clashes. In some rural towns, the families even know where their missing were each buried individually or collectively. For these families the same approach to memorialization detailed here above can be beneficial if they choose to do so. However, they should have the option to re-discuss this because they might change their minds when they see the process and other MPs identified.

“When exhuming, there may be in the same mass grave remains of MPs whose families do not want their MP exhumed, but when the other MPs are identified they say:”Ok I want my relative to be identified as well””

Claudia Rivera,2021

Chapter 5: Dealing with the stress of working on the missing

Caring for the wellbeing of the persons working in stressful and traumatic environments is also part of a trauma-informed approach.

Supporting the wellbeing and resilience of providers ensures they stay in good health and maintain their capacity to deliver their work sensitively and in a trauma-informed way.

The caregiver's capacity to deliver with empathy is closely linked to their ability to be compassionate with themselves.

Cumulative stress conditions

Working on the file of the missing in Lebanon can be burdensome and is often an arduous task. Frontliners and other staff members working on the issue of the missing may feel exhausted because of the little progress in return of their effort.

This cumulative stress requires a conscious and intentional effort to manage so as not to reach burn-out or compassion fatigue.

Burn-out is defined in ICD-11 as follows:

“Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

*Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”*⁵⁰

*“Compassion fatigue is the burnout and stress-related symptoms experienced by caregivers and other helping professionals in reaction to working with traumatized people over an extended period of time.”*⁵¹

Symptoms of stress can be categorized into 4 groups:

- (50) International classification of diseases for mortality and morbidity statistics (11th Revision)
- (51) American Psychological association. Dictionary of Psychology

Cognitive: Anxious thoughts, fearful anticipation, poor concentration, difficulty with memory.

Emotional: Feelings of tension, irritability, restlessness, worries, inability to relax, depressive mood

Behavioral: Avoidance of tasks; sleep problems; difficulty in completing work assignments; fidgeting; tremors; strained face; clenching fists; crying; changes in drinking, eating, or smoking behaviors.

Physiological: Stiff or tense muscles, grinding teeth, sweating, tension headaches, faint feelings, choking feeling, difficulty in swallowing, stomachache, nausea, vomiting, loosening of bowels, constipation, frequency and urgency of urination, loss of interest in sex, tiredness, shakiness or tremors, weight loss or gain, awareness of heart beat.

Social: Some people in stressful times tend to seek out others to be with. Other people withdraw under stress. Also, the quality of relationships can change when a person is under stress.”

The stress acquired from working on the file can also be traumatic. It is common for those working closely with survivors of trauma to become affected, to feel a shift in their view of the world and others. The American psychological association defines vicarious traumatization (VT) as the “the impact on a therapist of repeated emotionally intimate contact with trauma survivors.”

However, this impact affects caregivers such as social workers, nurses, doctors or other people closely working with the traumatized population.

Accompaniers for example who empathetically engage with the families can be impacted by their stories and views on the world, others and themselves.

Self-care strategies

Self-care is a continuous practice of managing levels of stress and improving wellbeing. Practicing self-care should not be limited to dealing with high levels of stress, it is an essential component of maintaining psychological wellbeing.

If you find yourself suffering chronically, struggling daily with your routine roles at work and in your personal life, the following tips can help you. The tips might not be enough on their own, in that case please seek the help of a mental health professional such as a psychologist/psychotherapist.

Self-care tips:

- Recognize your personal signs of stress, the ways in which your psyche, mind and body expresses stress is specific to you.
- Look for relaxing/soothing activities which calm your mind and ease your heart rate
- Take care of your physical wellbeing
- Maintain a healthy work/life balance
- Be realistic with your expectations of yourself
- Acknowledge your own limits, you cannot save the world or help the families beyond your capacity
- Take time off when you need to, and on regular basis
- Seek social support from trusted colleagues, friends, and family members.
- In order to avoid becoming personally involved, you must develop your capacity to communicate

supportively through professional training. This will help you develop supportive skills, learn how to communicate with empathy, validate, show concern while practicing detachment and avoiding taking on their burdens as your own or making promises out of compassion.

Staff care

Caring for the wellbeing of front liners who are in constant contact with the families, on site, or in any form of contact with the material such as data and narratives are an organizational priority to the given stakeholder working on the missing file.

The following principles are essential for stakeholders aiming to maintain a trauma-informed approach by caring for their own staff first.

Essential principles of staff care:

Principle 1: Systemic commitment to staff care

- Define staff care as a guiding principle by prioritizing it as an essential component of operations
- Set policies and procedures and budgets
- Build the organizations' capacity to support the staff by updating policies and participating in relevant conferences, workshops etc

Principle 2: Orientation and guidance

- Inform staff on the stressors they may face on the field and provide them with resilience resources and services when first joining the organization or when taking on a new assignment
- Inform onboarding staff of the organization's staff care policies and the services at their disposal
- Set orientation and onboarding materials on self-care, resilience and stress management

Principle 3: Continued support

- Ensure consistent staff care sessions in group settings for workers with similar work contexts, this could be on a monthly, quarterly or bi-yearly process based on the need of the employees
- Ensure individual support consultations and materials are available for staff to access confidentially
- Provide rest and relaxation activities for staff
- Set up communication channels on the topic of staff care
- Provide managers with additional support to ensure their wellbeing and ability to support their own staff
- Ensure staff wellbeing monitoring policies especially following critical incidents and highly stressful work periods
- When feasible, set up a peer support component with clearly defined frame of timing and place where staff can openly share with colleagues within the safe space ensured by a qualified facilitator who could be a colleague as well
- Identify job role which hold a higher risk of traumatic stress or higher load of work and prioritize their access to services
- Ensure everyone is involved in staff care activities at large, no one is immune to stress even if they do not show it

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