



Left Behind: **The Human Cost of Enforced Disappearances**

National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan



Focusing on those who remain, this NCHR report documents how enforced disappearance creates prolonged hardship, legal suspension, and unresolved grief, urging recognition, support, and justice for affected families

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Acknowledgement

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Table of Contents

List of Acronyms.....	1
Glossary of Key Terms	2
Foreword.....	5
Executive Summary.....	6
Introduction to the Report	9
Methodology.....	11
Context	13
Lived Experience of Affected Families.....	18
Cross Cutting Patterns	26
Women at the Centre	29
Children Left Behind.....	36
Gaps in Response.....	41
Recommendations	45
Conclusion.....	50

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form
COIED	Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances
CTD	Counter Terrorism Department
FIR	First Information Report
ICPPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHC	Islamabad High Court
NCHR	National Commission for Human Rights
UN	United Nations

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Ambiguous loss	A state where a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, leaving grief unresolved.
Certificate of absence	A legal mechanism used in some countries to provisionally recognise a missing person's status. Pakistan currently has no general legal mechanism equivalent to a certificate of absence.
COIED	Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances; established 2011 to trace missing persons, to inquire into enforced disappearances and fix responsibility where possible.
Counter Terrorism Department (CTD)	A provincial law enforcement agency in Pakistan responsible for counter-terrorism operations.
Disposed of	A term indicating case closure, not necessarily resolution or accountability. Disposal may include; tracing, recovery, release, detention established, death established, or administrative closure.
Fourth Schedule	A provision of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 imposing surveillance and movement restrictions.
ICPPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (UN, 2006).
Legal suspension	A condition where families cannot access legal rights because the

disappeared person has no recognised legal status.

Production order

A court directive requiring authorities to produce a detained person.

Psychosocial support

Services addressing emotional and social wellbeing. Largely absent for affected families.

Stigma (social)

Negative social judgement leading to isolation, reduced prospects, and withdrawn support.

UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

A UN body of independent experts that receives complaints and conducts country visits.

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“When someone dies, you have a grave. When someone is in jail, you know where they are. With enforced disappearance, there is nothing”

*Aymun Sajid, daughter of Sajid Mehmood
(disappeared 2016)*

Foreword

Over the years, I have met many families searching for someone who never came home. What stays with you after those conversations is not just the missing person, it is what the absence does to everyone around them.

A mother waiting beyond all reason, a sister holding together strands of her life, a daughter aging in the shadow of a disappearance, and children growing up inside a question that has no answer.

These stories often get lost in discussions about institutions, laws, and procedures. Those discussions, of course matter because enforced disappearance raises serious questions about constitutional rights, due process, and the rule of law. However, there is another side to this issue, quieter and far less visible. The daily reality of the people left behind.

We at the National Commission for Human Rights undertook this research because we felt this part of the story needed more attention. We wanted to understand how families live after the unthinkable happens, how they get through each day without answers, and how the effects of disappearance continue long after the event itself.

What we saw was a picture of lives on hold. Families spoke about financial strain, children pulled from school, health problems, isolation, and the weight of not knowing. But they also spoke about resilience and a stubborn determination to keep searching for the truth.

The women in this report stand at the centre of that story. Many have become providers, caregivers, and the main point of contact with authorities; carrying responsibilities they never asked for.

This report does not try to answer every question about enforced disappearance in Pakistan. It tries to add something that is often missing from public conversation: the perspective of those who live with its consequences every day.

I am grateful to the families who shared their experiences. Speaking about this kind of pain is never easy. Their willingness to do so gave this report its most important contribution: its humanity.

I hope these pages remind us to look beyond files and case numbers. Every disappearance leaves behind a circle of people whose lives are changed forever. Any real response to this issue must start where they stand.

Rabiya Javeri Agha

Chairperson

National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan

Executive Summary

Enforced disappearance remains one of the most complex and least resolved human rights issues in Pakistan. While it is widely recognised as a violation of fundamental rights, cutting across due process, liberty, and dignity, its impact is often discussed in abstract or institutional terms. This report shifts that focus by examining enforced disappearance through the experiences of those left behind, particularly women and children, to understand its full and continuing impact.

Drawing on interviews conducted by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), alongside civil society documentation and official data, the report highlights that enforced disappearance is a prolonged condition that reshapes family life over time.

Several key patterns emerge. First, the disappearance of a family member, often the primary breadwinner, leads to immediate and sustained economic hardship. Women are required to step into roles as earners and heads of household, often within informal and unstable labour conditions, while managing existing financial strain and limited resources.

Second, families experience a form of legal invisibility. In the absence of confirmation of death or detention, they are unable to access bank accounts, transfer property, resolve inheritance matters, or obtain essential documentation, creating a condition of legal suspension.

Third, the psychological impact of enforced disappearance is shaped by prolonged uncertainty. Families experience what has been described as *ambiguous loss*. This results in chronic anxiety, unresolved grief, and emotional strain, often carried primarily by women.

Children are also significantly affected. The report documents educational disruption, psychological distress, and increased vulnerability, including exposure to child labour and early marriage. These impacts extend with time, shaping long-term developmental outcomes.

Across all cases, families also reported social pressures, including stigma, isolation, and, in some instances, harassment or intimidation. These dynamics further restrict mobility, access to opportunities, and engagement with institutions.

The report also identifies significant gaps in response. At the legal level, there is no formal recognition of the status of missing persons and no comprehensive framework to address prolonged absence. Institutionally, delays, lack of transparency, and limited enforcement of directives reduce the effectiveness of

existing mechanisms. At the family level, there are no structured support systems, including financial or psychosocial assistance.

Based on these findings, the report puts forward a set of recommendations. These include the introduction of a legal status for missing persons, provision of financial and legal support to affected families, improvements in case tracking and communication, and the criminalisation of enforced disappearance in line with international standards, including steps toward ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. The report also emphasises that compensation cannot substitute for truth and accountability.

Ultimately, the report emphasizes a central point: enforced disappearance is not only a violation against an individual, it is an ongoing reality for families. Any meaningful response must therefore address not only the act itself, but its continuing impact on those who remain.

“

**“Our lives are still stuck on the day
that they were taken”**

*Saira Baloch, Sister of Muhammad Asif and Cousin of
Abdul Rasheed (disappeared 2018)*

Introduction to the Report

Enforced disappearance is generally understood as the arrest, detention or abduction of a person by state authorities, or with their support, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that detention or disclose the person's whereabouts¹. In effect, a person is taken and then placed outside the protection of the law.

It is widely recognised as one of the most serious human rights violations². It cuts across multiple protections at once: the right to liberty, due process, dignity, and even recognition as a person before the law³. Enforced disappearance, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population, constitutes a crime against humanity⁴.

That much is already clear but this report is not trying to restate the legal position or re-argue the violation. The legal framing, important as it is, often remains at a distance from the reality of what families actually experience. Discussions tend to stay at the level of institutions, procedures, and accountability. What is less visible is what happens after the disappearance.

Enforced disappearance does not end with the individual who is taken, it extends outward. Families are left in a space that is difficult to define. There is no confirmation of death, no access to the person, and often no meaningful response from institutions. The absence becomes unresolved and affects decisions, livelihoods, and everyday life in ways that are not easily captured in legal terms. As international human rights bodies have also recognised, enforced disappearance produces not only civil and political harms, but deep social and economic consequences for families.

Women, in particular, are left to navigate what comes next. They take on roles that are at once economic, legal, and emotional; managing households, engaging with institutions, and holding families together in the absence of certainty. Children growing up in this situation, often face disruptions to education, stability, and identity.

So while enforced disappearance is often discussed in terms of legality and violation, its most immediate and sustained impact is lived at the level of the family. This report therefore shifts the lens. It moves from the system to lived experience. From the

¹ United Nations, International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted December 20, 2006, art. 2. This definition is also reflected in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), art. 7(2)(i).

² Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. "Follow-Up Report to the UN Human Rights Council." UN Doc. A/HRC/WGEID/2016. Transmitted September 12, 2016.

³ Amnesty International. 2021. *Living Ghosts: The Devastating Impact of Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan*. London: Amnesty International.

⁴ United Nations. *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. Rome, 17 July 1998

abstract framing of rights violations to the everyday realities of those left behind. It centres the experiences of women and children, not as a secondary dimension, but as essential to understanding the full scope of the issue.

Because to understand enforced disappearance fully, it is not enough to ask what happens to those who are taken. It is equally important to ask what happens to those who remain.

Methodology

This report is based on a combination of primary accounts and secondary sources, brought together to understand not just the scale of enforced disappearances, but their impact on families, particularly women and children.

At the centre of this research are interviews with family members of disappeared persons. These interviews were conducted by NCHR in 2026 with female relatives of disappeared persons from Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Islamabad. Interviewees were identified with the help of Defence of Human Rights (DHR), an organisation that has worked extensively with affected families. Interviews were semi-structured and analysed thematically.

These conversations were used to document lived experiences and to understand how families navigate daily life, institutions, and prolonged uncertainty in the absence of a disappeared family member. The aim was not to produce exhaustive testimonies, but to identify recurring patterns and shared experiences across different cases and regions.

The interviews were supplemented by civil society documentation, particularly material produced by organisations working directly with affected families. These sources provided both case-level detail and broader insights into trends, institutional engagement, and gaps in response.

In addition, the report draws on official statistics and institutional data, including figures made available through the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED). While these figures offer a useful overview of registered and processed cases, they are used here primarily as a reference point rather than a definitive account of scale.

At the same time, there are clear limitations that shape this research.

First, enforced disappearance is, by its nature, underreported⁵. Families may choose not to come forward due to fear of reprisals, stigma, or lack of access to support mechanisms. As a result, available figures, whether from state institutions or civil society, are likely to reflect only a portion of actual cases.

Second, there are inconsistencies across data sources. Differences in documentation methods, definitions, and verification processes mean that figures are not always directly comparable. This report does not attempt to reconcile these differences, but instead focuses on identifying consistent patterns across sources.

⁵ Amnesty International, "Pakistan: Protests by Families of the Disappeared Met with Intimidation, Harassment and Violence," August 11, 2022

Finally, information on case progress, outcomes, and accountability remains fragmented. In many instances, families themselves are the primary source of information regarding the status of their cases.

Context

a. Scale and patterns

Enforced disappearances in Pakistan are not an isolated or occasional issue. They have been documented over many years through official bodies, courts, civil society organisations, and families themselves. The exact scale is difficult to determine, disappearance cases are often underreported, some families do not come forward out of fear, and official and civil society figures do not always align.

The official starting point is the COIED, established in March 2011. By February 2026, COIED had received over 10,806 cases since its establishment. Of these, roughly 6,809 persons were traced, but over 1,526 remained under investigation⁶. Among those traced, approximately 4,875 returned home, 1,028 were held in internment centres, 725 in prisons, and nearly 308 bodies were recovered. The geographic spread is also clear: the highest number of cases originated from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (3,743), followed by Balochistan (2,924), Sindh (1,870), and Punjab (1,750). Additional cases have been recorded from Islamabad Capital Territory (418 cases), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (71 cases), and Gilgit-Baltistan (10 cases). During February 2026, 33 new cases were registered and 54 cases were disposed of during the same period⁷.

Civil society figures add another layer. A joint civil society statement published by Amnesty International on 30 August 2025⁸ noted that DHR has documented 3,140 cases since 2006, of which 1,362 victims remain forcibly disappeared. It further notes that between January and July 2025, the Baloch Yakjehti Committee reported 546 cases, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement documented 133 cases, and Voice for Missing Persons of Sindh reported 40 cases. DHR's own March 2026 fact sheet records 2,409 cases in its database, with 1,397 persons still missing, 681 released, 236 traced in internment centres or prisons, and 95 reported dead⁹.

These figures should be read carefully because they do not all measure the same thing, and they come from different systems of documentation. Official COIED numbers reflect cases submitted to and processed by the Commission. Civil society figures often include cases reported directly by families, regional networks, and grassroots movements. Amnesty International's earlier work also cautioned that

⁶ Press Information Department, Government of Pakistan, "COIED Case Statistics Update,"

⁷ National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan, "Submission to the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances: Thematic Report on Enforced Disappearances and Memorialisation," submitted March 6, 2026

⁸ Amnesty International, "Pakistan: Failure to Address Enforced Disappearance Perpetuates Injustice Against Victims," Joint Statement (ASA 33/0243/2025), August 30, 2025

⁹ Defence of Human Rights (DHR). *Fact Sheet on Enforced Disappearances*. Islamabad, March 2026.

enforced disappearances are difficult to count because many families remain silent due to fear, and because some "released" persons have later been disappeared again.

What is consistent across all sources is the pattern: cases continue to be reported; they come from multiple provinces; and many families remain without a final answer.

b. Legal framework in Pakistan

The legal and institutional response to enforced disappearance in Pakistan is shaped by constitutional guarantees, administrative mechanisms, and ongoing legislative efforts. However, these elements do not yet form a comprehensive or fully effective framework.

At the constitutional level, enforced disappearance engages core fundamental rights. These include the right to life and liberty (Article 9), safeguards as to arrest and detention (Article 10), and the inviolability of dignity of man (Article 14)¹⁰. Together, these provisions require that any deprivation of liberty be lawful, acknowledged, and subject to due process. Enforced disappearance, by its nature, operates outside these protections, placing individuals beyond the reach of legal safeguards.

Institutionally, the primary mechanism addressing the issue is the COIED. The Commission is mandated to inquire into allegations of enforced disappearance, trace missing persons, and recommend action where responsibility is identified. Pakistan does not yet have a comprehensive law that criminalises enforced disappearance as a standalone offence. Legislative efforts have been made. In November 2021, the National Assembly passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill seeking to criminalise enforced disappearance. However, the bill did not reach the Senate, and parliamentary deliberations have continued without final enactment

At the international level, Pakistan has neither signed nor ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). Ratification would require the State to recognise enforced disappearance as a distinct and continuous crime, ensure investigation and prosecution, and protect the rights of victims and their families, including the right to truth and reparation.

c. Understanding Missing Persons and Classification Challenges

Pakistan's missing persons landscape is complex and encompasses a range of circumstances and actors. While many allegations raise serious concerns regarding

¹⁰ Pakistan. *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 1973.

enforced disappearance, not all cases reported as such necessarily involve state arrest or clandestine detention.

In practice, the term is sometimes also applied more broadly to cases involving voluntary disappearance, recruitment by non-state armed groups, irregular migration, family disputes, marriage by choice, or departures driven by social and economic pressures. In some instances, families may genuinely suspect state involvement; in others, uncertainty, fear, mistrust of institutions, or the hope of securing official attention may lead them to report a case as an enforced disappearance.

Recognising this complexity does not diminish the gravity of genuine cases of enforced disappearance or justify dismissing allegations without investigation. Rather, it highlights the importance of careful and impartial inquiry. Different forms of disappearance require different responses, and conflating them can complicate accountability, distort data, divert investigative resources, and leave families without appropriate support.

Clearer classification and more rigorous investigations would enable state institutions, civil society, and international actors to respond more effectively to the different forms of disappearance. This would also help address the broader social, economic, and security factors that lead people to go missing. Not only delivering justice, but also addressing the broader structural conditions that continue to place individuals and families at risk.

d. Institutional Response

The primary institutional mechanism, as mentioned earlier, for addressing enforced disappearances in Pakistan is the COIED. On paper, the Commission represents the State's response to a longstanding issue. In practice, however, its effectiveness has remained a point of concern for both families and civil society.

The superior judiciary has also addressed disappearance allegations. The Islamabad High Court has examined petitions relating to enforced disappearances and unlawful detention. The Supreme Court has addressed disappearance cases through constitutional petitions and human rights proceedings.

Specific instances of judicial action

The following examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are included to demonstrate recurring challenges in implementation of judicial directives.

While many judicial interventions have faced implementation challenges, courts have also, in some instances, secured tangible outcomes. These include orders for compensation to affected families, recovery or disclosure of missing persons

following judicial intervention, and sustained scrutiny of state institutions in disappearance cases. Such examples demonstrate both the potential and the limitations of judicial mechanisms in addressing enforced disappearances.

Case	Court Action	Outcome
Mudassar Naru (journalist, disappeared 2018) ¹¹	IHC CJ ordered PM Imran Khan to direct all agencies to produce him or trace his whereabouts; threatened to identify responsible public functionaries	Despite repeated judicial directions, there was no publicly reported indication that the case has been resolved as of April 2026
Faizan Usman (2024) ¹²	IHC instructed ISI to help police track him using agency surveillance systems; ordered affidavits from interior/defence secretaries	No publicly available information regarding the final disposition was available as of April 2026.
Zahid Amin (2020) ¹³	IHC criticized COIED for failing to enforce production order issued Sept 2020; demanded report on non-compliance	As of publicly available information reviewed for this report, no evidence was identified that the production order had been implemented.
Sajid Mehmood (2016) ^{14*}	Islamabad High Court ordered authorities to produce Sajid Mehmood and awarded compensation to his family, holding that the State had failed to protect fundamental rights. The Court also directed inquiry into responsible officials. ¹⁵	Disappearance remains unresolved and production order has not been implemented. Case later proceeded before the Supreme Court.

* See also interview with Aymun Sajid, daughter of Sajid Mehmood, pp. 20–2

¹¹ Islamabad High Court, Rana Mehmood Ikram v. Federation of Pakistan (Writ Petition concerning Mudassar Naaru), orders dated November 29, 2021, and December 1, 2021.

¹² Islamabad High Court, Faizan Usman v. Federation of Pakistan, orders dated September 3, 2024, and September 18, 2024.

¹³ Islamabad High Court, Zahid Amin and Sadiq Amin v. Federation of Pakistan, hearing dates June 23, 2022, and June 30, 2022.

¹⁴ IHC Orders Compensation to Missing Person's Family," *The News International*, October 20, 2020

¹⁵ Islamabad High Court, *Mahera Sajid v. Station House Officer, Police Station Shalimar & Others*, W.P. No. 2974/2016, judgment dated 11 May 2018



We have repeatedly said the enforced disappearances are a heinous crime and a sheer violation of the fundamental rights laid down in the Constitution...

Prime facie, the commission has failed to discharge its duties."

Former IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah ¹⁵

¹⁵ Islamabad High Court, *Zahid Amin and Sadiq Amin v. Federation of Pakistan*, hearing of petitions regarding recovery of missing persons, remarks of Chief Justice Athar Minallah, June 23, 2022. Reported in *The News International*, "Missing persons' commission failed to discharge duties: IHC," June 24, 2022

Lived Experience of Affected Families

Aqsa Dayo (Sister of Insaf Dayo)

Insaf Dayo, a 27-year-old tailor from Larkana, was picked up on 29 May 2017, during the month of Ramzan. According to his sister, Aqsa Dayo, he was at his tailoring shop at the time. A young boy who worked there witnessed the incident.

Aqsa recalls that six men arrived, three in police uniform and three in plain clothes, some with their faces covered. Insaf was handcuffed, his face covered, and taken away in an unmarked vehicle. There were multiple witnesses in the area.

The family immediately approached the police. They met with an Assistant Commissioner who initially acknowledged that the vehicle used in the abduction belonged to them and assured the family that they would be informed within three days. However, shortly afterwards, this position changed. Authorities denied any knowledge of the incident, including ownership of the vehicle.

The family filed a case in 2017, including complaints against the SHO and other officials. During proceedings, allegedly someone approached the family and told them to withdraw the petition, assuring them that Insaf would be released within a few days. Trusting this assurance, the family withdrew the case but he was not released.

After waiting for nearly a year without any development, the family refiled the petition in 2020. Since then, there has been little progress. According to Aqsa, production orders have not been implemented, and the family still has no information about Insaf's whereabouts.

The disappearance has had a significant impact on the family. Insaf was one of seven siblings, three brothers and four sisters. Their father had passed away in 2011, and their mother died in 2025. Aqsa now manages the household. She earns through tailoring work, which she describes as barely sufficient to meet basic needs.

The family is under constant financial strain. Medical expenses have been particularly difficult to manage. Aqsa's younger sister suffers from health issues, and her younger brother is also frequently unwell. Aqsa herself described the pressure as overwhelming, noting that medicines are expensive and income is limited. An older brother works in the medical field, earning around PKR 25,000 per month, and supports the family when possible.

The disappearance has also had broader social consequences. Aqsa described how friends and extended relatives gradually distanced themselves, particularly after their

mother's death. She also spoke about the stigma and suspicion the family faces, including repeated questioning about why Insaf was taken. "People keep asking what he did," she said, "but we don't know."

Their brother's absence has affected the family in multiple ways, including marriage prospects for the sisters, who remain unmarried. Aqsa noted that the situation has impacted them not just financially, but socially and emotionally.

The psychological toll on the family has been severe. Aqsa believes that the stress of her son's disappearance contributed to her mother's declining health, including diabetes, a heart attack, and kidney failure. Her mother passed away without ever seeing her son again.

Despite the passage of time, it has been nine years since Insaf's disappearance, the family continues to hold on to hope. Aqsa expressed a consistent demand:

"If my brother has done something, then bring him to court. Do it according to the law. I will accept whatever decision. But don't just make someone disappear."

The family has also faced pressure not to pursue the case publicly. Aqsa reported being warned against attending protests, with threats of arrest. During one such protest in Larkana, both she and her younger sister were detained when police intervened to disperse the gathering.

Today, the family continues to live without answers. Aqsa remains responsible for supporting the household while pursuing the case, navigating institutions, and managing the emotional and financial strain that has followed her brother's disappearance.

Saira Baloch (Sister of Muhammad Asif and Cousin of Abdul Rasheed)

Saira Baloch's family has experienced multiple disappearances through the years. The first occurred on 31 August 2018, when her brother Muhammad Asif and cousin Abdul Rasheed were picked up in Noshki, Balochistan. Both were in their early thirties. A third cousin was later picked up in 2022, at the age of 22.

At the time, Asif was serving as a constable in the Balochistan Police, while Rasheed was working as a shopkeeper. According to Saira, they had gone to a picnic point in Noshki with friends when they were taken. Some of those present were also picked up, but later released. The family first learned of the arrests through media reports, where authorities, specifically the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), announced detentions and labelled those taken as involved in terrorism-related activities. Beyond these reports, however, the family received no direct information.

Saira recalls the day as a moment that altered the course of their lives. She described the immediate shock within the household, the confusion, the fear, and the emotional collapse that followed. It was, as she put it, the first time she had seen her father break down. The family's home in Khuzdar, once structured around routine, became defined by this moment. Her mother struggled to cope, and the atmosphere within the household shifted almost overnight.

The family attempted to seek institutional recourse. When they approached the Khuzdar police station to file an FIR, they were refused, reportedly on the grounds that a case could not be registered against state institutions. With limited information and no clear guidance, they proceeded to file petitions before the High Court and the COIED, but these efforts did not result in meaningful progress. In some instances, alternative explanations, such as references to tribal disputes, were cited in response to their case.

The disappearance also had immediate economic consequences. Asif had been the primary breadwinner, supporting the household and contributing to the education of younger family members. His absence created sustained financial pressure, forcing the family to reassess priorities. Saira noted that some family members had to leave their studies, and even years later, financial instability remains a persistent challenge. Another brother, who is married with three young daughters, is unemployed, further increasing the strain.

In the initial period, the family remained largely silent, unsure of how to proceed. Reflecting on this, Saira described a sense of isolation and lack of direction. It was not until 2021 that she began to actively participate in protests, joining a demonstration in Quetta organised around another disappearance case. That moment marked a shift from private grief to public engagement.

Since then, Saira has been involved in protests and sit-ins, including extended gatherings in Islamabad where families of the disappeared seek recognition and accountability. She described this transition as difficult, particularly in the face of police intervention and pressure to withdraw. At the same time, she noted that remaining silent was no longer an option.

The family has also faced ongoing pressure and intimidation. Saira reported that her name was placed on the Fourth Schedule, and that she faced allegations under terrorism-related provisions. She described instances of being followed and warned against participating in protests. In addition, the family was asked to vacate government-provided housing linked to her brother's employment, further contributing to financial insecurity.

The impact of the disappearance extends beyond the immediate family. Saira spoke about a broader climate of fear within the community, where others began to worry that similar incidents could occur. She described the experience as one that affects not only individuals, but entire families and social networks.

Despite the passage of time, over eight years since the initial disappearance, the family continues to seek answers. Today, the family continues to live with financial strain, navigating institutional barriers, and participating in ongoing efforts to seek information and accountability.

Aymun Sajid (Daughter of Sajid Mehmood)

Sajid Mehmood, a software entrepreneur and educator based in Islamabad, was abducted from his residence on 14 March 2016 at approximately 6:00 PM. At the time, his daughter Aymun Sajid was 12 years old.

According to the family, around eight men arrived in two unmarked vehicles. Some were in plain clothes, while others wore uniforms associated with law enforcement. Several had their faces covered and were carrying weapons. They forcibly entered the home, conducted a search, and ransacked the premises, taking personal items including phones, computers, and property documents before taking Sajid Mehmood away.

The following day, the family attempted to file a case. Aymun recalls accompanying her mother and grandfather to the police station, where they were refused registration of an FIR. The experience was described as deeply distressing, not only because of the incident itself but also because of the immediate institutional barriers they encountered.

The case was eventually taken to the COIED and later pursued before the Islamabad High Court. In July 2018, the High Court ordered that Sajid Mehmood be produced and directed compensation for the family. Despite this, the order has not been implemented, and the case remains unresolved. The matter has since also been taken to the Supreme Court, with the state as the opposing party.

Aymun described the legal process as complex and, at times, discouraging. Even during proceedings before the Commission, the family was questioned for engaging legal counsel and for pursuing the case through the High Court. According to her, they were told that publicising the case or pursuing litigation might delay or prevent her father's release, a view that was also echoed by some members of the broader community.

The disappearance has had long-term consequences for the family. With Sajid Mehmood gone, Aymun's mother has taken on the role of sole caregiver and provider,

managing the household while raising three daughters. The family has faced financial strain, alongside the broader emotional and administrative burden of pursuing the case.

Social dynamics have also shifted. While immediate family members remained supportive, Aymun noted that friends and extended social circles gradually withdrew, and the family experienced a form of social distancing and silence. In some cases, they chose not to disclose the situation at all, reflecting the stigma and sensitivity surrounding enforced disappearance.

The impact has extended into key life decisions. Aymun described how her understanding of time became divided into “before” and “after” her father’s disappearance. Major life events, such as discussions around her sister’s marriage, were deeply affected by his absence. She recalled initially resisting such decisions, feeling that they could not move forward without him, before gradually confronting the reality that time was continuing despite the uncertainty.

At the centre of her account is the psychological impact of living without closure. Aymun spoke about the experience of *ambiguous loss*, describing it as fundamentally different from other forms of absence.

This condition shapes everyday life. The family continues to live without knowing whether Sajid Mehmood is alive, where he is, or what he may be experiencing. Aymun described this as the most difficult aspect of the experience, the constant unanswered questions.

Despite this, the family continues to pursue legal avenues. Aymun emphasised that, for her, justice is not limited to compensation or procedural outcomes rather it includes the return of her father, recognition of what the family has endured, and accountability for those responsible.

She also highlighted a broader concern: that enforced disappearance is often discussed in legal or procedural terms, while its human and psychological impact remains underacknowledged. She stressed the need for greater understanding of what such prolonged ambiguity does to families.

At the same time, she expressed a sense of resilience: “You can take away a person, but you cannot take away their identity, or the fact that they exist.”

Today, nearly a decade after the disappearance, the family continues to live in a state of limbo, navigating legal processes, managing the long-term effects of absence, and continuing to seek answers.

Gul Naz (Sister of Falak Naz)

Falak Naz, a resident of Swat, was picked up on 16 September 2009 from Mingora, at approximately 3:00 PM. At the time, he was around 18 years old and a student. According to his sister, Gul Naz, he had gone to the market when he was taken by the Station House Officer (SHO) of Mingora Police Station.

The family was initially told that he would be released soon. However, after approximately 16 days in police custody, they were informed that he had been handed over to the agencies. Beyond this point, no institution formally acknowledged his detention. To date, the family remains unaware of his whereabouts.

The family attempted to seek legal recourse. An FIR was filed, although Gul Naz noted that the process itself was confusing and shaped by pressure from authorities. The case was initially taken up before the Supreme Court, and later transferred to the COIED, where it remains pending. Proceedings before the Peshawar High Court did not lead to substantive progress, as the Court noted that action was limited without confirmation of Falak Naz's location.

At one stage, the family received an official communication indicating that his release could be considered if people were willing to testify to a local Aman committee regarding his innocence. However, due to the prevailing climate of fear in the area, no one was willing to come forward. As a result, the process did not move forward.

The disappearance had a profound impact on the family. Gul Naz recalls that she was in third grade at the time, and the experience shaped her understanding of safety and education. She described developing a fear that those who studied or progressed might be targeted, which led her to leave her education at an early stage.

The emotional and psychological impact on the family has been long-term. Both parents experienced significant distress following the disappearance. Gul Naz described how her father became withdrawn and lost interest in work, with his attention focused entirely on searching for his son. Her mother's health also declined over time, and she passed away on 19 April 2026, still waiting for her son's return.

The family consists of four brothers and four sisters, and the absence of one member has continued to affect all aspects of their lives. Beyond the immediate household, Gul Naz noted that friends and relatives gradually distanced themselves, largely due to fear of association. This isolation made it more difficult for the family to pursue the case or seek support.

She also described instances of pressure and intimidation. According to her account, the family was discouraged from protesting, and she herself was briefly detained.

There were also threats that continued pursuit of the case could result in further action against other family members.

Despite these challenges, the family has continued to pursue the case through available legal channels. Gul Naz emphasised the importance of awareness and collective response, noting that silence allows such practices to continue unchecked.

More than a decade later, the family continues to live without answers. The passage of time has not resolved the uncertainty. Instead, it has deepened the impact, shaping education, livelihoods, relationships, and the overall trajectory of the family's life.

“

“We are citizens of this country. We should know our rights and stand for them. If people stay silent, this will keep spreading”

Gul Naz, Sister of Falak Naz (Disappeared 2009)

Cross Cutting Patterns

Across interviews, legal records, civil society documentation, and official proceedings, certain patterns emerge consistently. While each family experiences enforced disappearance differently, the impacts converge around a common set of consequences: economic collapse, legal invisibility, gendered burdens, and long-term effects on children and family structures.

One of the clearest recurring themes is the rapid destabilisation of household economies. In many cases, the disappeared individual was the primary source of income, and families were forced to reorganise survival strategies immediately after the disappearance. This often resulted in debt, withdrawal from education, informal labour, and long-term financial insecurity.

A second recurring pattern is legal invisibility. Families repeatedly described existing in a space where the disappeared person is neither formally acknowledged as detained nor legally recognised as deceased. This creates barriers in accessing bank accounts, property, inheritance, documentation, and social entitlements. Rather than functioning as a temporary administrative issue, this uncertainty becomes prolonged and structural.

The burden of managing this falls disproportionately on women, a pattern examined in full in the next section.

Children experience the effects in ways that extend beyond the immediate moment of disappearance. Educational disruption, emotional distress, documentation issues, and increased vulnerability to child labour or early marriage appeared repeatedly across accounts. These impacts demonstrate how enforced disappearance reshapes family trajectories across generations.

Taken together, these patterns point to an important reality: enforced disappearance does not operate as a single event confined to the moment a person is taken. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has repeatedly recognised enforced disappearance as a continuous violation¹⁶, precisely because the harm persists for as long as the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person remain unknown.

The interviews conducted for this report reflect that continuity clearly. Families described their lives as divided into “before” and “after.” Time itself became organised around the disappearance. In this sense, enforced disappearance

¹⁶ Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. “Follow-Up Report to the UN Human Rights Council.” UN Doc. A/HRC/WGEID/2016. Transmitted September 12, 2016.

functions not only as a violation against an individual but as an ongoing condition imposed upon families. Its effects are cumulative, extending outward through households and communities. The disappearance itself may occur in a single moment, but the harm continues long afterwards.



**“Medicines are expensive and income
is limited”**

Aqsa Dayo, Sister of Insaf Dayo (Disappeared 2017)

Women at the Centre

Across every case documented in this report, women, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, emerge as the central figures navigating the aftermath of enforced disappearance. They absorb three simultaneous and overlapping roles: providers, caregivers, and legal advocates. This section examines each dimension in turn.

a. Economic Impact

One of the most immediate consequences of enforced disappearance is economic collapse within the household. In many documented cases, the disappeared person was the primary or sole earning member. Their sudden absence leaves families without financial stability, often overnight.

Amnesty International notes that financial hardship is “one of the most prevalent impacts” faced by families of the disappeared¹⁷, particularly where the missing individual was responsible for supporting entire households, including children and elderly family members. Families interviewed in that report described being pushed into debt, separating children across households due to financial strain, and taking up unstable or low-paid work to cope.

This pattern is also reflected in interviews conducted by NCHR. Across these interviews, female relatives consistently described an abrupt shift in financial circumstances following the disappearance. Households that had relied on a single income were left without support, forcing women to find ways to sustain families with limited resources and few viable options.

Within this vacuum, women are required to step into roles they were not previously carrying alone. Wives, daughters, and mothers become both primary earners and heads of household, while also continuing to manage caregiving responsibilities and pursue information about the disappeared family member.

The type of work available to women further complicates this transition. In Pakistan, women’s participation in the labour force remains limited and is concentrated largely in informal or insecure employment. As a result, many women affected by enforced disappearance move into low-paid and unstable forms of work, including home-based labour, stitching, domestic work, or small-scale informal activities.

This is consistent across both secondary reporting and NCHR interviews. Women described taking on piecemeal income-generating work while managing households

¹⁷ Amnesty International, “Living Ghosts: The Devastating Impact of Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan” (ASA 33/4992/2021, November 2021)

and engaging with institutions. The income generated is often irregular and insufficient, contributing to ongoing financial strain and, in many cases, debt.

The economic impact is further compounded by legal and administrative barriers. Families frequently face difficulties accessing bank accounts, property, inheritance, or pensions because the disappeared person is neither legally declared dead nor officially recognised as detained. As noted in NCHR's submission to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, the absence of a formal legal mechanism recognising missing persons leaves families in prolonged financial and administrative uncertainty.

For many women, this creates a situation where they are expected to sustain their families economically, without stable income opportunities and without the legal authority to manage existing resources. The burden, therefore, is not only financial rather it is structural, and it is carried disproportionately by women.

b. Legal and Administrative Burden

Alongside economic hardship, families face a parallel challenge in navigating legal and administrative systems. The absence of official confirmation, whether of death or detention, creates a situation where the disappeared person does not fit into any recognised legal category. They are not legally alive in a way that allows normal transactions, and not legally dead in a way that allows closure of affairs.

In practical terms, this lack of clarity creates a series of obstacles that accumulate through the years. Families often find that bank accounts cannot be accessed, particularly when accounts are held solely in the name of the disappeared individual. Even where funds exist, they remain out of reach without the required legal documentation. This can be especially critical in the immediate aftermath of a disappearance, when families are most in need of financial resources.

Similarly, property and inheritance processes remain stalled. Without a death certificate or formal declaration, families are unable to initiate succession proceedings or transfer ownership of assets. This means that land, homes, or other property may remain legally tied to the disappeared person, even as the family continues to rely on them for shelter or income. Disputes can also arise within extended families, particularly where inheritance claims cannot be formalised.

Administrative challenges extend further. Women interviewed in NCHR consultations described difficulties in managing basic documentation for themselves and their children. This includes issues such as updating identity documents, registering children for school, or completing official forms that require the presence or status of the missing person. In some cases, even routine bureaucratic processes become complicated by the inability to clearly define the family structure.

Access to benefits and entitlements, including pensions, employment-related dues, or social protection schemes, is also affected. These systems are built around clear categories, employed, deceased, retired, and families of the disappeared often fall outside these classifications. As a result, they may be excluded from forms of support that would otherwise be available in situations of death or unemployment.

As noted in NCHR's submission, the absence of a legal framework recognising missing persons leaves families unable to manage financial assets, resolve inheritance matters, or carry out basic administrative functions. In some contexts internationally, mechanisms such as "certificates of absence" or provisional legal recognition have been introduced to address this gap. The absence of a comparable mechanism in Pakistan means that families remain without even temporary legal relief.

With time, these barriers do not remain isolated, they compound. Economic strain is intensified when financial resources cannot be accessed. Emotional stress is heightened by the constant need to navigate systems that do not recognise the family's situation. Decision-making, whether related to education, housing, or long-term planning, becomes constrained by unpredictability.

The result is a condition in which families are expected to continue functioning, managing households, raising children, and meeting obligations, while lacking the legal tools required to do so. Everyday life becomes dependent on workarounds, informal arrangements, or discretionary support from officials, rather than clear rights.

In effect, families exist in a state of legal suspension. They are present within the system, but not fully recognised by it.

c. Psychological Impact

The psychological impact of enforced disappearance is shaped, above all, by uncertainty. Unlike death, which carries a form of finality, or detention, which at least implies a known location, enforced disappearance leaves families without answers. There is no confirmation, no timeline, and often no reliable information.

One of the key concepts that emerged in interviews is that of ambiguous loss. Originally developed by psychologist Pauline Boss¹⁸, the term refers to situations where a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, leaving relationships unresolved and grief without closure. In cases of enforced disappearance, this condition becomes prolonged. Families are left in a situation

¹⁸ Pauline G. Boss, "Ambiguous Loss: Working with Families of the Missing," *Family Process* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 14.

where the person is physically absent but psychologically present. The relationship does not end, but it cannot continue in any normal way. There is no clear moment of mourning, and no socially recognised process for grief.

This creates a condition of open-ended distress, where hope and fear exist side by side. Family members continue to search for information, follow up with authorities, and hold on to the possibility of return. At the same time, they are confronted, often silently, with the possibility of harm or death. This duality is difficult to sustain over time, yet it becomes part of everyday life.

The psychological effects of this condition are cumulative. Interviews and secondary research point to chronic anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and prolonged grief. Unlike more defined forms of loss, where grief may gradually shift or soften, ambiguous loss tends to persist. The absence remains active in decision-making, in conversations, and in how families plan, or struggle to plan, their futures.

For many families, this ambiguity also affects their sense of time. Life events, such as education, marriages, financial decisions, are delayed or approached with hesitation. There is often a reluctance to make irreversible decisions in the absence of clarity. In this way, disappearance does not only affect the present; it shapes the future as well.

Women, in particular, carry a significant share of this emotional burden. Across interviews conducted by NCHR, female relatives described the difficulty of maintaining a sense of normalcy within the household while dealing with their own unresolved grief. They are often the ones who continue to engage with institutions, follow up on cases, and manage expectations within the family.

At the same time, they play a central role in supporting children and other dependents. This includes not only meeting practical needs, but also managing emotional responses, answering questions, providing reassurance, and absorbing distress. In many cases, women become the emotional anchor of the household, even as they themselves remain in a state of uncertainty.

The psychological impact is further intensified by the lack of formal support systems. Access to counselling or mental health services is limited, and families are often left to cope on their own. Social expectations around resilience and silence can also discourage open discussion of distress, particularly for women.

Importantly, this emotional strain is closely tied to economic insecurity and legal uncertainty. Financial stress, administrative barriers, and repeated engagement with institutions all contribute to a sense of exhaustion and frustration. Each interaction, whether with authorities, courts, or officials, reinforces the absence rather than resolving it.

In this sense, the psychological impact of enforced disappearance is not a separate layer of harm. It runs alongside and through other forms of impact, shaping how families experience their economic, legal, and social realities.

d. Social Pressures

Beyond the household, families of the disappeared also navigate a range of social pressures that shape how they move through everyday life. These pressures are not always formal or visible, but they are persistent. Across interviews and secondary documentation, they tend to take similar forms, stigma, suspicion, and social isolation, even if their intensity varies by context.

In some cases, families are viewed through a lens of association, particularly where disappearances are linked to security concerns. This can alter how communities respond to them. Relationships may become strained, interactions more guarded, and support networks less reliable. Families spoke of a gradual distancing leading to fewer visits, less engagement, and an underlying sense of being judged.

This social positioning often brings with it a feeling of being watched or scrutinised. Interviews also point to instances of harassment or informal surveillance, whether through repeated questioning, monitoring of movements, or indirect pressure. Even where these experiences are not constant, the possibility of them shapes behaviour.

For women in particular, these dynamics translate into a narrowing of social space. Decisions about leaving the house, travelling, or engaging in work outside the home are often filtered through concerns about safety, perception, and potential consequences. In some cases, women described becoming more cautious in how they speak, where they go, and who they interact with.

Mobility may be reduced, not only due to external restrictions but also as a self-protective response. Activities that might otherwise be routine, seeking employment, attending hearings, visiting offices, or even participating in social gatherings, can become difficult to sustain. Over time, this limits access to opportunities, information, and support.

There is also an internal dimension to this pressure. Families may choose to self-limit visibility, avoiding public discussion of the disappearance or reducing engagement with institutions out of fear of negative repercussions. This can further isolate them, cutting them off from both formal and informal avenues of support.

These social dynamics do not operate independently of other pressures. They interact with economic strain and psychological stress in ways that reinforce each other. Reduced mobility can limit income opportunities. Social isolation can intensify

emotional distress. Ongoing scrutiny can make engagement with institutions more difficult.

Taken together, this creates an environment in which families are not only coping with loss and ambiguity, but are also constantly negotiating their place within their communities.



“After my brother was taken, I stopped going to school. I started believing that education could make you a target”

Gul Naz, Sister of Falak Naz (Disappeared 2009)

Children Left Behind

a. Education Disruption

One of the most immediate impacts of enforced disappearance on children is the disruption of education. The sudden loss of a primary income often forces families to reassess priorities, and schooling is frequently affected. Across interviews and secondary documentation, children of disappeared persons have dropped out of school due to financial constraints, particularly where fees, transport, or educational materials can no longer be afforded.

In other cases, education continues but in an unstable form. Children may experience interrupted schooling, including frequent absences, transfers between institutions, or shifts to lower-cost alternatives. These disruptions are not only financial. Changes within the household, such as relocation, increased domestic responsibilities, or the need to contribute to income, also affect a child's ability to remain engaged in education on a consistent basis.

Reportedly, over 1,500 Baloch students dropped out of school or university between 2004-2019 due to the disappearance of a family member¹⁹.

The impact is not always limited to affordability or access. In some instances, the disappearance itself reshapes how children perceive education and their place within it. In one of the interviews conducted, a young girl spoke about associating her brother's disappearance with his education, believing that his studies had somehow contributed to him being picked up. As a result, she chose to stop her own education, out of fear that continuing might expose her to similar risks.

This reflects a more complex dimension of disruption, where schooling is not only interrupted by circumstance, but actively abandoned due to fear, perception, or trauma. In such cases, the disappearance alters not just access to education, but a child's sense of safety within educational spaces.

Gradually, these forms of disruption, whether financial, emotional, or perceptual, accumulate. They limit continuity in learning, reduce the likelihood of completion, and narrow future opportunities. What begins as an immediate response to a crisis can translate into long-term educational disadvantage, affecting not only individual trajectories but the broader stability of the household.

¹⁹ Baloch Human Rights Organisation, "Report on Missing Persons in Balochistan," 2019, cited in Muhammad Sharif, "The Curse of Missing Baloch and Academic Performances," Pakistan Today, July 2, 2023

b. Psychological Effects

The psychological impact on children is often less visible, but deeply felt. The disappearance of a parent or close family member, combined with a lack of clear information, creates an environment of confusion, fear, and anxiety.

Children are often aware that something significant has happened, but do not have the tools or explanations needed to fully understand it. This can affect behaviour, emotional regulation, and relationships within the household. In interviews, caregivers described children asking repeated questions, struggling to make sense of the absence, or reacting through withdrawal, irritability, or changes in routine.

The same condition of ambiguous loss described earlier, applies strongly in this context. Children are left without a clear narrative: they cannot fully mourn, but they cannot return to a sense of normalcy either. Children may remain preoccupied with the absence, or with questions about safety and return, which can affect their engagement with school and social life.

Research by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also highlighted that families of the missing, including children, often experience long-term psychological distress linked to uncertainty, with effects such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal persisting over the years²⁰. Similarly, studies on enforced disappearance globally note that children in affected families face heightened risks of emotional and developmental challenges due to prolonged instability and lack of closure.

These conditions contribute to long-term developmental risks, affecting emotional wellbeing, learning, and social interaction. The absence is not a single event for children, it becomes part of how they understand safety, relationships, and the future.

c. Legal and Identity Challenges

Children of disappeared persons also face a range of legal and administrative challenges that affect not only access to services, but their basic recognition within formal systems. These challenges are often less visible than economic or emotional impacts, but they have long-term consequences for how children are able to navigate education, protection systems, and future opportunities.

²⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, *Living with Absence: Helping the Families of the Missing* (Geneva: ICRC, 2018)

A central issue is the absence of legal clarity around the status of the disappeared individual. Where a parent's presence or documentation is required, children can face gaps in identity and verification. This can affect routine processes such as:

- obtaining or renewing identity documents (e.g., B-Forms, CNIC-linked records)
- school registration and maintenance of official academic records
- access to services that require parental consent or verification

Affected families have often described these processes as inconsistent and often dependent on discretionary decisions by officials, rather than clear procedures. Even where documentation is eventually obtained, it may require repeated visits, additional affidavits, or informal facilitation. Delays in documentation can interrupt schooling, limit access to services, and create complications in transitions between institutions.

The absence of legal recognition also has implications for inheritance and guardianship. Without formal acknowledgement of whether the disappeared person is alive or deceased, families are unable to initiate inheritance proceedings or transfer assets in a legally secure way. For children, this means that entitlement to family property or financial resources remains uncertain or inaccessible.

Similarly, guardianship arrangements may remain informal. In the absence of clear legal status, it can be difficult to formalise decision-making authority in matters relating to education, healthcare, or travel. This leaves children without fully recognised legal protection, particularly in situations where disputes arise or where formal documentation is required.

As highlighted in NCHR's broader analysis, the lack of a legal framework recognising missing persons creates sustained barriers for families in managing legal and administrative affairs, including those directly affecting children.

d. Increased Vulnerability

The combination of economic strain, legal uncertainty, and social pressure increases the vulnerability of children in affected families. These pressures do not operate in isolation, instead they intersect in ways that gradually narrow the options available to children and shape the choices families feel able to make.

In contexts where income has been lost and alternative sources are limited, children may be pushed into child labour as a way of contributing to household survival. This is often not a single decision, but a gradual shift, helping at home, taking on small jobs, and eventually leaving school altogether. While this may provide short-term financial relief, it further disrupts education and can expose children to exploitative or unsafe working conditions, particularly in informal sectors where protections are minimal.

For girls, the pressures can take a different form. Interviews and secondary reporting suggest a heightened risk of early marriage, often linked to economic hardship, concerns around safety, or attempts to reduce the perceived burden on the household. In some cases, marriage is seen as a form of protection; in others, as a way of managing financial constraints.

The broader environment also contributes to vulnerability. Legal ambiguity can delay access to entitlements or support, while social pressures may restrict mobility or access to opportunities. Together, these factors can reduce the protective structures around children, making it more difficult to maintain continuity in education, wellbeing, and development.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that these outcomes are not universal. Not all families experience them in the same way, and many actively resist such pressures where possible. However, the patterns recur across different cases and contexts, particularly where support systems are weak or absent.

In this sense, vulnerability is not simply a characteristic of individual children, it is produced by the conditions surrounding them. Enforced disappearance creates a situation in which families are required to cope without adequate economic, legal, or social support, and children often bear the longer-term consequences of that gap.



“If my brother has done something, then bring him to court. Do it according to the law. I will accept whatever decision. But don’t just make someone disappear”

Aqsa Dayo, Sister of Insaf Dayo (Disappeared 2017)

Gaps in Response

Despite the existence of formal mechanisms and ongoing documentation of enforced disappearances, significant gaps remain in how the issue is addressed. These gaps are not confined to one level, they operate across legal frameworks, institutional processes, and the support available to families.

The table below summarises the key institutional gaps identified across case studies, civil society documentation, and NCHR interviews.

Gap Type	Specific Issue	Consequence for Families
Legal	No formal legal status for missing or disappeared persons	Families cannot access bank accounts, transfer property, resolve inheritance, or obtain essential documentation
Legal	Enforced disappearance not fully criminalised as a standalone offence	No clear legal basis for investigation, prosecution, or accountability
Institutional	Delays in case processing before COIED and courts	Proceedings extend over years with limited updates or tangible outcomes
Institutional	Cases closed as "disposed of" without meaningful resolution	Procedural closure without clarity on fate, whereabouts, or responsibility
Institutional	Low compliance with production orders (reported <8%)	Commission unable to enforce its own directives; families see no results
Institutional	Limited transparency on case progress and disposal criteria	Families rely on own follow-ups; confidence in the process erodes
Family-Level	No structured financial assistance for affected families	Households fall into debt, child labour, or early marriage as coping mechanisms
Family-Level	No psychosocial or mental health support	Prolonged ambiguous loss, chronic anxiety, and unresolved grief without intervention
Family-Level	No legal aid or designated help desks	Families navigate complex systems alone, often facing discretionary or inconsistent treatment

a. Legal Gaps

At the most basic level, Pakistan lacks a formal legal status for missing or disappeared persons. This absence has far-reaching implications. Without legal recognition, families cannot resolve financial, administrative, or personal matters tied to the disappeared individual. Bank accounts remain inaccessible. Property and inheritance processes stall. Essential documentation cannot be obtained.

There is also no structured framework to manage prolonged absence. In some international contexts, mechanisms such as certificates of absence or provisional legal recognition allow families to access assets, manage property, or make decisions while the status of the missing person remains uncertain. Pakistan provides no comparable mechanism, leaving families in prolonged legal uncertainty, often for years.

In addition, enforced disappearance has not been fully operationalised as a standalone criminal offence with clear enforcement pathways. Although legislative efforts have been made, including the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill passed by the National Assembly in November 2021, the bill did not reach the Senate, and the legal gap remains. Without a distinct criminal offence, there is no clear legal basis for investigating and prosecuting those responsible.

Related to this is the broader issue of weak accountability mechanisms. Even where individuals are traced or released, there is limited follow-through in terms of identifying responsibility or pursuing action against those involved. As noted by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the existing system has struggled to deliver on key objectives such as accountability, justice, and reparation for victims.

b. Institutional Gaps

At the institutional level, families consistently encounter delays in case processing. Proceedings before COIED and related courts extend over long periods, with families attending repeated hearings without clear progress. Court hearings are intermittent, with long gaps between appearances, further extending ambiguity.

Even based on official figures, a significant number of cases remain under investigation at any given time. As of end 2025, over 1,700 cases remained pending before the Commission, reflecting the difficulty in establishing the fate or whereabouts of many disappeared persons.

More fundamentally, there are concerns about limited outcomes. COIED reports cases as "disposed of," but this does not mean resolution in the sense families understand it. Cases are closed after a person is traced to a detention facility or

released, without clarity on responsibility or accountability. In other instances, cases may be closed based on institutional assessments that are not transparent to families. Civil society organisations have raised concerns about the dismissal or disposal of cases without delivering justice, highlighting a gap between procedural closure and substantive resolution.

The implementation gap is also significant. Production orders—directives requiring authorities to present a detained person—have a low compliance rate, reportedly less than 8%. This limits COIED's ability to enforce its own directions and weakens its role as a mechanism capable of ensuring accountability.

Finally, structural concerns persist around transparency and independence. COIED operates under the Ministry of Interior, raising questions about its capacity to investigate allegations that may involve state actors. Limited public reporting and inconsistent access to information further add to the difficulty families face in understanding the status of their cases. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has noted concerns regarding the Commission's structural and functional dependence on the Ministry, as well as barriers to meaningful participation, including proceedings conducted primarily in English.

Taken together, these institutional issues, delays, unresolved cases, disposal without resolution, low production order compliance, and lack of transparency, mean that for many families, engagement with COIED does not bring them closer to answers. Instead, it becomes part of a longer process of waiting, navigating institutions, and continuing uncertainty.

c. Family-Level Gaps

At the level of families, the gaps are even more pronounced. There are no structured support systems specifically designed to assist families of the disappeared. Financial assistance, where available, is inconsistent and not embedded within a broader framework of support.

There is also a significant lack of psychosocial services. Families are left to cope with unresolved absence, grief, and stress without access to counselling or mental health support. This is particularly significant given the nature of enforced disappearance, which creates ongoing psychological strain rather than a one-time trauma.

In practice, families navigate these challenges largely on their own, managing legal processes, financial pressures, and emotional impact without coordinated institutional support.

Taken together, these gaps highlight a broader issue: while mechanisms exist to acknowledge enforced disappearance, they are not supported by a comprehensive

system capable of addressing its full impact. Section 9 below addresses each of these gaps through targeted legal, institutional, and family-level recommendations.

Recommendations

The findings of this report point to the need for a more structured, human-centered response to enforced disappearances, one that moves beyond documentation and addresses the legal, economic, and human consequences experienced by those left behind. The following recommendations respond directly to the gaps identified in Section 8. Each recommendation is cross-referenced to the corresponding gap using the labels G1–G9.

Label Gap (from Section 8)

- G1 No formal legal status for missing persons
- G2 Enforced disappearance not criminalised as standalone offence
- G3 Delays in case processing before COIED and courts
- G4 Cases closed as "disposed of" without meaningful resolution
- G5 Low compliance with production orders (<8%)
- G6 Limited transparency on case progress and disposal criteria
- G7 No structured financial assistance for affected families
- G8 No psychosocial or mental health support
- G9 No legal aid or designated help desks

A. Legal Recognition and Accountability (Addresses G1–G2)

1. Introduce a legal status for missing persons

Create a legal status or certificate for missing persons, providing temporary recognition of disappearance. This should enable families to:

- Access bank accounts held solely in the name of the disappeared person
- Initiate property and inheritance processes
- Make guardianship and administrative decisions for dependents

In comparative contexts, similar mechanisms (such as certificates of absence) have been used to reduce the administrative burden on families while cases remain unresolved. The absence of such a framework in Pakistan leaves families in prolonged legal uncertainty.

2. Adopt ICPPED and criminalise enforced disappearance

Take steps toward signing and ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), and align domestic legislation accordingly. Ratification must be accompanied by:

- Criminalisation of enforced disappearance as a standalone offence
- Recognition of it as a continuous crime
- Protections for families, including the right to truth and reparation

3. Amend the legal framework governing the COIED

The legal framework of the COIED needs to be amended in order to strengthen accountability mechanisms, including the ability to formally refer cases for criminal investigation and prosecution where evidence of enforced disappearance exists. Ensure that findings of the Commission trigger follow-up accountability processes rather than solely case disposal procedures.

B. Immediate Institutional Measures (Addresses G7, G9)

While questions of responsibility and accountability remain central, the absence of clarity cannot justify the absence of support. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding enforced disappearances, the State retains an obligation to mitigate the harm experienced by affected families.

4. Establish financial assistance mechanisms

Provide state-supported financial assistance to families of the disappeared, particularly where the missing individual was the primary breadwinner. Assistance should be regular, predictable, and not contingent on case resolution.

5. Provide state-supported legal aid

Establish legal aid services to assist families in filing cases, navigating courts, and engaging with the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED).

6. Designate focal persons or help desks

Create designated help desks within relevant institutions (police, courts, COIED) to assist families in navigating procedures and reduce reliance on informal or discretionary processes.

7. Protection Measures

Introduce protection measures for victims, witnesses, and family members who pursue disappearance cases, including safeguards against intimidation, reprisals, and harassment.

C. Medium-Term Institutional Measures (Addresses G3–G6)

8. Strengthening the COIED

- Strengthen the independence of the Commission by ensuring greater institutional autonomy and reducing operational dependence on executive authorities.
- Expand the Commission's institutional capacity through dedicated staff, adequate resources, and greater regional accessibility for affected families.
- Require regular public reporting on registered cases, pending cases, case outcomes, and implementation of Commission directives.
- Publish disaggregated and regularly updated data on disappearance cases, including information by province, case status, and stage of proceedings.

9. Develop standardised case procedures

Create uniform procedures for case registration, tracking, and follow-up, applicable across police, courts, and COIED. This includes timelines for each stage of processing.

10. Ensure transparent communication with families

Mandate regular, transparent communication with families, including written updates on case status and procedural developments. Families should not have to initiate every follow-up.

11. Strengthen production order enforcement

Introduce mechanisms to improve compliance with production orders, currently reported below 8%. This may include reporting requirements, sanctions for non-compliance, and independent monitoring.

12. Establish clear guidelines for case disposal

Define what constitutes meaningful case closure. Cases should not be recorded as "disposed of" without establishing responsibility, ensuring accountability, or providing clarity to families regarding the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.

D. Long-Term Structural Measures (Addresses G8, with child-specific additions)

13. Establish psychosocial support systems

Create accessible counselling and mental health services for families of the disappeared, delivered through community-based support systems. Given the nature of ambiguous loss, support must be sustained over time, not time-limited.

14. Introduce education continuity programmes

Establish targeted support for children of disappeared persons, including scholarships, fee waivers, and flexible re-enrollment procedures for those who have dropped out.

15. Develop social protection schemes

Design social protection schemes specifically tailored to families affected by enforced disappearance, recognising that their needs differ from those of bereaved or unemployed households.

16. Strengthen accountability mechanisms

Invest in independent oversight, investigation, and prosecution capacity for enforced disappearance cases. This includes clarifying institutional responsibility and ensuring follow-through on findings.

17. Consider a truth and reconciliation or inquiry mechanism

Explore the establishment of a truth and reconciliation or independent inquiry commission to acknowledge the scale of the issue, document violations systematically, and recommend systemic reforms.

E. Compensation and Redress (Addresses G7)

18. Provide compensation as part of broader redress

Provide financial compensation to affected families as part of a broader framework of support. Compensation must not replace the obligation to establish truth and accountability, nor be treated as a substitute for investigation or prosecution.

Meaningful redress requires:

- Acknowledgment of harm
- Access to justice

- Where possible, clarity on the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared

Compensation alone does not constitute resolution.

Conclusion

The accounts presented in this report point to a consistent reality: enforced disappearance does not end with the person who is taken. Its effects extend into households, relationships, and decisions made over years.

Families are required to adapt in the absence of clarity. They reorganise finances, assume new roles, and navigate systems that do not fully accommodate their situation. Women become providers and intermediaries with institutions and children grow up within disrupted educational and social environments. At the same time, indeterminacy remains unresolved, shaping how families experience time, responsibility, and loss.

Institutional mechanisms exist, but they do not fully address this reality. Legal frameworks do not recognise the status of the disappeared in a way that enables families to function effectively. Processes often prioritise case management over resolution. Support systems, financial, legal, and psychosocial, remain limited.

What emerges is not only a gap in accountability, but a gap in recognition. The experience of families exists at the margins of formal systems, despite being central to the impact of enforced disappearance.

Addressing this requires more than procedural reform. It requires acknowledging that the consequences of enforced disappearance extend beyond the act itself, and that responses must be designed accordingly. This includes legal recognition, clearer institutional processes, and sustained support for families navigating prolonged absence.

Ultimately, understanding enforced disappearance is not only about tracing the missing. It is also about recognising those who wait, who search, and who hope without resolution. It includes the mothers who spend years at protest camps, the children who lose faith in education, and the sisters who become heads of households overnight. It includes the living who cannot move forward because they are the ones left behind.

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“You can take away a person, but you cannot take away their identity, or the fact that they exist”

*Aymun Sajid, Daughter of Sajid Mehmood
(Disappeared 2016)*



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