

What about those left behind?

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The disappearance of people on migration journeys has reverberating effects on their family and community.

Families of people who go missing on a migration journey either do not know how to seek government support or are sceptical of doing so, and States have done almost nothing to address this issue. There appears to be little understanding and appreciation of the obstacles that families face in the search for answers about the fate of their missing loved ones and of the impact of such a situation on their well-being and livelihoods.

In December 2018, 152 states endorsed the Global Compact on Migration and resolved to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants”, to “facilitate communication with affected families” and to “[e]stablish transnational coordination channels and designate contact points for families looking for missing migrants.”¹ Yet families experience multiple structural constraints, ranging from their own circumstances to the lack of adequate institutional and policy frameworks that take into account the particular dynamics of deaths and disappearances on migration journeys. Constraints also result from complex interactions shaped by class, migration status and gender, while efforts to trace relatives have been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Laila’s brother suddenly disappeared from the lives of his family and community. Overnight, all contact was lost. *“He called from a beach, and he said he would sleep there and leave the next day.”* But he never called again.

In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) carried out research in Ethiopia, Spain and the UK to learn how people with missing migrant relatives could be better supported in their search and in dealing with the impacts of loss.² The study is not representative of the experiences of all migrant families. Nevertheless, it provides

insight into how people are impacted by the loss of a loved one on migration journeys.

The families’ experiences

There is a clear gap between the approach and knowledge of governments and the needs of families. Families in all countries suffer a sense of uncertainty over where to start their search when they realise there is a lack of protocols or entities who can support the process. If families approach authorities, those authorities often say they do not have jurisdiction over missing migrants’ cases, alleging that the disappearance did not take place within their territory.

There is also a clear perception that authorities approach cases of missing migrants first and foremost as an issue of anti-smuggling/trafficking or immigration control. Families are pressurised to provide details of the smuggling facilitators who were involved, and are often told that they should not have let their relative undertake such a migration journey in the first place. People who have been migrants themselves, and especially those who have insecure migration status, feel that approaching any authority (or even any organisation that they perceived might share information with authorities) would jeopardise their stay in the country. Furthermore, community advocates who contact authorities on families’ behalf are questioned regarding their ties to families and are accused of being connected to migrant smuggling groups or involved in facilitating migrant smuggling.

Families therefore rely mostly on informal channels, contacting friends and family members in different countries and reaching out to people who had travelled with their relatives, such as other migrants and smuggling facilitators. For example, in Ethiopia smuggling facilitators – who are themselves often members of the

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community – were frequently willing and able to access contacts and information that could establish or help determine the whereabouts of a missing person.

Many families rely on community-based groups and migrant and refugee associations and advocates, who are often migrants themselves, fluent in the languages of the families, and with an intimate understanding of the specific contexts of the families and their communities.

In Spain, Laila received support from a network of migrant advocates who assist families in their searches. We spoke with Amira, who is helping Laila search for her brother, and she told us: *“When a family contacts me or someone in the group, we start the process of seeking information through a network of informal, unofficial contacts... We look for them in hospitals, then in detention centres and prisons... and eventually at the morgue...”*

Families use social media in the search, posting short descriptions and photos of the missing person, and screening groups for information about missing or dead migrants. However, many of them lack internet or computer access at home, and their only way to conduct online searches is at community organisations. Limited access to technology, already an issue, has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many previous points of access, such as internet cafés, community centres or libraries, have been closed.

Other vulnerabilities add difficulties

Engaging in a search can often be costly and a lack of financial resources creates an extra barrier. Filing reports, meeting with authorities, travelling to locations where a person was last seen or trying to track his or her steps can generate significant costs – not to mention the scams or extortion in exchange for information. Furthermore, in countries of migrant transit and destination, such as Spain and the UK, many families have unstable and low-paying employment and poor housing conditions, which severely limits the ability to start a search. In places of migrant origin, like Ethiopia, families are often left without the



One of our research participants showing us the last photo he has of his missing older brother.

economic support that their missing family member was expected to provide if their journeys had been successful. Many also face the responsibility of covering the significant debt that their loved one incurred to cover the costs of their journey. This particularly affects women and older relatives left behind.

Legal disenfranchisement is another vulnerability that shapes families' options. The fear of starting a search before having attained favourable immigration status regularly leads to postponement of efforts, and therefore to the loss of valuable time to collect information and/or evidence. Visa restrictions may also limit search options.

The IOM research also provides evidence of how a disappearance can exacerbate and reinforce long-standing forms of inequality based on gender. Since most missing migrants were men, it was often the wives, sisters and mothers who drove the search, and who carried a disproportionate amount of social and financial responsibility. The women are simultaneously expected to continue the search for the missing person and to care for their children and older family members.

Conclusions

While some policy implications from the IOM research are context specific, they echo previous findings and recommendations made by the Missing Migrants Project and other organisations, such as the ICRC.³

All efforts to assist people who have missing migrant family members should recognise the expertise, knowledge and well-being of families and put them at the centre. This means addressing their needs, rather than focusing on the security and criminal aspects of how the person went missing. The definition of family in cases involving missing migrants should be flexible, taking into account emotional dependency, and be in line with cultural and other contexts.

Community-based groups and grassroots advocates, NGOs, mainstream civil society organisations and other organisations who support families of missing migrants are of critical importance in the absence of appropriate laws, policies and safeguards that allow people to approach and to receive support from authorities. A working group of these relevant actors and families of missing migrants in each country could be formed to help with information sharing both to families and to relevant government agencies. While such cooperation could start at the country level, the aim should be to build networks with other actors regionally and beyond – both to share best practices and to help resolve particular missing persons cases.

The issue of missing migrants is not adequately addressed by policies or laws.

A starting point would be for each country to create a protocol that would enable a uniform approach to the implementation of existing national and international legal provisions that protect the rights of families of missing migrants. Such a protocol should include instructions for efficient collection, preservation and sharing of data, and for cross-sectoral collaboration on missing persons cases. The protocol would act as a guide for families, as well as for community groups, organisations and government bodies trying to help them, on how they can search for their loved one and access support.

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1. www.iom.int/global-compact-migration
2. Missing Migrants Project www.missingmigrants.iom.int Research team included Gabriella Sanchez, Danish Institute for International Studies; Carlos Arce, University of Córdoba; Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste, Addis Ababa University; and Samuel Okyere, University of Bristol.
3. For example, in the Five Point Action Plan in IOM's *Fatal Journeys* Volume 2 (2016) https://publications.iom.int/fr/system/files/fataljourneys_vol2.pdf and the draft 'Principles on stakeholder interaction with families of missing migrants' being prepared by ICRC's Missing Persons Project www.icrc.org/en/draft-principles-stakeholder-interaction-families-missing-migrants