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MEMORY
PROJECT

«Never Healing Wound»: Long-Term Consequences of Enforced Disappearances for the Families of Missing People in Chechnya



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This report was produced in the framework of the “Memory Project”. This project is dedicated to the issue of grave human rights violations, abductions, and enforced disappearances during the armed conflict in the North Caucasus, and aims to preserve the memory of the victims of Stalinist repressions and deportations, and to counter the rehabilitation of Stalin’s personality. This report presents the findings of a field study conducted in 2023 in the Chechen Republic. Fragments of interviews taken during the study also formed the basis of the short animated film “Ni Zhivyye, Ni Mertvyie” (“Neither Living, Nor Dead¹”), which was published on February 23, 2024, on the eightieth anniversary of the deportation of the Ingush and Chechens by Stalin. The main findings of this report were summarized in a pre-release by the Novaya Gazeta².

¹. Memory Project, Neither Living Nor Dead [short animated film], YouTube, February 23, 2024. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu-F0pYiZaM>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

². Milashina Ye., “Ni Zhivyye, Ni Mertvyie” [Neither Living Nor Dead] Novaya Gazeta, February 23, 2024. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/02/23/ni-zhivye-ni-mertvyie>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

«Never Healing Wound»: Long-Term Consequences of Enforced Disappearances for the Families of Missing People in Chechnya

Introduction

Enforced disappearance refers to a set of severe human rights violations. When systematically committed against civilians as part of a large-scale attack, enforced disappearances are considered a crime against humanity. International law obliges states to bring perpetrators to justice through criminal investigation and prosecution.³ These elements become the foundation for sustainable recovery and reconciliation, which are especially important for relatives of missing persons.

Since the outbreak of the second armed conflict in the Chechen Republic at the end of 1999, between three and five thousand residents of Chechnya have gone missing, mostly after being detained by security forces. Since then, their families, which are thousands of people (parents, wives, children, sisters, and brothers), have lived in a state of constant anxiety and uncertainty. For many years, the relatives of the missing have been struggling with the unknown, continuing to hope for the return of their loved ones. However, they have been unable to obtain any reliable information about their fate, encountering not only inaction on the part of investigative authorities but also frequent attempts to conceal the crimes. The uncertainty associated with the loss or unknown fate of loved ones affects many aspects of the lives of missing people's relatives.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the psychosocial consequences of ambiguous loss for relatives of missing persons, as well as their mechanisms of seeking justice and preserving memory. A study of the long-term impact of disappearances on close relatives is a largely unexplored perspective on the Chechen conflict. We have tried to reveal the depth and complexity of this emotional experience, as well as the social and political problems that families face in conditions of harsh authoritarianism, lack of justice, the impossibility of establishing the truth, and years of uncertainty.

One of the main objectives of the study is to understand the role of women in the search processes and in overcoming difficulties associated with the disappearance of loved ones. On one hand, women in families where a relative has disappeared often become not only the bearers of emotional burden, but also the pillar of support for others. The search for missing people during the wars in Chechnya was mainly carried out by women – mothers, sisters, daughters. This is largely because men were especially vulnerable during war and post-war times – they could be detained under any pretext and subjected to torture. On the other hand, the status of a missing person's wife remains largely uncertain sometimes causing serious difficulties, and we found this aspect equally important to consider. This is why empirical data were collected from women, whose families were affected by disappearance of their loved ones.

The key objective of this study is to analyze how families view the attainment of justice and how they preserve the memory of their family members in the absence of any state-sanctioned processes to establish the truth and achieve that justice. In a post-war society, bringing about

³. International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006. Available at: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/disappearance.shtml. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

lasting positive change is inseparable from processes that establish truth, justice, reconciliation, reparations, and institutional reforms.⁴ Understanding these issues is critical if a process of meaningful post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in Chechnya is to become possible.

Methods

This study is based on 21 interviews with relatives of missing persons conducted between July and August 2023. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. All respondents were applicants to the European Court of Human Rights who received positive decisions on their complaints. To conduct this study, a specialized guide of 20 questions was developed.

All respondents were women living in different localities of the republic. The interviews were conducted in Chechen and took place in Grozny. Before starting the study, we consulted with psychologist who had extensive experience working with relatives of missing persons and a deep understanding of the topic. The psychologist gave recommendations on the methodology of conducting interviews that would avoid retraumatization of the interviewees. Thus, the participants were given freedom to express their emotions, share experiences, avoid questions they found difficult, and end the conversation whenever they felt necessary.

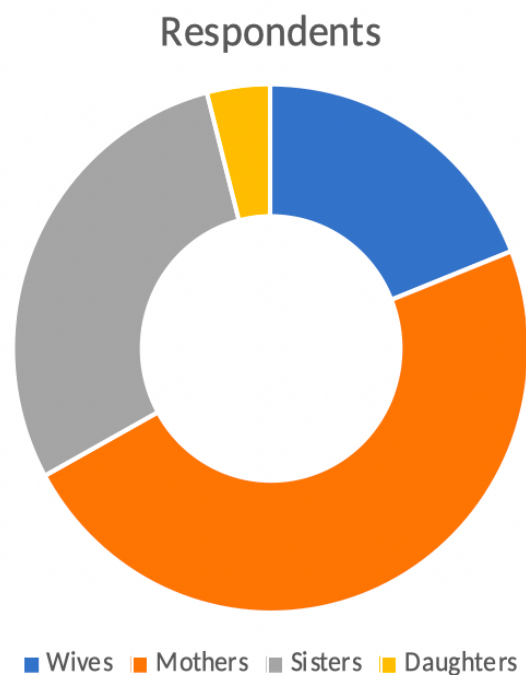
Each participant was given information about the nature and expected outcomes of the study prior to the interview. With the informed consent of the participants, all conversations were recorded on a voice recorder, transcribed, and translated into Russian. In cases where participants objected to the audio recording, the interviewer took extensive notes. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants and their stories, the report uses pseudonyms instead of real names, and information about localities and other information about the circumstances of the detention of their relatives is limited. The table below provides general information about the respondents.

No	Name	Relationship to Missing Person	Age	Family status	Children	Place of residence
1	Raisa	Spouse	57 years	Widow	4	Rural
2	Marina	Spouse	42 years	Widow	1	Rural
3	Zidat	Mother/son missing	69 years	Widow	3	Urban
4	Marem	Mother/son missing	69 years	Widow	2	Rural
5	Linda	Mother/son missing	75 years	Widow	4	Rural
6	Zargan	Mother/son missing	63 years	Married	5	Rural
7	Asma	Spouse	54 years	Widow	2	Urban
8	Kheda	Sister/brother missing	32 years	Married	3	Rural
9	Khadizhat	Sister/brother missing	59 years	Married	4	Urban
10	Zaira	Sister/brother missing	64 years	Married	2	Rural
11	Larisa	Mother/son missing	73 years	Widow	5	Rural

⁴. UN General Assembly resolution 60/147. Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (16 December 2005). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/N0549642.pdf>

12	Zoya	Mother/son missing	71 years	Widow	2	Rural
13	Laura	Sister/brother missing	45 years	Married	3	Rural
14	Aishat	Mother/son missing	68 years	Married	3	Rural
15	Lika	Mother/son missing	67 years	Married	3	Rural
16	Zulai	Sister/brother missing	53 years	Married	0	Urban
17	Elita	Mother/son missing	70 years	Widow	2	Urban
18	Rayana	Daughter/father missing	28 years	Single	0	Rural
19	Taus	Mother/daughter missing	73 years	Widow	6	Rural
20	Seda	Sister/brother missing	43 years	Widow	3	Rural
21	Fatima	Spouse	63 years	Widow	4	Rural

Of the 21 women interviewed during the study, the majority were mothers (48% of respondents); 29% were sisters, who often came for interviews instead of their sick mothers or fathers; 19% were wives of missing persons; and 4%, or one person, was the daughter of the missing person, who also participated in the interview instead of her mother.



The main limitations we faced during this study were security issues related to the overall challenging for independent researchers or public initiatives situation in the region, as well as the inextricably related problems with access to respondents. Since it was impossible to conduct the research openly and invite resp to participate, we used the contacts of the researchers' families and acquaintances to find the respondents. In many cases, the women who took part in the interview helped find other interviewees. To ensure the safety of all participants, interviews were conducted in neutral territory.

Context

The armed conflict in Chechnya, which broke out in December 1994 and officially ended with the abolition of the “counter-terror operation” regime in 2009, claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people. There is no exact data on losses. The authorities deliberately did not document civilian casualties. According to conservative estimates by the Memorial Human Rights Centre (HRC “Memorial”), up to 50 thousand civilians were killed during in the First Chechen War in Chechnya, and up to 25 thousand in the Second Chechen War. Thus, two Chechen campaigns led to almost 75 thousand civilian casualties in addition to 13 to 25 thousand casualties among Russian troops and armed supporters of Chechen independence.⁵

Killed and wounded people (combatants and civilians), destroyed cities and villages were not the only losses of the war. Both sides of the conflict grossly violated human rights. The radical wing of the Chechen separatists carried out terrorist attacks aimed at civilians. Federal security forces subjected populated areas of the republic to indiscriminate bombing and shelling, including residential areas and civilian infrastructure, which led to mass deaths. Security forces also systematically committed gross human rights violations during their so-called “special operations.”⁶ The period has been marked by the prevalence of arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances carried out by state agents.

The exact number of missing people during the wars in Chechnya is unknown. According to the HRC “Memorial,” - one of the leading human rights organizations that monitored abductions in Chechnya, - between 3,000 and 5,000 people have disappeared since 1999. However, Memorial was able to cover only 25-30% of the territory of the republic; accordingly, the actual numbers may significantly exceed the ones reported.⁷

In most cases, people disappeared without a trace after being detained by security forces. If the detention took place officially, involvement with “militants” could have been stated as the formal reason, but most of the time no reasons were given and people were effectively abducted. Armed, uniformed security forces arrived in the middle of the night in armored personnel carriers and cars without license plates; they did not introduce themselves, did not explain where the detainee was being taken, and often beat him and his relatives during the detention. Since the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999, such detentions and

⁵. Cherkasov A., Golubev O., Malykhin V., A chain of wars, a chain of crimes, a chain of impunity: Russian wars in Chechnya, Syria and Ukraine. Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, 2023, Available at: https://ruswars.org/report/Report_Memorial.pdf. Accessed: 03/03/2024. According to official data provided by the Russian authorities, more than 11 thousand Russian soldiers died in the two Chechen campaigns. According to various estimates, the losses of armed supporters of Chechen independence ranged from 2.5 thousand to 10 thousand people in the first war and about 4 thousand in the second one. Source: International Crisis Group, “The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I), Ethnicity and Conflict,” Europe Report No. 220, 2012. Available at: <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.pdf>, Accessed: 03/03/2024.

⁶. Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, Zdes' zhivut lyudi. Chechnya: khronika nasiliya [People live here. Chechnya: a chronicle of violence], Moscow: Zvenya, 2003.

⁷. International Federation of Human Rights and Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, Torture in Chechnya: “stabilization” of a nightmare. Available at: <https://www.fidh.org/ru/regiony/evropa-i-central-naya-aziya/rossiya/chechnya/Pytki-v-Chechne-stabilizatsiya>, 2006. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

Human Rights Watch, The “Dirty War” in Chechnya: Forced Disappearances, Torture, and Summary Executions. 2001. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2001/03/01/dirty-war-chechnya-forced-disappearances-torture-and-summary>, Accessed: 03/03/2024. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/chechnya/RSCH0301.PDF>

Human Rights Watch, Worse than a War: Disappearances in Chechnya - a Crime against Humanity, 2005. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/chechnya0305/>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

Amnesty International, Rossiyskaya Federatsiya: gde pravosudiye po otnosheniyu k ischeznuvshim v Chechne? [Russian Federation: Where Is Justice for Those Who Disappeared in Chechnya?] 2007. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur460152007ru.pdf>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

subsequent disappearances have become widespread.⁸

Relatives conducted searches on their own or with the help of human rights organizations. In addition to Memorial, organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Committee against Torture, and the Mothers of Chechnya (Materi Chechni) dealt with issues of missing persons in the region during the war and post-war periods. They provided legal, social, or psychological support to families of the disappeared.

In certain cases, relatives, with the help of human rights activists, were able to establish the whereabouts of the detainees. It was discovered that they were taken to military units and commandants' headquarters, which serves as further evidence that they were abducted by state agents. However, the official agencies responsible for investigating disappearances denied their involvement in the crimes. In some cases, relatives managed to find the bodies of the missing, most often with signs of cruel torture. Often the bodies of people detained at different times and in different places were found buried together. This fact also indicates the existence of a coordinated system where detainees were held for some time, brutally tortured, while their fate was being decided. The center of this system in wartime was Khankala - a main base for the stationing of federal troops, where one of the largest mass graves was discovered in 2001.⁹

Since 2003, pro-federal security forces, consisting of ethnic Chechens sponsored and armed by Moscow, began to play an active role in the fight against the insurgency.¹⁰ Many of these groups were initially paramilitary formations that did not have a formal status, but by the end of 2006, most of them were legalized in a process of the so-called "Chechenization" of the conflict and incorporated into various federal security agencies. These agencies were given absolute freedom of action and complete immunity and now it was them who primarily abducted people, many of whom subsequently disappeared without a trace¹¹.

At the same time, during this period, human rights defenders working in the region noted a decline in the number of registered complaints and of officially recorded disappearances. One of the reasons for this decrease was that local security agencies acted more selectively, as they well understood the specifics of the region and knew the people on the ground. Another reason for the drop in documented cases was intimidation, hostage-taking, and violence against relatives practiced by Chechen security forces.¹² Fearing that someone else close to them might suffer, the relatives of a detainee did not make any formal complaints and often tried to achieve their release on their own (for example, through ransom or family ties).

⁸. Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, "Neofitsial'naya" tyuremnaya sistema v Chechenskoy Respublike. [The "Unofficial" Prison System in the Chechen Republic,] 2003. Available at: <https://memohrc.org/ru/reports/neofitsial-naya-tyuremnaya-sistema-v-chechenskoy-respublike>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

Physicians for Human Rights, 2001. Chechnya: Endless brutality. Mode access: <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2001/05/chechnya-endless-brutality-report-2001.pdf>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

⁹. Human Rights Watch, V Chechne obnaruzheno massovoye zakhoroneniye [A mass grave discovered in Chechnya,] February 27, 2021. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/russian/press/russia/2001/0227.htm>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹⁰. Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, Situatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze: noyabr' 2006 – may 2007 [The situation in the North Caucasus: November 2006 - May 2007]. 2007. Available at: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fmemohrc.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fold%2Ffiles%2F184.doc&wdOrigIn=BROWSELINK>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, Chechnya 2004: "Novyie" metody "kontrterrora" [Chechnya 2004: "New" methods of "counter-terrorism,"], 2005. Available at: <https://memohrc.org/ru/reports/chechnya-2004-novye-metody-kontrterrora>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

After the final establishment of Ramzan Kadyrov's personalist regime in the Chechen Republic in 2008,¹³ detentions of people suspected of "extremism" and support to militants continued. During this period, short-term detentions, during which the detainees were severely beaten and tortured to obtain information, became common practice. They would subsequently be released, with the warning that they should not tell anyone about anything if they did not want trouble for themselves or their families. Often, detainees did not see the faces of their tormentors, hidden under masks, and did not know where exactly they were kept, since they were blindfolded during transport to the interrogation site. Another characteristic feature of the detentions of this period was the confiscation of documents from illegally detained people. After interrogation and torture, they were released, yet their documents were not returned, which often prevented the victims from leaving the republic, and made them victims of repeated detentions. Once detained, people often ended up in the databases of various law enforcement agencies and were subsequently repeatedly detained during routine document checks.¹⁴

Since 2009, abductions by security forces have again become more frequent, but the relatives of the abducted were now even less likely to turn to human rights defenders. To this day, "temporary disappearances" are practiced in the republic whereby abducted persons disappear for a certain period, from several hours to several weeks, and subsequently may be either released or formally arrested on a fabricated charge. In some cases, people disappear without a trace, which most often means that the detainee is no longer alive. The most fully documented and resonant case was the illegal detention and execution of 27 residents of Chechnya that occurred in 2017.¹⁵

These severe human rights violations in Chechnya remain relevant to this day. Republican authorities systematically persecute opponents and critics of the regime and those who are considered insufficiently loyal, or associated with extremist groups, LGBTQ+, and those who, for some reason, have strongly angered the current leadership. Kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial executions, as well as pressure, threats, and violence against family members of disfavored people are still common in the republic. Often, attacks are also directed at human rights activists and journalists,¹⁶ who criticize the situation in the republic and/or assist victims. The authorities do not investigate such facts, and the criminals remain unpunished.

According to human rights activists, around 900 people were abducted in Chechnya in 2022.¹⁷ Almost all of those detained were subsequently released; some were handed over to the police for further processing of the arrest. However, given the difficult situation in the region, it is important to note that this assessment requires verification. Human rights activists were able to confirm only isolated cases of abductions.¹⁸ The atmosphere of fear, the absence of

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Chechnya: The Inner Abroad. Crisis Group," Europe Report No. 236, 2015. Available at: <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/236-chechnya-the-inner-abroad.pdf>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹⁴ International Federation of Human Rights and Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre, Pytki v Chechne: «stabilizatsiya» koshmara [Torture in Chechnya: "stabilization" of a nightmare.] 2006. Available at: <https://www.fidh.org/ru/regiony/evropa-i-central-naya-aziya/rossiya/chechnya/Pytki-v-Chechne-stabilizatsiya>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹⁵ Milashina Ye. "Pokhishcheny i ubity agentami gosudarstva": YESPCH priznal vinu Rossii v dele o kazni 27 chelovek" [Kidnapped and killed by agents of the state": the ECHR found Russia guilty in the case of the execution of 27 people.] Novaya Gazeta website, December 14, 2021. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/12/14/pokhishcheny-i-ubity-agentami-gosudarstva>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹⁶ "V Chechne napali na zhurnalistku Yelenu Milashinu i advokata Aleksandra Nemova" [Journalist Yelena Milashina and lawyer Alexander Nemov were attacked in Chechnya,] BBC Russian Service, July 4, 2023, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c16932g0n11o>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

¹⁷ Orlov O., Cherkasov A., "Nasil'stvennyye ischeznoveniya v Chechne" [Enforced disappearances in Chechnya,] 2023. Available at: https://memorialcenter.org/uploads/Ru_Enforced_Disappearances_Chechnya_73262c4895.pdf. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

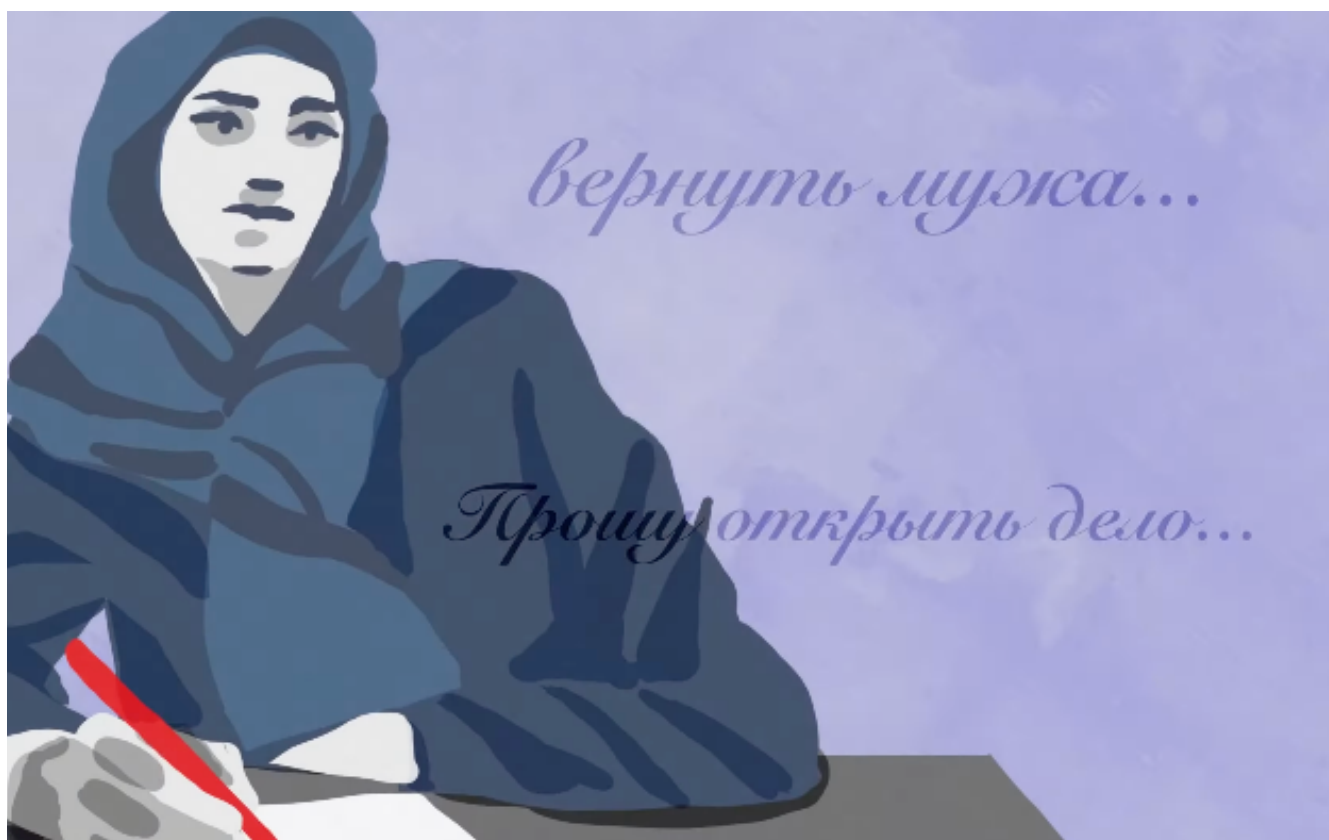
¹⁸ Ibid.

human rights organizations, and independent monitoring mechanisms in the republic make it impossible to obtain reliable information on the actual number of disappearances.

The number of missing persons in the recent years may be significantly higher. In many cases, people try to establish the whereabouts of missing relatives on their own, without turning to government agencies. This is often due to a lack of trust in the authorities and the fear of making the situation worse for the abducted relative and/or other family members. Given that abductions are most often carried out by agents of the state, and publicity often leads to reprisals against other family members, unofficial methods for finding and returning missing persons often prove to be more effective.

Impunity and the Search for Justice

Impunity is the absence of justice created when the system, through unjust laws and other mechanisms, seeks to protect not the victims, but the perpetrators of violence. Impunity affects the entire society, maintaining an atmosphere of oppression. Truth allows people to connect the events of the past and give meaning to their present and future. The truth retold and recorded becomes documentary evidence of collective memory. By limiting the survivors' access to the truth, impunity contributes to maintaining a distorted picture of historical events and denies recognition to the experiences and pain of victims, which impedes their recovery and rehabilitation. Justice is similarly important to the survivors – it too becomes part of the history of a people in the process of re-establishing their peaceful life.



For years, relatives of the missing have been looking for ways to establish the truth and achieve justice, turning to the authorities and investigative bodies of the Russian Federation. However, apart from isolated cases, Russian authorities did not investigate crimes committed by state agents in Chechnya. Residents of the republic have completely lost hope of their

rights being protected at the national level. The only opportunity for them to be heard was the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). To date, the ECHR has made decisions in 668 cases, establishing facts of violations of the right to life and the impermissibility of torture as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. In 2012, the ECHR issued an important decision on the case of Aslakhanova and Others v. Russia, which paid particular attention to the systemic problems associated with enforced disappearances in the North Caucasus.¹⁹

Russia paid compensations awarded by the European Court to the relatives of the missing but never executed the Court's ruling in the part of investigating crimes and punishing those responsible for the disappearances. For relatives of missing persons, monetary compensation is not as important as establishing the truth about what happened to their loved ones and restoring justice. To ensure that such crimes stop in Chechnya and do not occur in other regions of Russia, the rulings of the ECHR must be followed through to their full extent – the crimes must be investigated, and the perpetrators must be brought to justice²⁰.

One of the key factors complicating the fulfillment of ECHR rulings in disappearance cases is the fact that Russian law does not provide for exceptions from statutes of limitations for war crimes or crimes against humanity. This means that, over time, the ability to investigate and prosecute such crimes decreases.²¹ The absence of a special article in the criminal code of the Russian Federation that qualifies enforced disappearance as a separate crime is also an obstacle to the effective investigation and prevention of such crimes. This factor became even more relevant in connection with Russia's decision in March 2022 to stop implementing ECHR judgments after expulsion from the Council of Europe.²² Despite ongoing calls from the ECHR to comply with the rulings, Russia continues to ignore its obligations. Even if it becomes possible to investigate these crimes in the coming years, the risk that statutes of limitations will apply to them remains. Political will and structural reforms are needed to be able to establish the fate of the missing persons, to investigate crimes committed against them, to bring the perpetrators to justice, which in turn will prevent the recurrence of mass violence.

Ambiguous Loss

The term “ambiguous loss”, introduced by psychotherapist and professor Dr. Pauline Boss, is most useful in explaining how the disappearance of a loved one affects their family members. Ambiguous loss is a situation where a person does not have a clear idea of whether a close relative is alive or dead.²³ This type of loss is usually associated with war or illness (such as severe forms of dementia).

¹⁹ Aslakhanova vs. Russia, Stichting Justice Initiative. Available at: <https://www.srji.org/legal/aslakhanova>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Who will tell me what happened to my son? Russia's implementation of European Court of Human Rights Judgments on Chechnya,” 2009. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/27/who-will-tell-me-what-happened-my-son/russias-implementation-european-court-human>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

²¹ Kulikov V. “Sledovatelye obyazhut zakryvat' dela s istekshim srokom davnosti” [Investigators will be obligated to close cases with an expired statute of limitations,] Rossiyskaya Gazeta, January 25, 2023. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2023/01/25/za-staroe-opravdaiut.html>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

²² Skoblik K. The Human Rights Backlash in Criminal Justice: The Case of Russia's Exit from the European Convention on Human Rights, EJIL Talk!, August 1, 2023. Available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-human-rights-backlash-in-criminal-justice-the-case-of-russias-exit-from-the-european-convention-on-human-rights>. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

²³ Boss, P.G., Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

When loss contends with uncertainty, it freezes the grieving process. Traumatic experiences can last for many years and even be passed on from generation to generation.²⁴ People experiencing ambiguous loss are stuck in this state, not understanding what to do next, since most of the time, society offers no mechanisms that would help cope with such a situation. Uncertainty disrupts commonly recognized and accepted markers of life and death, and the experience of the missing person's family cannot be seen as a familiar part of the life cycle, so the family often feels alone in their grief.²⁵

The biggest challenge for families of missing people is learning to live with the loss. Most often, families describe their condition as a feeling of defenselessness, depression, anxiety (psychological consequences), somatization of experiences (that is, the development of ailments against the backdrop of stress and anxiety), and conflicts in the family. Ambiguous loss becomes an ongoing, perpetual traumatic process. The anxiety is focused on the continuing absence of the missing person, not just the event of his or her disappearance. The most tangible and traumatic impact of an ambiguous loss is precisely that it cannot be left in the past.²⁶



Even though in most cases it is men who go missing, women (mothers, wives, daughters, sisters), who find themselves alone in a patriarchal society, suffer from deteriorated social, economic and psychological problems due to the loss of a family member who often was also the breadwinner.²⁷ Not knowing whether or not their loved one will return, does not allow the family to reconsider intrafamilial roles and rules, and this situation often does not work in the woman's favor. The disappearance of a man from the family leads to a kind of crisis of status and identity for the woman. This is especially evident in relation to the missing person's wife.

²⁴ Boss, PG, "The trauma and complicated grief of ambiguous loss," *Pastoral Psychol*, 2010, No. 59: pp. 137–145.

²⁵ Betz, G., & Thorngren, J. M., "Ambiguous Loss and the Family Grieving Process," *The Family Journal*, 2006, No. 14 (4), pp. 359–365.

²⁶ Robins, S., "Discursive Approaches to Ambiguous Loss: Theorizing Community-Based Therapy after Enforced Disappearance," *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2016, No. 8: pp. 308–323.

²⁷ Kapur, A., & Alshaibi, S., "The Impact of Enforced Disappearances on Women," in: J. Heath & A. Zahedi (Eds.), *Book of the Disappeared: The Quest for Transnational Justice*, 2023, pp. 62–90.

Her status within her husband's family becomes ambiguous – she is not a widow, since there is no confirmation of the death of her missing husband, but she is no longer a wife since her husband is not physically present. It is unclear whether she should stay with her husband's family, continue to live with his relatives or return to her own family. Difficulties often arise in interpreting the mother's right to raise children, since according to Chechen adats (customary laws), children are considered as part of their father's family, and their relatives have priority rights in upbringing. It is difficult for a woman to explain to her children where their father is, and, even if desired, it is difficult to gather the courage to remarry, because she is neither a widow nor divorced.

According to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,²⁸ the relatives of missing persons, along with those who disappeared, are also considered victims of the crime. In the following sections, we will show what grave consequences these crimes had for our respondents.

Psychological Consequences

Laura and her one-year-old son came to their village to visit her parents. At two o'clock in the morning, armed men in masks and military uniforms burst into their house. They walked around the rooms as if they were purposefully looking for something. Laura's son was crying; her sister was also terrified, she was crying and screaming. The masked men threatened to shoot them if they did not shut up. They then grabbed Laura's father and pushed him out of the house. Everyone else was ordered to stay in the house and not come out. After some time, they returned and took Laura's younger brother, who was 27 years old at the time of his arrest. Both men were put in an armored personnel carrier and taken away in an unknown direction.

Laura was the one most involved in the search for her brother and father. Her mother was unwell and could barely move. Laura spent a lot of time in various state agencies but could not find a single trace of her family members. Every evening, the whole family went out into the yard and sat in front of the house, waiting for their father and brother, hoping that a car would come and bring them back. A little more than a month passed when one of the neighbors approached them and told them that a body of an unknown man had been found in the river in a neighboring village. Judging by the description, this could have been Laura's father. Laura's relatives went to the neighboring village. They were given the shirt the man was wearing. It was Laura's father's shirt. In the breast pocket of his shirt were dentures — Laura's father had a habit of putting them there when his blood pressure rose. Laura's family reburied her father in their village. They never learned anything about the fate of her brother who was taken away with the father. Laura's mother died without seeing her son. Now Laura continues to search for her brother.

I think he's alive. I never had the feeling that he was gone. I have night dreams about my mom and dad and my dead brothers [Laura had two older brothers who died before her younger brother and father were kidnapped], but he is never in my dreams. That's why I think he's alive.

²⁸ International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2006. Available at: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/disappearance.shtml. Accessed: 03/03/2024.

This is a typical reaction of missing people's relatives. Without confirmation that their loved one has died, people become lost, do not know what to do or think, deny their loss and continue to hope.

I think he is alive; he is just being held somewhere in the North in prison, but he will come back. And he will be very happy with how I've dealt with everything – I raised four children by myself, built a house. He will be happy to live there. (Raisa, 57 years old, searching for her husband)

It seems to me that if he were dead, we would have found him, like our father... We did find our father, albeit dead. It seems, why didn't we find our brother if he was killed? I don't know. People do say that they were taken someplace and kept in prisons. (Laura, 45 years old, searching for her brother)

This hope is twofold and reflects the complexity of the emotional process that accompanies this type of loss. On the one hand, it becomes a source of consolation and support; it gives the strength to continue everyday life. On the other hand, it is coupled with anxiety. The imagination of what trials a missing loved one might have gone through instills fear and anxiety. Thus, these two sides can coexist, creating the emotional ambivalence that families of missing people constantly live with. We heard about this most frequently from mothers of missing people: They say we have these prisons – "White Swan," "Berkut." I only hope he is not there. Better let him be dead. They are very much tortured there; what don't they do to people there. (Larisa, 73 years old, searching for her son)

People tell me that he is probably alive, that he will return, but to be honest, I no longer want him to be alive or to return. 16 years have passed. If he is alive, what kind of life has he seen? Better let them have killed him on the spot. We all have to die sooner or later. And if he comes back now... he's 43 already... what kind of person would he be? This is understandable, everyone wants..., but, if you imagine... I can't [weeps]. How would I meet him? (Elita, 70 years old, searching for her son)

My sons still hope that their father will return. 21 years have already passed, and I have almost given up hope, but they wait for him... I think that he will return after all, to be honest. It is said that they were taken to work in some distant places that can only be reached by helicopter. Most likely, some kind of islands. (Fatima, 63 years old, searching for her husband)

Another common psychological consequence of ambiguous loss is anxiety. All the women interviewed, especially moms searching for sons and daughters, said that they still live in a state of constant anticipation and anxiety. This anxiety permeates their daily lives, creating constant, intense stress, and has profound psychological consequences for these women.

At night I can't close the gate, or close the door. I'm waiting for him all the time. If I hear rustling on the street, I run out. This is what happens when someone promises to come, and you are waiting for him. I don't even know how to explain... (Elita, 70 years old, searching for her son)

Every morning she [mother] went to the city to look for my brother. She hasn't spent a single day at home since he disappeared. She never told us where she went. One day she came home limping, but she did not tell us what happened to her. She just said that everything was good. (Khadizhat, 59 years old, searching for her brother)

We still don't lock the gate at night. I want him to be able to come in at any time. We didn't really live after our son disappeared. Every evening I hope that I will see him at home in the morning, and every morning I hope that he will come in the evening. If a car drives past the house at night, I run out in the hope that that is my son returning. I want to cry all the time. There is no joy at all. (Zidat, 69 years old, searching for her son)

The anticipation and constant feeling of anxiety in which these women live often lead to nightmares, in which missing relatives appear. Zulai's younger brother was taken from their village home in the middle of the night in 2001. Since then, she dreams of him quite often:

The last time, I had a very scary dream about him. After that, I didn't dream about him anymore. And before that, I often saw him in my dreams. I saw him once - some old basement quarters, with old tiling. In every room I saw people... they were dead. And I saw my brother hanged. He was hanging by his feet and bleeding, and after that I didn't see him. (Zulai, 53 years old, searching for her brother)

As noted above, in a situation of uncertainty concerning the fate of a loved one, the mourning process often freezes. People feel as if time has stopped; their emotional response to loss is suspended due to a lack of clarity and control. This creates special emotional stress and those living in uncertainty cannot adapt to loss:

Our life seemed to stop after our brother was taken away. We had no life. (Zaira, 64 years old, searching for her brother)

It is easier to cope with a confirmed loss when there is a body and the ability to grieve the loss through appropriate cultural rituals. When a relative disappears without a trace, such mechanisms do not exist.

For me, the war is not over. I wait for her every day... it would be better if she died, and I knew about it, it would be easier for me that way. Now, from one day to the next, I guard the gate waiting for her... He [husband] hardly even reminisced about our son, who was killed in the first war. But he could not live with the loss of his daughter. He died 3 years later from a heart attack. (Taus, 73 years old, searching for her daughter)

I don't reminisce about my son, who died. Even though he was killed before my eyes, I was able to bury him. And this [the missing one] is always before my eyes. There is nothing worse than this in this life. Any person must die, this is easier to accept. But when you don't know where your son is... this is the biggest punishment. (Zidat, 69 years old, searching for her son)

According to Chechen adats (customary laws), it is inappropriate for parents to praise their children or show affection towards them in public. When faced with the pain of a missing son or daughter, mothers often follow these customs and try to hide their emotions, which further

complicates the grieving process.

I was very strong. Now, after all these years, I can immediately burst into tears. Before, I held on and didn't cry. I remember once one of my relatives came to see us; she started a panic, screaming, and crying. And she asked me, why won't you scream or cry? I said – see, there is my aunt; during the war, the Russians burst into her house and shot her son right in their house, while he was asleep on the sofa... My cousin's son was killed; they cut off his head and placed the corpse in the center of the village. My other aunt had three sons die, and she didn't shed a single tear. So I won't scream and cry. (Elita, 70 years old, searching for her son)

A soldier was standing there. I told him: "If I had a machine gun, I would shoot you all." In response, he said to me: "Why aren't you crying, if your son was taken away?" I answered him: "I will not cry in front of you!" But then I walked over to the side and started crying. (Zargan, 63 years old, searching for her son)

I never cried. I shouldn't mourn him, because I believe he will come back. I've only teared up a little once since he went missing. This was when I was signing papers at the bank to receive compensation. Then I thought, "Is there truly no hope at all, and they will stop searching for him?" But it seems to me that he is alive anyway, he is just being held somewhere in prison. (Raisa, 57 years old, searching for her husband)

None of the respondents sought psychological help or took part in psychological support programs that were offered by international and local non-profit organizations during the war and post-war period in Chechnya.

It never occurred to me to go to a psychologist. How will I share with a stranger? They would not understand me anyway. I don't even tell my sister about my pain. Anyone who has not experienced this will not understand. (Marem, 69 years old, searching for her son)

Only Allah will understand and support me. The main thing is to ask for patience, to make dua.²⁹ (Elita, 70 years old, searching for her son)

Respondents often came to interviews in pairs - this is how they have searched for their relatives for many years. Usually, they met in the process, traveled together to different authorities, supported each other, and shared information. To this day, they keep in touch, visit each other, and support each other.

I only share with Larisa, because she knows what it's like. No one else will understand me like that... We always told each other all the news we received, we traveled everywhere together, went to rallies. (Zoya, 71 years old, searching for her son)

Ambiguous loss is one of the most difficult types of experiences a person can go through. The lack of clear closure or understanding of what has happened creates a constant feeling of tension, uncertainty and anxiety. These ongoing traumatic experiences can severely impact both a person's psychological and physical health.

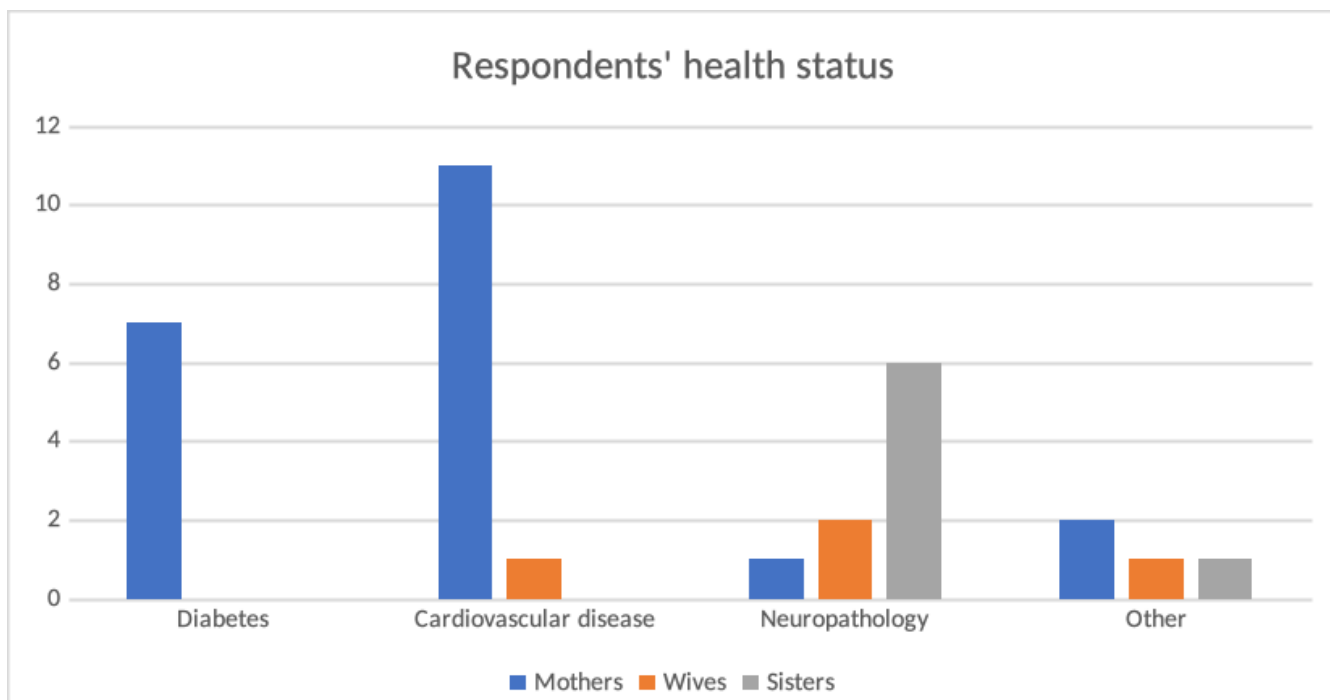
²⁹. Dua in Islam is an appeal to Allah asking for help or protection for yourself, your family and friends.

Physiological Consequences

After Larisa's son was kidnapped in February 2003, she never turned on the TV. One summer evening, Larisa suddenly wanted to listen to the news, and she turned on the local channel. The news reported that three corpses were found on the outskirts of Grozny. They were found by a tractor driver when clearing out undergrowth. They did not have any documents with them. Larisa stared at the screen as if spellbound. She got up and came closer to the TV - they were showing her boy. That night, she could not close her eyes. At 5 a.m., she left the house and headed to Grozny. She arrived at the mosque, where, as she learned, the bodies of the young people were taken. In the mosque's courtyard, they were at that moment washing the body of one of the deceased. She called over the man who was in the yard and told him her story. He took her inside the mosque. Larisa approached the one who looked just like her son, but it turned out that it was not him. This man simply had the same wide eyebrows and black hair as her son.

Then I heard the news that 53 corpses were brought to the prosecutor's office. I went there with a neighbor whose brother had also disappeared. He told me that maybe I should not go inside. I thought there would be corpses laid out on the floor. I was ready to look for my son among them. But instead, there were some piles of bones. The clothes were preserved, but there were no people in them any longer. I fell as soon as I entered. It felt like I had been hit on the head. After that, I was taken to the hospital. I spent about a month in the hospital after that. That's when I got sick. I had a heart attack, was diagnosed with diabetes, and then I was taken abroad. I had brain surgery. I had a tumor. My vision completely disappeared. Then in Austria, they restored it for me. (Larisa, 73 years old, searching for her son).

The psychological trauma that relatives had to endure in search of the missing does not pass without leaving its mark on the body. Somatization is a common phenomenon in situations of ambiguous loss. Almost all respondents in the study reported having chronic diseases. In only one case did the interviewee not have any health complaints – this was a young respondent, 28 years old, whose father had disappeared. The most frequently reported diagnoses were cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In many cases, these diagnoses are present in the same person simultaneously. These diseases were most often cited by the mothers of missing persons. Sisters and wives more often complained of general malaise, headaches, and memory problems. At the same time, when sisters talked about the health of their parents, they indicated such diagnoses as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. The chart below does not take into account the illnesses of parents and other relatives, but only the direct participants of the interviews.



The “neuropathology” category in the presented diagram includes complaints such as frequent headaches, poor memory, and insomnia. Among other diseases, benign tumors (both excised and chronic) and, in one case, sarcoidosis, were the ones most often mentioned.

Almost all respondents spoke about the fact that their illnesses were the result of the stress they had to endure during the detainment and after the disappearance of a relative.

It was a huge stress for me. I went completely gray in two months. I’ve had blood pressure spikes. To this day I have a very bad memory; I forget everything. (Khadizhat, 59 years old, searching for her brother)

I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. I was under intense stress. It’s still strange to me that I didn’t die from this news. After all, both of my sons were detained. War, the house destroyed, winter, I raised them alone, without a husband. (Marem, 69 years old, searching for her son)

My mother died that way - worrying, full of anxiety. From this, she died. Now my father is sick. His sugar jumps up to 35 one moment, then drops to zero the next. (Kheda, 32 years old, searching for her brother)

This is a wound that never heals [shows her hand with sores]. Look – see these sores... This wound is inside me, but it shows on the body. (Zaira, 64 years old, searching for her brother)

Some respondents said that children who witnessed a detainment, even at a very early age, also developed health problems.

My grandson was only 9 months old when his father was taken away. He cried a lot. The soldiers shouted at his mother, telling her to calm him down or they would kill her. He cried for a long time afterward. We took him to doctors a lot. After all, although they are little, they [children] understand everything. (Aishat, 68 years old, searching for her son)

The unresolved disappearances of loved ones leave a deep emotional scar on the mental health of the survivors, which, in turn, leads to physical illness. The human psyche and body are connected into a single system, therefore somatization is a direct consequence of unresolved psychological problems, prolonged stress, the resulting deterioration of the immune system, and disrupted functioning of internal organs. After the abduction of relatives, physical suffering became an inseparable part of the daily lives of their loved ones.



Social Consequences

Fatima got married early, at the age of 16. She and her future husband were neighbors in the village and fell deeply in love with each other. After marriage, Fatima, like many Chechen women, began to live in her husband's house with his parents and two brothers. By the time her husband disappeared in 2001, Fatima had had four children. Her husband was the only one in their family who earned money. Before the war, he worked as a long-haul trucker. After each trip, he brought home food and clothes and provided for the whole family — his wife and children, his parents, and his brothers. After the war began, he could no longer leave Chechnya. Instead, he began transporting gasoline from the village to the city and selling it. There were checkpoints between villages and towns at that time, where all cars were stopped and their documents checked. To get from the village to Grozny, Fatima's husband had to pass through two such checkpoints. He often talked about being stopped, and that his work was dangerous. That morning, he went to the city with his brother, but they never returned home. Their car was later found burned near Grozny, but their bodies were not recovered.

Life without a husband in his parents' house was difficult. The mother-in-law and father-in-law were very cruel to Fatima and her children. They took away her child support benefits – the only income she had – and used physical violence against her and the children. Fatima put up with

everything, swallowed her resentment, and lived for the sake of her children. Ten years after her husband disappeared, her presence in their home started to inconvenience her parents-in-law and brother-in-law, who at that time already had his own family. They decided to evict her.

My husband's brother came to me in the middle of the night; it was raining, and he told me to quickly get out. I didn't even really have time to pack my things. That's how they kicked me out. They decided that I and the children were not entitled to compensation [awarded by the ECHR]. They didn't even get the compensation yet at that point, they were just collecting documents for the application, yet they already started saying that I wasn't entitled to anything. They evicted me and four children from their land in the village. I had to piece everything together bit by bit. (Fatima, 63 years old, searching for her husband)

As our research has shown, wives are the most vulnerable category of relatives of missing people. In addition to facing uncertainty related to their status and their position in the family, they often find themselves alone in a difficult life situation. All the wives of missing persons interviewed during the study had no education, had no employment at the time of their husband's disappearance, and lived in the same house with their husband's relatives.

Even though, according to Chechen traditions, the wife has the right to live in the house of her missing husband if they have children, and her children retain the right of inheritance, the husband's relatives sometimes force them to leave the husband's house with her children. Sometimes, the wives of the missing and their children are perceived as an additional economic burden on the family. Sometimes this situation arises if there are other claimants to the inheritance.

Since my husband disappeared, I have been left on the street with my children. They [my husband's relatives] kicked me and our children out and said that we were not entitled to anything, neither land nor the house. (Asma, 54 years old, searching for her husband)

I don't communicate with his relatives. I handle everything myself. They didn't want to see me there after he got lost. And when I received the compensation [awarded by the ECHR], they took that from me too. (Raisa, 57 years old, searching for her husband)

The wives we interviewed, who found themselves in such a situation, having no education and means of subsistence, had to look for most often low-paid work. If the family lived in a village, the women had significantly fewer job opportunities, so they had to travel to the city. For example, Fatima got a job in a cafeteria in Grozny:

We often had no food at all. Our pension for the loss of a breadwinner was not enough. My mother-in-law took this pension from me. Then I got a job in a cafeteria in the city. I got up at 5 in the morning and went to the city by minibus or with a relative by car. In the evening, I prepared food for the children, left everything on the stove, got ready in the morning, and left. I arrived home late; I only had time to do household chores and prepare food for the children for tomorrow. (Fatima, 63 years old, searching for her husband)

Occasionally, their husband's relatives subjected the wives of missing persons to unfounded accusations and insults:

They blamed me all the time. They said that I was a slut, that I even got a job just to get around more. Although I worked there with their relatives, who saw what I was doing all day. (Fatima, 63 years old, searching for her husband)

They came up with all kinds of stuff about me, they called me a prostitute, they forbade me to enter their house. They did all this so as not to give me and the children anything. (Asma, 54 years old, searching for her husband)

I wish things were different, that he was never taken away. Then I would have had more respect from his relatives, and the attitude towards me would have been different. (Raisa, 57 years old, searching for her husband)

In only one case did the respondent stay with her husband's parents after he went missing, even though she was only 20 years old. Her decision was largely because she did not want to part with her son, who was barely a year old at that time. Her husband's relatives did not want to give her the child, since it was their only grandchild, and she would not have been able to remarry with a child in tow:

They said that they would allow me to see my son, that I was young and I needed to build a future. But I decided to stay to raise him myself. They lived in poverty; my son would have been deprived if I had left. I also was not sure if their position [allowing her to spend time with her son] would remain unchanged if I left. (Marina, 42 years old, searching for her husband)

Without outside help, it is difficult for women to give proper attention to their children, let alone provide for their education and development; this takes a serious toll on the children. In almost all cases, the interviewed wives of the missing men said that their children received only secondary education. Only in two cases did the boys receive secondary specialized education. Girls most often get married early and did not continue their studies. Sometimes, this may be due to society's high demands on the honor and moral character of the missing person's wife and, accordingly, her daughters.

During the active struggle against insurgency from 2003 to 2009, security forces classified the sons of missing persons as being in the risk group of radicalization, placing them in the same category as the children of former militants. The Chechen police implemented «preventive» measures targeting these teenagers and young men, which sometimes included «preventive» arrests. Typically, during such detentions, young individuals were held in illegal detention facilities without any report being filed or a criminal case initiated and often endured physical and psychological violence.

Our research has revealed that the unresolved disappearance of a relative disrupts the established system of roles within the family and society. The process of family adaptation to this new reality can lead to severe social consequences, particularly affecting the vulnerable position of women within families of missing husbands and hindering the successful development of their children.

Economic Consequences

Rayana was eight years old when her father was taken away. She remembers this day well. In their village, security forces often carried out so-called “mop up operations.” On that day, many cars drove up to their house. They took away Rayana’s father and several other neighbors. The people in uniform said that they would release them after examination, but Rayana has never seen her father since. At first, Rayana’s mother was actively searching for him, but after a couple of years, she was diagnosed with a serious incurable disease and became bedridden. She is still confined to her bed. Rayana has two older sisters and a brother. They are all married. Rayana is now 28 years old. She spends all her time with her mother - feeding her and assisting with personal hygiene needs. She had no opportunity to get an education or a job. Twice a year, she and her mother visit a rehabilitation center in Grozny. This is the only time that Rayana spends outside the home. Her father was the only breadwinner in the family, so his disappearance greatly affected their financial situation:

Financially it was very difficult. We have few relatives on our mother’s and father’s side, and it was difficult for them too, because there was a war going on. They also couldn’t help much. People helped us. Fellow villagers brought food and shared clothes. Sometimes, people from neighboring villages came to bring us something because they heard from someone that our life was hard. (Rayana, 28 years old, searching for her father)

Detentions and enforced disappearances occurred during war and post-war times, when most people struggled to survive on humanitarian aid provided by various organizations, and income opportunities were significantly limited. This is how Seda, whose two brothers disappeared, remembers it:

Mom reached out to many human rights organizations. She always went somewhere, whether it was in the heat or the cold. In winter, she came home with her fingers blue from the cold. She had no gloves. At that time we we had no money. In the fall, she would come back drenched, and during the heatwaves, she stood outside all day unable even to buy water. There was only enough money for travel from the village to the city, back and forth. (Seda, 43 years old, searching for her brother)

The state provided no support. The only organization that helped during the war and post-war period was the International Red Cross Committee, which distributed food and provided modest opportunities for starting a small business:

There was an organization... I don’t remember the name... I think it was the Red Cross... they gave you a choice of either a cow or a sewing machine. My mother taught me to sew as a child, so I really wanted a sewing machine. They gave me money to buy it. I still make money from this - I have my own tailoring business. (Laura, 45 years old, searching for her brother)

If the family had any savings, they were spent on searching for the missing person. Almost all respondents mentioned scammers who played on their vulnerability and took advantage of the opportunity to profit from their desperate situation. They offered to sell information about the whereabouts of the kidnapped person in exchange for money, weapons, or other material goods.

Whom haven't we paid! He [the husband] knelt in front of the Russians, cried, told them: "Tell me, what you want? Gold? Money? A car?" He was ready to give everything to return his daughter. We sold everything that was in the house, even the dishes. (Taus, 73 years old, searching for her daughter)

I gave money to everyone who said that I should give them money, and my son would be found. Two thousand, or that many thousands, and we'll bring him in half an hour, they said... They knew how to make you believe. Then there was someone from Atagi village, who said that if we gave him 5 thousand euros, he would 100% get him out, that he was most likely in Khankala. I believed it, I was ready to give everything to get him back, even my home. (Larissa, 73 years old, searching for her son)

They [the soldiers] kept asking me to bring them money and gold. I didn't have any of this. Then they said that they would look for my son if I brought them a machine gun. I bought a machine gun and gave it to them. (Zargan, 63 years old, searching for her son)

The unresolved disappearance of family members entailed significant economic hardships for their families. Women most often remained at the head of the family and took responsibility for both supporting the family and searching for the missing, which was often associated with large financial costs.

Coping Mechanisms

Kheda is 32. Kheda's mother died eight months ago, after twenty years of unsuccessful searches for her son. He disappeared in 2003. Kheda hardly saw her mother - she went to the city every day with other women from the village, whose sons also disappeared. When Kheda's mother was diagnosed with cancer, she kept telling Kheda that, after she was gone, Kheda would have to continue searching for her brother. She showed Kheda the documents she had collected over the years, which she carefully placed in a separate folder. Kheda made a promise to her mother that she would do everything possible to find out the whereabouts of her brother and establish the truth about what happened. Since her mother passed away, Kheda has carried her mother's passport in her purse. All these years, the son's photograph remained between the pages of her mother's passport.

For twenty years my mother searched for him and waited. His things are still folded in our closet. At the very top of the pile, our mom put the clothes he last wore at home... She waited for him every day. She never locked the doors at night, so that my brother could come in when he returned. (Kheda, 32 years old, searching for her brother)

On the anniversary of her brother's disappearance, Kheda's entire family and relatives gather at their home. They read the mawlid and distribute alms.

This is a day of mourning for us. This pain inside... there is no escape from it. We don't always talk about it, but it is always with us. When this day comes, everyone in the family can finally open up about this pain and talk. (Kheda, 32 years old, searching for her brother)

Unable to establish the truth about what happened to their missing relatives, families must seek other coping mechanisms to help them move on with their lives. According to our respondents, their inner circle, solidarity and sympathy from relatives and friends, were their best sources of support. While it is not customary to talk openly about one's feelings in Chechen culture, events such as the distribution of alms in hopes for a better fate for the missing, and family meetings of close relatives united by common grief help the families of the missing feel supported and find new strength to continue their search.

Almost all respondents said that the first thing they did after receiving compensation awarded by the ECHR was to perform a sacrifice ritual and distribute the meat to neighbors and low-income families. Usually, this ceremony is performed in honor of the deceased or to alleviate the suffering of a seriously ill relative.

We wanted them to feel good wherever they were - on earth or in heaven. In case they feel bad, or they get sick, doing the ritual on their behalf is a great benefit. This is appreciated by Allah. (Seda, 43 years old, searching for her brothers)

Such rituals help preserve the memory of the missing. Keeping alive their memory, expressed in ongoing searches, traditional and cultural rituals, and individual family traditions, has a healing effect, helping families become more resilient and continue with life even if they cannot fully cope with the loss. For the families of the missing, remembering the disappeared is an act of resistance against the crime committed against them and their relatives. Preserving memory in such conditions is a way to remain visible and at least partially have the wrongdoing committed against them recognized. Preserving memory is highly important for our respondents; the survivors feel hurt by society's lack of remembrance for their loved ones.

They talk about the dead, but why does no one remember those who have disappeared? They could mention the missing at least during some events, but they never do. (Zargan, 63 years old, searching for her son)

At least, they could establish a small office in Grozny where the relatives of the missing could gather and talk, but the authorities are unwilling to publicize or discuss these issues regarding the missing. (Laura, 45 years old, searching for her brother)

It's not customary for us to even talk about them, especially since they disappeared during the most difficult times. The suffering they endured is too frightening to even imagine. Why not remember them? Nobody talks about them at all; it's not customary to remember them. (Lika, 67 years old, searching for her son)

Religion is another mechanism that enables families to attain some degree of acceptance of their ambiguous loss.

When I was in Hajj, I made dua for my son, so that Allah would ease his fate if he was alive, and calm his soul if he was no longer among us. I made dua for Allah to give me patience. (Marem, 69 years old, searching for her son)

I am pleased with Allah. It means that this was bound to happen; it means that such were his plans for me. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, of course, not even on my worst enemy, but Allah gave me patience. (Elita, 70 years old, searching for her son)

I'm not complaining about my health. Considering how old I am and what I've been through, I feel good. I ask Allah that I could see my daughter again in this world, even just once, but if she is no longer alive, I will be able to see her there. (Taus, 73 years old, searching for her daughter)

Despite this humility, all respondents continue to search. Every year they continue to submit requests to the investigative committee and the prosecutor's office, although they receive no information from them:

Last year, I submitted the request again, but they didn't even send me an answer. In previous years, they sent me some formal replies. This year, I don't expect an answer, but I'll write anyway. (Marem, 69 years old, searching for her son)

I have a large folder at home with all the documents and requests that I have submitted over these 20 years. Every year I submit a request, I always put a copy in the folder, and I also keep the answers. (Zoya, 71 years old, searching for her son)

In certain cases, relatives of the missing persons have completely lost hope that local authorities will help them in searching for the missing, and have instead put their trust in the federal government:

It is important for me to know what happened to my brother... No one wants to say what happened to him. Local authorities cannot do this, only the federal ones can. The authorities must determine whether these people are alive or dead. Maybe they are in secret prisons. (Khadizhat, 59 years old, searching for her brother)

Missing people are not things, they are not a cat or a dog; they are not animals... These are people who had their own families, their own lives. Why aren't they being searched for? Why can't you hear us? Why don't they help? This grief has affected almost every family. (Seda, 43 years old, searching for her brother)

After some time, such hope for the return of the loved ones transforms into hope that the missing relative did not suffer/is not suffering. Along with religious and traditional practices, this hope becomes another mechanism for relatives to cope with their grief.

Conclusion

Ambiguous loss is one of the most difficult and traumatic experiences a person can face. People, whose loved ones are missing, live with a constant sense of uncertainty and anxiety, which affects both their psychological and physical well-being. Almost all study participants pointed to their chronic diseases, which, in their opinion, were closely related to the trauma they experienced.

The disappearance of a loved one also has more serious social consequences for a certain category of relatives. This is especially true for the missing persons' wives, who face problems of uncertainty about their status (a wife or a widow), and their children, who receive less attention and opportunities for successful development.

Ambiguous loss also has a significant impact on the financial situation of the families. Women most often must take on the responsibility of providing financial support for the family. Searching for missing persons becomes an additional financial burden for such women.

Despite these challenges, all study participants continue their search for their missing relatives. This process has become an integral part of their lives and the embodiment of hope for the return of the missing, which, in fact, becomes their way to go on living.

Recommendations

Due to the current situation in the Russian Federation, formulating specific and effective recommendations for assisting relatives of missing persons in the Chechen Republic appears extremely difficult. The atmosphere of impunity, the non-existent rule of law, the lack of control over the security forces, and, most importantly, the lack of political will to investigate the crimes committed by state agents against residents of the Chechen Republic create seemingly insurmountable obstacles to the implementation of effective measures that would allow for the searching of the missing and providing support to their loved ones.

However, we believe in the importance of formulating some general recommendations based on the research conducted. We hope that when the situation in the region changes for the better, our recommendations will be useful for developing comprehensive measures to interact with the relatives of those missing in Chechnya. We are confident that without serious work on this issue, achieving long-term peace and sustainable post-conflict rehabilitation of Chechen society, as well as positive changes in the public consciousness of Russian society, are impossible.

1. Public recognition of crimes against missing persons and their relatives at the state level

Public recognition and condemnation of the crimes committed at the political level and public acknowledgment of the moral damage caused to the relatives of missing citizens must be achieved. This recognition not only holds the greatest emotional significance for the relatives of the missing persons but also allows society to condemn these crimes, realize its share of responsibility for them, and take measures aimed at preventing similar crimes in the future.

2. Investigation into disappearances

A thorough investigation into abductions and disappearances is necessary to establish the fate of the missing. This process includes opening mass graves and conducting forensic examinations. These steps aim at restoring justice and providing relatives with answers to their questions about the fate of the missing, which have been tormenting them for years. A law needs to be adopted classifying enforced disappearance as a crime and providing clear penalties for those responsible. This, in turn, would allow for an effective investigation of cases

of forced disappearance and would contribute to the prevention of such crimes in the future.

3. Documentation

As abductions continue, it is critically important to pay special attention to documenting such cases. Support must be provided to human rights organizations that collect and verify information about abductions and disappearances in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Thorough documentation will create a reliable database for future investigations and legal actions.

4. Medical rehabilitation

Relatives of missing persons must be provided with an opportunity to undergo medical rehabilitation in sanatoriums or medical institutions at the expense of the state or funds from charitable foundations.

5. Economic and social support

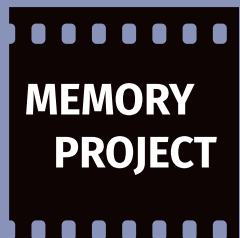
Families of missing persons still require social support. This largely concerns the families where minor children of the missing fathers remained in the care of their mothers. Due to their difficult financial situation, these children have been frequently deprived of the opportunity to receive a decent education and find employment. Such families should receive financial support to cover everyday expenses, such as rent, education, and medical needs, funded by the state or charitable foundations. A program to support education and employment for children of missing persons must be created, including training in new skills and professional training.

6. Comprehensive psychological support

Family members of missing persons should be provided with comprehensive psychological support by experienced specialized psychologists. It is necessary to provide family members with the opportunity to gather, create their associations, and have spaces where families of missing people can meet and share their experiences and feelings.

7. Monuments and memorials

Creating memorials, books, films and audiovisual products dedicated to the missing plays a key role in preserving their memory. These symbols not only serve as a place for mourning and remembrance but also remind society of the need to combat abductions and human rights violations.



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