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Editorial:

Mental health challenges of enforced disappearances: a call for research and action

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Enforced disappearances are defined by the United Nations as the arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty by state agents, or those acting with state approval, followed by the concealment of the victim's fate or whereabouts. These disappearances present profound mental health challenges for both the individuals concerned and their families (United Nations, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Unlike conventional bereavement, families of the disappeared live in a perpetual state of ambiguous loss in which they are unable to grieve or move forward<sup>2</sup>. However, this unique psychological burden lacks a well-established evidence base for therapeutic intervention, leaving both victims' families and mental health professionals without clear guidance.

The mental health challenges associated with enforced disappearances are often unearthed only when an authoritarian regime is removed. In many contexts, both victims and therapists are often afraid to speak out, even in settings in which medical confidentiality is meant to be assured. This fear can act as a significant barrier to understanding what has happened, and what therapeutic approaches work best. Meanwhile, the persisting effects of political repression may limit mental health research and interventions, further exacerbating a crisis that requires urgent global attention.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced> (2025, accessed 27 May 2025)

<sup>2</sup> Boss P. Families of the missing: psychosocial effects and therapeutic approaches. *International Review of the Red Cross*. 2017; 99(2); 519-534. [https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc\\_99\\_905\\_4.pdf](https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc_99_905_4.pdf)

## *The Global Scope of the Issue*

Enforced disappearances are a significant human rights violation affecting thousands of individuals across various regions, including Latin America, South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa<sup>3</sup>. Historical examples include the 'Dirty War' in Argentina (1976–1983), where an estimated 30,000 people were disappeared<sup>4</sup> and contemporary cases such as those in Syria, where tens of thousands remain missing due to state repression and conflict<sup>5</sup>. The problem is not limited to conflict zones; enforced disappearances have also been reported in a wide range of contexts, often targeting political dissidents, journalists, or people from marginalised groups<sup>6</sup>. Although the precise numbers of people disappeared will likely never be fully understood, many other countries have also been affected – including Chile (1973 – 1990), Mexico, Colombia (during the civil conflict), Sri Lanka (during the 1983 – 2009 civil war), Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Philippines, China, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Algeria (during the 1990s).

## *Psychological impact and challenges*

The absence of information about the fate of a disappeared person creates a psychological state known as ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999)<sup>7</sup>. Unlike traditional bereavement, where rituals such as funerals and commemorations facilitate emotional processing, families of the disappeared exist in a prolonged state of uncertainty. This lack of closure can lead to complicated grief, chronic anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A number of distinct challenges can be identified:

- **No Definitive Loss or Closure:** Unlike in conventional bereavement, where a loved one's death is acknowledged through social and cultural rituals, families of the disappeared remain trapped in a kind of uncertainty. This unresolved loss prevents the typical grieving process and can lead to prolonged distress (Boss, 2007)<sup>8</sup>
- **Societal Stigma and Political Fear:** Many families face social isolation or even threats if they seek justice or public recognition of their loss. In some cases,

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations. With conflicts, internal strife, leading to escalating enforced disappearances worldwide, third committee highlights importance of coordinated search.

<https://press.un.org/en/2023/gashc4384.doc.htm> (2025, accessed 27 May 2025)

<sup>4</sup> Tondo L, Basso E, Jones S. Adopted by their parents' enemies: tracing the stolen children of Argentina's 'dirty war'. The Guardian, 16 Jan 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jan/16/tracing-stolen-children-of-argentina-dirty-war>

<sup>5</sup> 4 News. Syria's disappeared. 25 Mar 2011. <https://www.channel4.com/news/syrias-disappeared>

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International. Enforced disappearances. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/enforced-disappearances/> (2025, accessed 27 May 2025)

<sup>7</sup> Boss PG. Ambiguous loss: working with families of the missing. Fam Process. 2002 Spring;41(1):14-7. doi: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2002.40102000014.x. PMID: 11924081.

<sup>8</sup> Boss, P. (2007). Ambiguous Loss Theory: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners. *Family Relations*, 56(2), 105–110. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4541653>

governments may deny disappearances altogether, leaving families vulnerable to further trauma (Hamber, 2009)<sup>9</sup>.

- *Legal and Bureaucratic Barriers*: Enforced disappearances create a complex interplay of social and psychological challenges for affected families. The lack of an official death certificate places them in legal limbo, preventing claims to inheritance, access to social benefits, and the ability to remarry. Children of the disappeared often struggle with certification issues that hinder their access to education, healthcare, and legal protections. The lack of a formal acknowledgment of their parent's status can lead to difficulties in obtaining necessary documentation and financial hardships compounding their sense of loss and instability. This prolonged uncertainty exacerbates psychological distress, contributing to chronic anxiety, depression, and unresolved grief.
- *Intergenerational Trauma*: Recent advancements in understanding intergenerational trauma are highly relevant to the families of enforced disappearance victims, and it is essential for mental health professionals to be aware of these impacts<sup>10</sup>. The family members of the disappeared persons exhibit heightened levels of anxiety and distrust in institutions, perpetuating cycles of trauma.
- *Disrupted grief processing*: In many cases of enforced disappearance, families are often denied access to mourning practices that are socially and culturally accepted. Denied the ability to hold public commemorations, their grief may remain unacknowledged, both privately and collectively. This absence of communal validation can act to intensify suffering, prolonging the sense of unresolved loss.

### *The Therapeutic Void*

Although enforced disappearances inflict profound psychological distress on affected families, there is a notable absence of established, evidence-based treatments tailored to their specific needs. Instead, traditional approaches to bereavement are generally recommended for use, but often fall short. This is because such approaches presuppose a confirmed death, with the resulting opportunity for mourning rituals - conditions that are typically absent in cases of enforced disappearance. Similarly, conventional PTSD models may not fully capture the specific blend of hope, despair, and prolonged uncertainty that these families endure.

The concept of ambiguous loss, however, may offer a framework through which we can start to understand and address the unique challenges faced by families of the disappeared. Ambiguous loss refers to situations where a loved one's absence is unclear or unresolved, which can lead to a kind of frozen grief. This paradigm

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<sup>9</sup> Hamber, B. (2009). *Transforming Societies After Political Violence: Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health*. Springer.

<sup>10</sup> Weingarten K. Witnessing the effects of political violence in families: mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and clinical interventions. *J Marital Fam Ther.* 2004 Jan;30(1):45-59. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2004.tb01221.x. PMID: 14763208.

acknowledges the persistent uncertainty and provides strategies to help individuals build resilience while they also experience ambiguity. This includes the adoption of "both-and thinking" – in other words, accepting that a loved one can be gone, yet potentially returning, at the same time.

While interventions like narrative therapy and community-based support have shown promise, research including comprehensive, large-scale studies has remained scarce. Additionally, fear of reprisal, and persisting political sensitivities, may inhibit survivors and therapists from openly discussing their experiences, hindering the evaluation and development of systematic and effective therapeutic approaches. Victims' families may also present in fluctuating states, alternating between hope and despair, meaning that their experiences are difficult to categorise when conventional approaches to understanding grief are used. There is an urgent need for systematic research to understand the grief that arises when people have been forcibly disappeared, and, subsequently, to create interventions that are specifically tailored to the psychosocial needs of families dealing with ambiguous loss.

An often-overlooked dimension of enforced disappearances is the plight of those who return. Survivors face not only the psychological aftermath of prolonged captivity and torture but also the profound challenge of reintegration into society. Their reappearance may attract unwanted public attention, fuelling fear, suspicion, or political stigma. Many returnees struggle with trust, hypervigilance, and feelings of shame, while simultaneously navigating societal silence or denial about their ordeal. In some cases, the fear of being labelled "mentally unstable" discourages them from seeking psychological support, further compounding their isolation. These layered vulnerabilities highlight the urgent need for trauma-informed reintegration programmes that offer anonymity, dignity, and sustained psychosocial care.

### *A Call for Research and Action*

Enforced disappearances represent an ongoing humanitarian and psychological crisis that demands more attention from the global mental health community. The first step is a comprehensive study mapping the prevalence and psychological impact across different regions. The next phase should involve the development and testing of targeted interventions, including culturally sensitive therapy models that address ambiguous loss and prolonged grief.

Mental health professionals must advocate for policy changes that support victims' families, including legal recognition of their status, access to mental health services, and the right to seek justice without persecution. International psychiatric associations, human rights organisations, and trauma researchers need to collaborate to fill this critical gap.

### *Conclusion*

The mental health burden of enforced disappearances is profound yet poorly understood. Families of the disappeared face unique challenges that standard bereavement models fail to address. While some community-based interventions have shown promise, there is a dire need for rigorous research to develop evidence-

based treatments. Mental health professionals, policymakers, and researchers must come together to acknowledge this invisible trauma, advocate for affected families, and push for therapeutic innovation. Addressing this issue is not just a clinical necessity but a moral imperative.