

Families of Missing Migrants:

Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support

Country report:
Zimbabwe



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Cover photo: *Where Is My Brother?* "The years I have lost my brother have been the most painful years, not only for me but for all of us as a family," said Mr Foroma. "The pain is just unbearable." © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

Chapter 1: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

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This publication is the result of a collaborative effort involving several IOM offices and a team of independent researchers participating in the project “Assessment of the needs of families searching for relatives lost in the Central and Western Mediterranean”, funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionately negative effects on people already in vulnerable situations, including those with missing migrant relatives. It has exacerbated the struggles that the families discuss in this report.

This report is dedicated to the families of all people who have gone missing or died on migration journeys while seeking safety, dignity and better opportunities.

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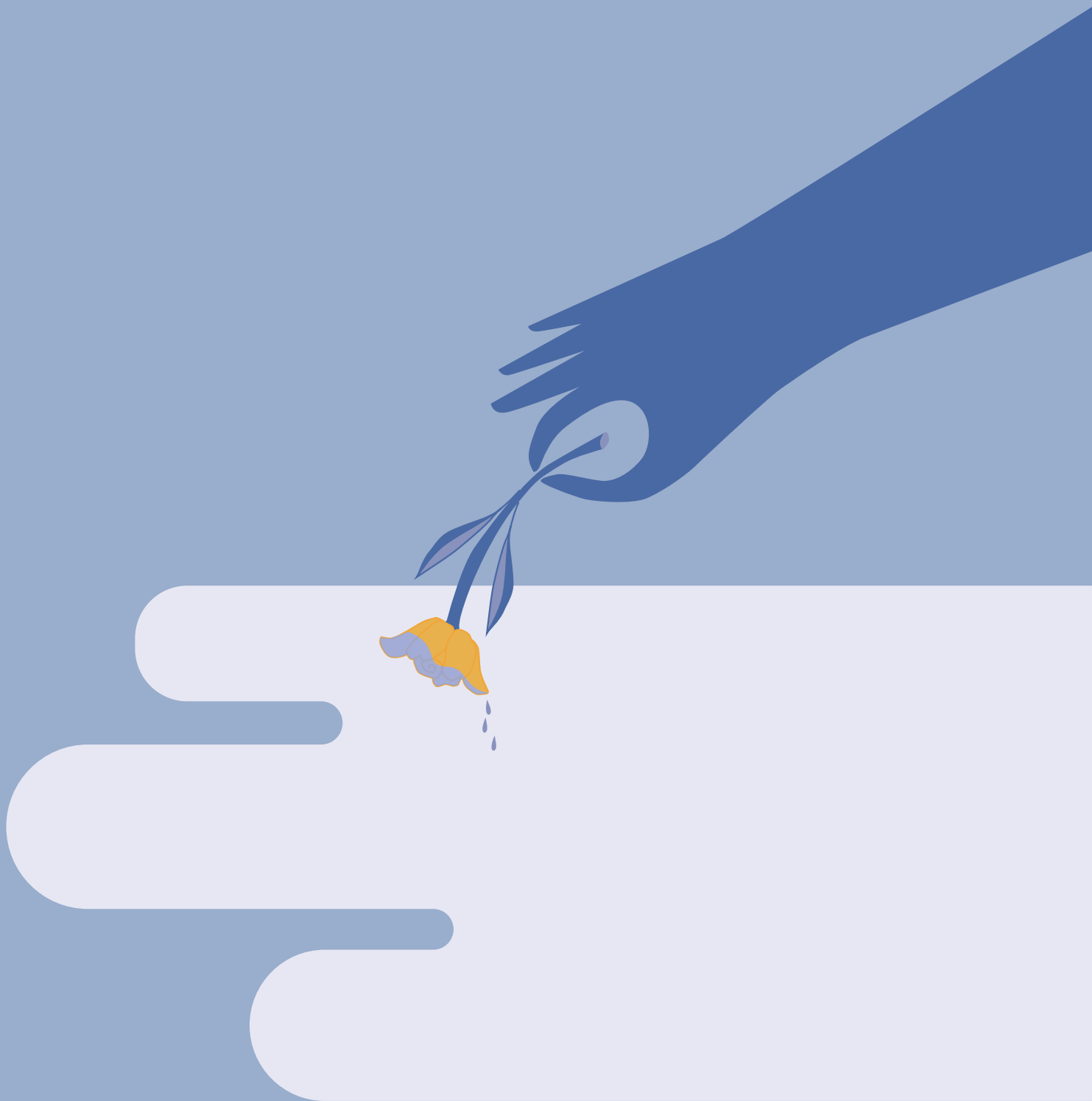
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ABBREVIATIONS

DRG	Department of the Registrar General
GMDAC	Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (IOM)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
SADC	Southern African Development Community
ZHRC	Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission



ASSESSMENT OF THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES SEARCHING FOR RELATIVES LOST IN THE CENTRAL AND WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Between April 2019 and March 2021, IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), through its Missing Migrants Project, carried out a research project that aimed to document the experiences of families searching for missing relatives lost in the context of migration journeys in the Central and Western Mediterranean. Since 2014, IOM's Missing Migrants Project has recorded more than 40,000 deaths and disappearances during migration around the world. The death or disappearance of each person included in IOM's records has reverberating effects on the family and community surrounding them. With support from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, IOM GMDAC conducted research in Ethiopia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe to better understand the experiences and the challenges that families face while searching for loved ones lost during migration. The project aimed to capture such situations in places of migrant origin, transit and destination.

The project was a highly collaborative effort involving several IOM offices and a team of independent academics and researchers who are migrants themselves and/or who work closely with migrant communities in the countries that participated in the study. An advisory board formed by key international and civil society organizations and academics working with families of missing migrants around the world provided input at different stages of the project.

The research team spent time with 76 families in their communities across four countries, having in-depth conversations with them. The team prioritized listening to what is important to the families, allowing them to drive the knowledge that was created with the project. Thus, the voices of the research participants, who are all missing family members in the context of migration to another country, are at the centre of the project's findings and reports. The experiences of families were complemented with interviews with more than 30 stakeholders to assess the institutional, legal and policy framework applicable to cases of missing migrants in the contexts studied.

Based on the research findings and in consultation with the project's advisory board, a series of policy implications and recommendations were developed to drive action to support families of missing migrants in searching for their relatives and dealing with the impacts of their loss. They are aimed at different actors – in government, international organizations, and community and migrant support organizations – and can be found in the last chapter of each of the reports.



76
FAMILIES



4
COUNTRIES



More than
30
STAKEHOLDERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faced with a deteriorating political and socioeconomic situation at home, large numbers of Zimbabweans have left their home country over the last decades. Structural vulnerabilities shaped by changing migration policies, obstacles to obtaining adequate documentation, and concerns over detection by immigration control authorities force people to opt for more dangerous, hidden and remote migration routes outside of official channels. On these journeys, the likelihood of people losing touch with their families due to a variety of circumstances is higher. If this happens, families left behind start to wonder what happened to their loved ones, and in this context of uncertainty, they start a search for information while they cope with the day-to-day struggle of living with the absence.

This research report contributes to the body of knowledge on the experiences of families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe as they search for their relatives and deal with the impacts of the loss. The disappearance of a migrant has deep impacts on the emotional, economic, social and legal conditions of the family members left behind, which have not yet been examined in the Zimbabwean context. The report is based on qualitative research conducted in Zimbabwe's Manicaland province in December 2020 and January 2021, and it gives insights into the experiences of 22 families of missing migrants as they attempt to establish the circumstances surrounding their loved ones' disappearances.

This report is part of a project carried out by IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre that identifies and raises awareness of the challenges and coping mechanisms of people with missing migrant relatives in Ethiopia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. It hopes to contribute to stronger and more appropriate legal and policy responses to support families of missing migrants. In particular, this report identifies recommendations that would help fulfil Zimbabwe's commitments under SDG 10.7 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through which States commit to cooperate closely at the international level to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration, and Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which calls on States to "save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants" (UNGA, 2018).

The research found that the lack of clearly identifiable and accessible search mechanisms meant that most families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe did not even know where to start or whom to contact when their loved ones went missing. While many families were not aware that they could report the disappearance of their relative to the police or did not know which agency or unit they should approach to file a report, others were highly sceptical of doing so, given a widespread lack of trust in the authorities. The few families who had contacted the authorities did not receive any meaningful support with their cases. As a result, families turned to informal channels to search for their loved ones.

The search process is wrought with obstacles and constraints. Most of the families interviewed highlighted that their precarious living and financial conditions were a major barrier preventing them from effectively exhausting all options to search for their relatives. Families also faced barriers related to a lack of awareness of their rights and options and poor access to information regarding how to file missing-person reports and how to effectively seek support

in the search for their relatives. The lack of awareness, along with other hurdles – such as high costs, distances from rural communities to government institutions in urban centres, unclear procedures, mistrust and stigma – limits families' access to justice and information.

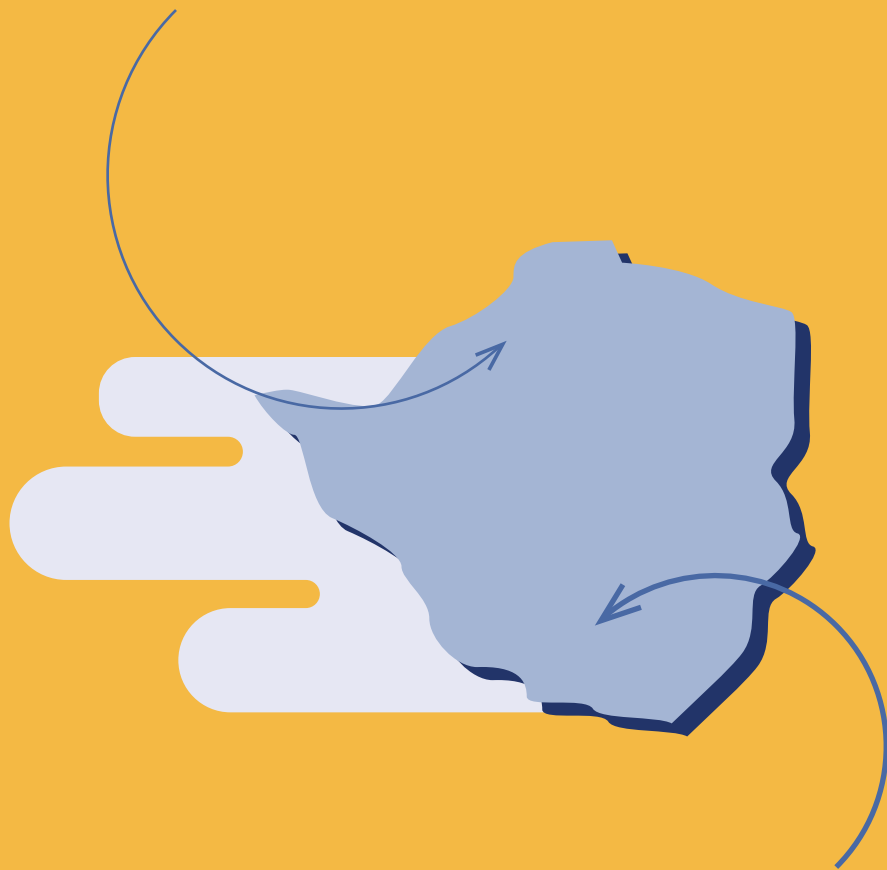
Testimonies collected in this study show the psychological impact of losing a loved one during migration. Families shared experiences of going through various emotional hardships, teetering between hope that their relatives will return and fear that they might never be found. Besides the enduring psychological and emotional impacts, families also articulated social pressures and stigma associated with having a missing relative, which affected not only their search process, but also their day-to-day lives. In particular, having a missing relative exacerbated the economic and social disenfranchisement of women, children and older relatives left behind.

The general lack of awareness and understanding of the needs of families of missing migrants has resulted in inadequate or non-existent institutional responses to provide support. With the aim of contributing to filling this gap, this report makes a series of recommendations for how families in Zimbabwe with missing migrant relatives can be better supported. The recommendations, summarized below and further described at the end of the report, provide insights for developing specific and targeted responses, and highlight the need for evidence-based policies and interventions:

1. **Develop a multipronged national strategy to address cases of missing migrants with the following elements:** (a) prevention strategies to reduce the number of people who go missing on irregular migration routes, (b) search strategies to ensure that authorities provide a uniform response to cases of missing migrants and that they work with key stakeholders to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the missing, and (c) support and guidance provisions for families of missing migrants to ensure that they know how and where to access help and support.
2. **Develop specialized and standardized procedures for police response when migrants are reported missing,** which should include clear steps on what the police should do when a disappearance linked to migration is reported, what steps to take when it comes to transnational cases, and clear standards for informing families about the progress of the investigation – and what they can or are expected to do to contribute to the process during its different phases.
3. **Establish a dedicated cross-border mechanism to ensure an integrated, harmonized and systematic approach to address missing-migrant cases at the transnational level,** in order to clarify the roles and responsibilities of actors dealing with investigations that have a cross-border element, to foster a close working relationship between counterparts (including consular authorities, law enforcement and forensic agencies), and to establish procedures to enhance cross-border exchange of information and data and ensure mutual access to existing databases.
4. **Fund and support the establishment of legal empowerment programmes with the aim of connecting families of missing migrants in rural communities with tools that will help them access justice and support,** and providing them with information and knowledge about their rights and available avenues to search for their missing relatives and deal with the financial, legal and administrative impacts of their absence.
5. **Create mechanisms to enable safe reporting of missing-migrant cases, ensuring that the data collected from families of missing migrants will be used for the humanitarian purposes of the search,** with the aim of clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the missing, not for immigration control and enforcement purposes.

CHAPTER 1

Migration journeys of Zimbabwean migrants



1. Introduction¹

“The years I have lost my brother have been the most painful years, not only for me but for all of us as a family,” said Mr Foroma, who has been searching for his brother who went missing on his journey to South Africa. “When your brother goes missing like this, without a trace, not a day would pass by without thinking about it and reliving the pain.”

Mr Foroma’s brother is one of many Zimbabweans who have gone missing on migration journeys in the past decades, as the deteriorating political and socioeconomic situation in Zimbabwe has led thousands of people to leave the country irregularly. Migration policies and lack of access to travel documents have played a key role in shaping the vulnerabilities that Zimbabweans encounter on their migration journeys. The need to avoid detection in order to reach their destination has led many to rely on dangerous and remote routes, which increases the risks they face and reduces their options to seek assistance. Many disappear on their journeys, but the exact numbers are not known, as information on Zimbabwean missing migrants is not systematically collected or reported. Information on the families affected by these deaths and disappearances and who remain behind without knowing what happened to their loved ones is just as limited.

Aware of these challenges and building on previous research that highlights the vast and intertwined psychosocial, economic and legal effects of having a missing family member across contexts (British Red Cross et al., 2019; Mediterranean Missing, 2016), IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, in partnership with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), conducted a study to document the experiences of the families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe as they search for their relatives and cope with the impacts of their loss. This report is based on interviews and conversations conducted with families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe’s Manicaland province in December 2020 and January 2021. Most families have been searching for relatives and loved ones who went missing on migration journeys to South Africa. Given these dynamics, the report has a strong focus on the Zimbabwe–South Africa migration route. Information collected through conversations with the families was supplemented by desk research and interviews with key stakeholders.

The report is divided into three main sections: The first chapter looks at the political and economic situation in Zimbabwe, then examines the specific dynamics of Zimbabwean migration and what is currently known about missing migrants in the country. The second chapter describes the methodology and presents the findings of the study. Drawing from the testimonies of the families, the third chapter makes a series of recommendations to improve institutional responses to the search for missing and deceased migrants in Zimbabwe.

¹ This report is the result of a collaborative effort between IOM’s GMDAC and the ISS. Ringisai Chikohomero (ISS) carried out the fieldwork in Zimbabwe, interviewing families in the districts of Chimanimani, Chipinge and Harare. Marta Sánchez Dionis and Kate Dearden (IOM GMDAC, Missing Migrants Project) carried out stakeholder interviews and documentary research and co-wrote this report.



Where Is My Brother? “The years I have lost my brother have been the most painful years, not only for me but for all of us as a family,” said Mr Foroma. “The pain is just unbearable.” © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

2. Emigration from Zimbabwe: Context and background

Emigration is by no means a recent occurrence in Zimbabwe. Amid deteriorating economic and political circumstances, many Zimbabweans have left the country since the turn of the century. South Africa is by far the single largest destination country for Zimbabwean migrants (IOM, 2018). Other countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region are also hosts to significant numbers of Zimbabweans (ibid.). The United Kingdom, the former colonial power, is also a popular receiving country (Crush and Tevera, 2010).

During the colonial period, the economy of the Southern Africa region was shaped by the institutionalization of exploitative migrant labour and the expulsion of black Africans from their land (Migration Data Portal, n.d.). Forced dispossession and the imposition of taxes by colonial powers forced black Africans to engage in wage labour in the mines and farms of South Africa, where there was an increasing demand for their work (Tshabalala, 2017). These dynamics contributed to transforming South Africa into an important labour migration hub in Southern Africa.

Yet measures introduced by South Africa in the 1960s to reduce its reliance on foreign migrant workers gave rise to increased monitoring and control of cross-border movements. This took place against the backdrop of the struggles for independence and civil wars in several countries in the region, including Zimbabwe (Musoni, 2020). Following the end of the civil war in Zimbabwe in 1980, the South African Government started to build a fence in 1985 to close its borders with Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Tshabalala, 2017). The border, which is electrified, arguably has made irregular border crossings quite dangerous (Musoni, 2020).

In parallel, there was a progressive rise in the number of people emigrating from Zimbabwe, due to the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country in the years after its independence. This rise accelerated since the turn of the century, with many Zimbabweans leaving the country due to increasing levels of poverty, unemployment and economic hardship (IOM, 2010; Lefko-Everett, 2010; Crush and Tevera, 2010). The downward economic spiral was precipitated by the effects of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s (Bond, 2000; Brett and Winter, 2003), followed by the Fast Track Land Reform Programme,² which severely impacted the agricultural industry in the country (Chitsike, 2003), and by fiscal and economic policies that resulted in the highest inflation rate in the world in 2008 (Hanke, 2008).

Alongside the worsening economic situation, the first decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a rise in political repression and authoritarianism. The Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), the ruling party in Zimbabwe since 1980, increasingly resorted to repression to suppress political opponents, particularly supporters of the opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Political violence has led to internal and external displacement as suspected opposition members and their families flee from their homes for safety. The level of political intimidation, violence and repression is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban settings (*New Humanitarian*, 2009; Maringira, 2020).

Zimbabweans seeking to migrate to South Africa due to the increasingly difficult political and economic conditions were bound by the strict permit requirements imposed by the South African Government. Until 2009, Zimbabweans had to obtain visas from the South African embassy in Harare (Vanyoro, 2019a). Those intending to visit South Africa had to demonstrate that they had sufficient income to sustain themselves while in the country and return to Zimbabwe within the stipulated period on the visa (Musoni, 2020). In 2009, a bilateral agreement between the two countries allowed Zimbabwean citizens in possession of a valid passport visa-free entry into South Africa for a 90-day period. While the provision does not allow for employment while in South Africa, those Zimbabweans able to secure a passport have used this as a starting point for legally entering South Africa and then seeking employment.

Although the procedures for travelling to South Africa were somewhat simplified by the introduction of the visa waiver, other issues continue to make it difficult for Zimbabweans to fulfil all the conditions set for documented travel outside the country – particularly the difficulties in obtaining passports. The passport application process is characterized by long

² Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) was a process that formally started with the Land Acquisition Amendment Act of 2002 to address the colonial racial distribution of land, redistributing land from white-owned farms to black farmers (Mkodzongi and Lawrence, 2019).

waiting times and delays at registry offices (Chingono, 2019). The reasons for delays in issuing passports vary, ranging from increased demand for travel documents to bureaucratic inefficiencies and the lack of foreign currency to buy the materials needed for passports (Samaita, 2019). In addition, passport prices are unaffordable to many Zimbabweans (Musoni, 2020).

There are other inefficiencies and bureaucratic delays pertaining to immigration control and border management across the SADC region, which means that even Zimbabweans with access to legal documentation resort to crossing the border into South Africa irregularly (Louw-Vaudran and Chikohomero, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has added to these dynamics. Besides border closures and mobility restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the virus, obtaining a negative COVID-19 test, required for travel in both directions across the Zimbabwe–South Africa border, is generally too costly for many travellers. The validity period of the certificate has also been a challenge. The test should have been done 24 hours prior to entering Zimbabwe and 72 hours prior to entering South Africa, but extra screening put in place has increased delays at border crossing points. For example, in December 2020, people waited up to seven days to cross the Beitbridge border into South Africa legally (Louw-Vaudran and Chikohomero, 2021), which meant that several tests would have been needed by travellers to cross the border regularly.

3. What is known about Zimbabwean missing migrants?

As outlined above, movement restrictions, unattainable visa requirements, and issues related to the issuance of passports and other travel documents can lead aspiring migrants to opt for irregular migratory mechanisms. However, the practice of “border jumping” – crossing the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa irregularly – can be traced back to the emergence of the Zimbabwe–South Africa border with the colonization of the African continent in the 1890s (Musoni, 2020; Vanyoro, 2019b). Historians claim that the practice began when the Limpopo River became the colonial boundary between Southern Rhodesia (the predecessor of today’s Zimbabwe) and South Africa, and the first State-enforced mobility controls were introduced (Musoni, 2020). Ever since, people wanting to cross the border informally from Zimbabwe into South Africa have developed strategies to navigate border enforcement regimes in the two countries.³

For example, while travelling via public and private transportation, people seek the help of brokers, known as *omalayitsha*, to cross the official Beitbridge border post. After paying a fee that is almost invariably negotiated with border post authorities, travellers can avoid lengthy waits with the assistance of *omalayitsha* and may continue with their journeys (Tshabalala, 2017; Musoni, 2020).

The most documented form of irregular migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa involves crossing the Limpopo River. This route is also believed to be among the most lethal ones. There are reports that people travelling off the main roads to avoid detection by authorities (with or without smugglers) may be targeted by criminal gangs (known as *amagumaguma*) on the isolated and remote areas of the riverbanks (IOM, 2009a; Tshabalala, 2017; Musoni, 2020). While crossing the river, people also face the risk of being swept away by its currents. While complete data on the number of people who have died while attempting to cross the Limpopo River does not exist, IOM’s Missing Migrants Project has recorded 21 cases of people who drowned while attempting the crossing between 2014 and 2020. One testimony collected during an IOM survey with migrants entering South Africa and travelling through the Limpopo province attests to the dangers of this crossing:

“ A woman who was crossing into South Africa [was travelling with] her husband, his younger brother and his three children. ... When they were in the middle of the river ... they were swept away by the water. [But] they managed, the three adults, to pull each other and their children across. However, six adults [also] in the group were swept away. Two had babies on their backs. They were never seen again. (IOM, 2009a)

³ Cross-border mobility on the Zimbabwe–Mozambique border follows different dynamics. People living on Zimbabwe’s border with Mozambique cross the border daily (for work or to visit relatives). This movement is rarely for migration purposes, since Mozambique does not offer the same opportunities for long-term migrants as South Africa does and, therefore, is not subjected to the same migration controls as those existing between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Those who manage to reach the South African side of the Limpopo River have to then cross the electrified fence that runs along the border. While the voltage levels on the border fence were reduced to non-lethal levels in 1993, there is no complete data on the number of people who have lost their lives by electrocution from the border fence since its construction in 1985. According to media reports, the first person to die trying to cross the fence was a Zimbabwean man on 31 March 1985 (*New York Times*, 1985). Official figures by the South African armed forces show that in the first three years after the construction of the fence, 89 people died of electrocution while attempting the crossing, while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and church groups have long argued that this figure is an underestimate (Monteiro, 1990). Today, the electric wires of the fence are allegedly set only to detect those who attempt to cross (Bolt, 2016).

Having reached their destination in South Africa, Zimbabwean migrants are also reported to go missing in a variety of circumstances. They may be detained without access to means of communication. Many may voluntarily decide not to report their whereabouts to their friends and families if they do not have legal documents to stay in the country, fearing arrest and deportation (Machinya, 2020). Others may die in anonymity, ending up buried in basic, unnamed graves if no one claims them (*Independent*, 2019). Every year, thousands of bodies remain unidentified in mortuaries in South Africa, many of whom may be migrants, and whose families do not know what has happened to them. Hoping to address the issue of unidentified remains in South Africa, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) launched a pilot project in South Africa and Zimbabwe in 2016. The ICRC is working with South African authorities to enhance forensic identification procedures in mortuaries in the country, while at the same time collecting ante-mortem data from families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe to enable positive identifications (Evert, 2021; Ndou, 2021).

Text box 1. International Committee of the Red Cross pilot project: Missing and deceased migrants and their families

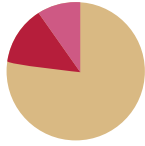
Many Zimbabwean migrants travelling to South Africa come from rural areas which are extremely isolated, with almost no means of communication. In cases of disappearance, their families lack the resources to conduct an efficient search across the border. In 2016, the ICRC, with the support of the authorities in Zimbabwe's Zaka and Gwanda districts, collected personal information from families on their missing relatives, which could be used to assist in the search for them in South Africa, whether alive or dead.

The ICRC then visited communities in South Africa seeking to trace their missing relatives and loved ones whom they believe to still be alive. In the unfortunate event that the ICRC could not find the missing migrants, with the informed consent of the families, it would share the missing persons' data with the South African authorities to see if they could match the descriptions with unknown bodies kept in mortuaries.

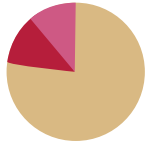
Annually, thousands of bodies remain unidentified in mortuary facilities across the country and are eventually buried as "Unknown male" or "Unknown female". These cases exert increased pressure on the available public services – including pathology, police and health services – and municipalities responsible for the burial. Many of the unidentified dead are believed to be migrants from other countries. To reduce this number and provide answers to families of missing persons, the ICRC collaborated with South African authorities to enhance forensic identification procedures employed in one of the main mortuaries in the country.

Results

The pilot project proved successful in identifying migrants who are alive, and increasing the identification rate of unidentified remains in the main mortuary of Johannesburg. The collection of cases from Zimbabwean families who are missing family members was expanded to Harare and Bulawayo in 2020.

Pilot study*Tracing requests:*

127 requests, 23 successfully located with ICRC intervention, 14 re-established connection through own means

*Secondary identifications:*

416 examinations of unidentified bodies conducted in Johannesburg mortuary with 93 confirmed identities, 49 South African and 44 foreign nationals

Findings

The ICRC pilot project demonstrated that:

- (a) Once sensitized and informed properly, families expressed a willingness to actively participate and support the search for their missing loved ones by authorities and supporting organizations.
- (b) Missing migrants who were found alive were grateful to be reconnected with their families.
- (c) Families were able to provide relevant information on personal features that, with their consent, was shared with authorities to aid in comparison and maximize identification opportunities.
- (d) The Forensic Pathology Services in South Africa showed willingness and dedication to implement secondary examinations, thereby increasing the identifications of unknown remains (which reduces workload and associated costs) while opening additional storage for new admissions.
- (e) This identification programme is non-discriminatory and benefited South African nationals and those from other countries alike, as both were identified through this process.
- (f) The pilot project demonstrated a tangible remedy for the public concern about the unacceptable number of unidentified remains in South African mortuaries as well as mortuary operations struggling under the huge workload.

Way forward

Based on these findings, as well as on a Family Needs Assessment conducted in Zimbabwe at the end of 2020, the ICRC has proposed transforming the pilot project into a coordinated programme with the commitment of concerned authorities in South Africa and Zimbabwe. To be more effective, the project needs to transition into a programme run by concerned authorities who can manage its growth to accommodate the gradual inclusion of mortuaries throughout South Africa and Zimbabwe. An authorities-led programme could also include the acceptance of missing-person inquiries from more families in Zimbabwe (and the rest of the region in the longer term) through an official, safe, and reliable multinational conduit and collaboration.

The ICRC considers that the authorities are best placed to respond to this long-term issue and ensure the sustainability and gradual expansion of the programme. It is therefore essential that South African and Zimbabwean authorities commit to the programme and collaborate with the ICRC and other stakeholders in the form of representatives from relevant departments participating in an Oversight Committee on Missing Migrants. This Committee will be in charge of setting up a cross-border mechanism to exchange information on missing migrants.

Preventing the loss of contact

Tracing services

The ICRC works with National Red Cross Societies of South Africa and Zimbabwe and other humanitarian organizations in critical locations with high concentrations of migrants, such as refugee camps, deportation facilities and reception centres, border points, and shelters. Together, they provide free telephone call services, Wi-Fi connectivity and other forms of communication so that people can trace their family members and maintain contact. In 2019, the ICRC launched a website called Trace the Face – Southern Africa (www.tracetheface.org/sa) that allows the ICRC and National Societies to publish photos of people looking for their missing relatives in the hope of reconnecting families.

Digital humanitarian platform: RedSafe

The ICRC is piloting a digital humanitarian platform, RedSafe, in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Some of the needs of the migrant community can be met by this app, which offers different types of services:

- (a) Provision of accurate and actionable information to migrants to help keep them safe and mitigate risks along the way.
- (b) Access to a “digital vault” to upload important documents (such as copies of passports) and keep digital copies safely stored.

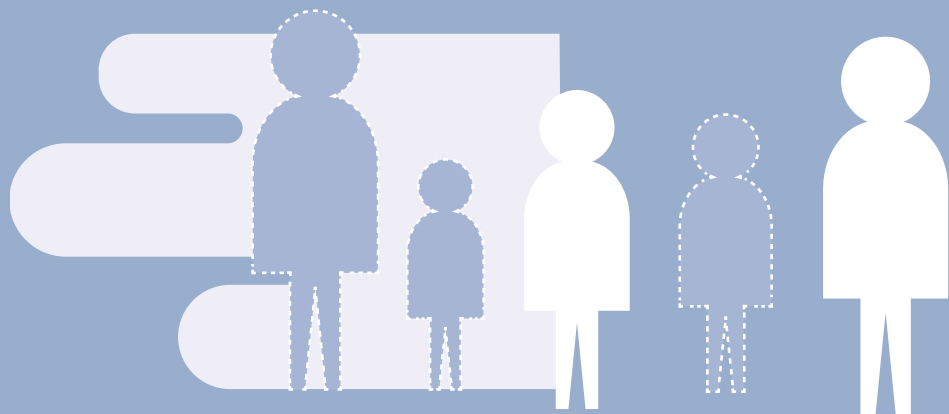
In the future, additional services will be added to this app, including the geolocation of services and contact notifications to allow migrants to send formatted messages to a list of contacts – for example, to let their families know that they are safe.

Source: Regional Delegation of the ICRC in Southern Africa.

The lack of systematic and reliable data on the number of people who go missing on their migration journeys from Zimbabwe to South Africa results in the underestimation of the toll of unsafe migration across this border – and in the context of migration between these two countries more generally. It is likely that there are many unreported and unrecorded cases of migrants who have gone missing or lost their lives during the journey or thereafter. Currently, no authorities in Zimbabwe or South Africa collect reliable and systematic statistics on this phenomenon. The lack of data – and therefore the invisibility of so many disappearances and deaths – highlights how loss of life has become normalized and tolerated as an assumed risk of irregular migration.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology



1. Research methods

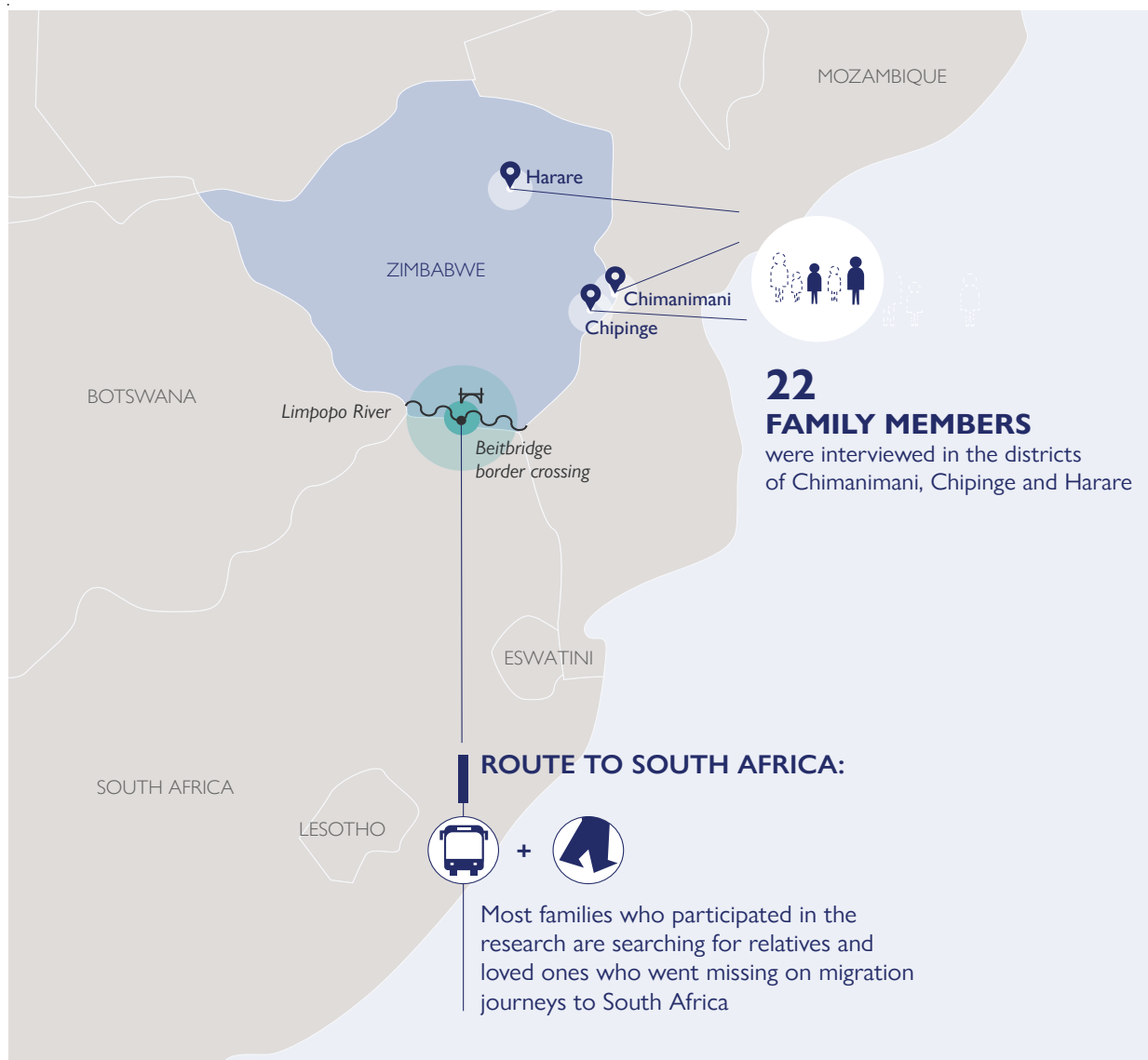
This study documents the experiences of Zimbabwean families searching for loved ones who went missing in the context of their migratory journeys out of Zimbabwe. The research relied on semi-structured qualitative interviews and participant observation and was supplemented by desk research and key informant interviews. This approach allowed for in-depth conversations with families concerning their loss. A series of guiding questions were used to allow families to articulate what they considered important when trying to establish the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of their missing relatives, and their encounters with authorities in the search process.

The research was conducted in December 2020 and January 2021 in areas selected in consultation with the IOM country office in Zimbabwe. Families were contacted in the districts of Chimanimani and Chipinge in Manicaland province, which have historically high levels of emigration. Additionally, two interviews were conducted in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. A total of 22 family members were interviewed – 14 women and 8 men. Interviews were conducted in Shona dialects: in Chimanimani and Chipinge, interviews were done in Manyika and Ndau, while the two interviews in Harare were conducted in Zezuru. All names mentioned in this report are pseudonyms chosen to protect the identity of interviewees.

Chipinge and Chimanimani are administrative districts in Zimbabwe's Manicaland province. They are located in the country's Eastern Highlands, a belt of mountains that extend along the international border with Mozambique. These districts have been prone to harsh weather conditions in recent years. Between 2019 and 2021, Cyclone Idai, Tropical Storm Chalane and Cyclone Eloise brought torrential rains and winds, causing flash floods and destruction and displacing thousands of people from their homes (IOM, 2021).

Families with missing migrant relatives in these districts were identified through churches and church-related organizations. The Churches in Manicaland (CiM) platform, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) – Manicaland region, and the Manicaland NGO network were central to gaining access to families in rural communities. These organizations reached out to community facilitators or peace ambassadors in Chipinge and Chimanimani to introduce the research project, who in turn relied on their networks to identify families with missing migrant relatives.

Figure 1. Migration journeys to South Africa



Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

The families interviewed in Chipinge and Chimanimani have spent their lives in their communities, which are sustained by subsistence agriculture. Due to their proximity to Mozambique, members of these communities walk across the border for work, to trade or to visit relatives without facing border controls, since the border is not militarized and Mozambique does not constitute a migrant destination (IOM, 2020). People in search for longer-term opportunities usually migrate to South Africa – in fact, all the missing relatives searched for by families in Chipinge and Chimanimani interviewed for this research had gone missing during their migration journeys to that country. The main route to South Africa is via the Beitbridge border post or across the Limpopo River. People migrating to South Africa from Chipinge and Chimanimani use public transport or private vehicles to reach Beitbridge town, and once there, most people make contact with smuggling facilitators, who help them navigate the border crossing (Moyo and Nshimbi, 2019).

Most families who participated in the research have been searching for their relatives for many years. They reported that their relatives had left the country due to the deteriorating economic and political situation after the turn of the century, with most emigrating between 2000 and 2005. Faced with limited employment opportunities and

increasing economic hardship, family members had decided to seek better opportunities and a chance at a better life in South Africa. Alongside economic precarity, a few family members cited fear of political persecution as the reason why their relatives decided to leave their communities.

2. Limitations of the research

The research was conducted after lockdown measures were put in place on 30 March 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19. By the time fieldwork was carried out in December 2020 and January 2021, COVID-19-related measures had been relaxed to an extent, allowing intercity travel in Zimbabwe, albeit with limited public transport available. Still, police were present on the main highways and in towns, and roadblocks had been set up to enforce other COVID-19-related measures such as mask wearing and physical distancing.

The increased police presence made field research difficult, due to the erosion of community trust in law enforcement (Louw-Vaudran and Chikohomero, 2021). As discussed further below, due to fears that their loved ones' lack of legal migration status would be reported to the police, as well as the significant social stigma associated with having a missing family member, the families interviewed for this research did not tend to share information about their cases freely. This limited the researcher's ability to access information.

There were some logistical challenges to reach the communities, as the research took place during the rainy season, characterized by incessant rain, flooding and road closures. As most parts of Chipinge and Chimanimani are off limits without an off-road vehicle during this season, the research took place in areas less affected by the rains.

The overall study did not seek to be representative of the experiences of all Zimbabwean families who have missing migrant relatives. It sought to allow families residing in the Chipinge and Chimanimani districts to express what was important to them and to articulate their own priorities. The findings are based on data collected as part of the interviews with the families of missing migrants in these two districts, complemented with information from conversations with two families of missing migrants residing in Harare. In this sense, every testimony documented in this report is indicative of how a family has faced the loss of a loved one in the context of migration. Nevertheless, more research with families of missing migrants and key stakeholders in other areas of Zimbabwe, as well as in countries of destination like South Africa, would complement the findings of this study and offer broader perspectives and insights into the experiences of families searching for loved ones lost on this migration route.

CHAPTER 3

Research findings



All the families who participated in this research live with the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to their loved ones, even whether they are alive or dead. The conversations conducted with them through this research provide insights into how they seek to clarify the fate of their missing relatives and the barriers they face in doing so. These are rooted in the historical and geopolitical context of irregular migration more generally, and between Zimbabwe and South Africa more specifically. The barriers prove fundamental in the face of virtually no official structures or protocols that can help people in Zimbabwe search for their missing relatives in another country, especially when the missing person has irregular or uncertain legal status. As a result, families use informal channels to seek information about the whereabouts of their relatives, and often they try to keep the search process fairly private, so as not to alter their status in the community.

The research also documented varied and wide-reaching impacts related to having a missing relative. The absence of siblings, partners, parents and cousins, many of them for years, has had (and will continue to have) lasting financial and legal impacts on those left behind. There was also evidence of the deep emotional and psychological consequences of having a missing relative, as documented in previous research with families whose relatives have gone missing in other contexts, such as in conflict situations and environmental disasters.¹ Long-term sociocultural impacts of absence were also evidenced by the stigma felt by the research participants and by the fact that women, children and older relatives experienced specific and heightened impacts on their financial and personal security.

The findings of the research with families in Chipinge and Chimanimani are presented in this section under three themes: the ways that families seek information about their absent loved ones (Section 3.1), the main barriers they faced in searching (Section 3.2), and the impacts of having a missing family member (Section 3.3). The issue of missing migrants is so far unaddressed in policies, laws and resource allocation in Zimbabwe. Addressing it will require change and cooperation across borders, and also in terms of approach and perspective, including the recognition that having a missing family member, no matter the context, is a humanitarian issue and families have the right to access information and justice. The research findings outlined in Section 3 inform the recommendations in Section 4, which aim to provide a road map for authorities and other stakeholders on how the situations of families with missing migrant relatives can be improved.

¹ For example, see: Boss, 2017; Robins, 2010; British Red Cross et al., 2019.

1. The search process

No one wants to believe that their loved one is missing or that something bad has happened to them. Understanding how families process this possibility and then start to search for information is important for discerning the options available to them and, ultimately, how these can be improved. The research showed that families are not complacent – they do everything within their means to find information and live with the impacts of their loved ones' absence in the meantime. However, their options are extremely limited, especially in a context of social pressures and little structural support from authorities and other actors.

1.1. The decision to start the search

There was no uniform process for how families started the search for information about their missing loved ones. For most, this process was a daunting and devastating experience. First, families had to accept the possibility that their relative was in fact a “missing person”, which entailed a different emotional process for everyone. Some family members began looking for their relatives only one week after not having heard from them, while others waited for two to three months before doing so. Mr Chayamiti, whose brother had been missing for close to five years at the time of the interview, explained how his family experienced this process:

“Two days after leaving Mutare [for South Africa], we had contact with my brother when he was about to cross the Limpopo into South Africa, [but] we never heard from him again. At first, we thought he was still travelling. Then we thought he was probably still trying to settle in South Africa, but at this time I cannot lie – fear was getting the better of us. After two months seeing other people talking to their relatives who had left around the same time, we went to the police.

Families who waited longer before they started searching said that they did so because they believed that it might take their relatives some time to settle and establish themselves before contacting those left behind at home. For example, Ms Sithole, who has been looking for her missing husband for nearly a year since he left Chipinge in February 2020 for South Africa, was cautiously optimistic. “People keep telling me he went during COVID-19, [that] things are hard even in [South Africa] – he will contact us once he has settled,” she said.

From the start, many families did not know at which point their relatives went missing and, therefore, where and how to start looking for them. For those thought to be lost on the journey itself, the vast and largely unpopulated border regions (particularly between Zimbabwe and South Africa) made it especially difficult for families to start looking. While there are migrants who use the official Beitbridge border post – crossing legally or bribing their way across – the families interviewed claimed to know little about the unofficial routes or details of the smuggling process that their missing loved ones used to reach South Africa, except that they involved having to cross the Limpopo River. They also narrated that among those who lacked legal migration status or authorization to travel, it was common for them to hide in order to avoid detection and possible deportation by authorities, which in turn made the search for them more difficult.

This lack of information reported by families may be explained by how people make use of smuggling services when they travel to South Africa from eastern Zimbabwe. In western Zimbabwe, from where the migration corridor to South Africa is frequently used, it is a common agreement, even if not verbalized, that smuggling facilitators would let the families know once their relatives have crossed the border and/or had reached their destinations in South Africa. This is often connected to the agreement for their payment, but it also helps maintain trust in their services and the continuation of their business. However, this may not be the case for prospective migrants who contract smugglers after leaving their communities in other parts of the country or once they reach the border. In such cases, families may not have the contact information for the smuggling facilitators involved, nor precise details on the time frame or exact location of their relatives' crossing, which would provide some basic information to start the search.

Additionally, once families made the decision to start searching for their relatives, the lack of clearly identifiable and accessible search mechanisms meant that most families did not even know where to start or whom to contact. Ms Mandi, who has been searching for her son, explained:

“ My first-born son was our breadwinner. He just said he is going to leave for South Africa, [but] till this day I haven't heard from him. At first, I thought he was settling, and I would hear from him, but years have passed without a word. I don't even have anywhere to start. Who[m] do I ask? I don't think the police can help with someone missing in South Africa.

As stated in her testimony, Ms Mandi did not think that the police or the authorities could help in searching for relatives missing in another country. Several families reported not knowing about any institutions with the mandate to assist in their searches. Others thought they could not report their relatives as missing if many years had already passed since they last heard from them. For example, Ms Chiringo, who has been searching for her missing grandson, stated:

“ We did not, at any point, report him to the police as a missing person. I didn't think it was necessary because all young people from this area were travelling to South Africa to look for jobs. This is common practice in this part of the country. Also, I thought he was going to come back. However, I realized after several years that he was now a missing person, and I thought it was already too late to report him as a missing person to the police. I do not know what happened to him.



A Loss in the Generation. “The last time I saw my grandson was in 2007,” Ms Chiringo said. “In 2010 [he stopped] being in contact with me here. I am 75 years old, and I do not have the capability to look for him in that country. ... I would want him to come back home. I hope that he will come back to us alive.” © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

1.2. Searching through informal channels

Faced with the lack of clear mechanisms to assist with their search, families said that they primarily made use of their personal networks in their search by reaching out to other relatives or friends in the destination country. They also asked community members who are known to have travelled to or who lived in the destination country. Families in rural

communities believed that when in a foreign country, people from the same community stuck together and established their own diaspora networks. As a result, they approached anyone they trusted who returned from or was travelling to South Africa. Ms Sithole explained:

“ There is a perception that people, when they leave their community and go to [a] foreign land, they look for their “homeboys”, so we always ask those who are returning for Christmas if they have seen our relative.²

In general, families reported using word of mouth and telephone calls to track down information through their diaspora networks. Families also reported that they regularly asked those coming back from South Africa if they had seen or heard from their relatives. Social media did not appear to play a critical role in the searches carried out by families, especially given the limited access to computers, smartphones and the Internet reported by research participants in Chipinge and Chimanimani.³

1.3. Retracing their missing loved ones’ steps

Having exhausted all other options, some interviewees indicated that they were willing to embark on their own journeys to retrace the steps of their missing loved ones. Matigwe, who has been searching for his little brother, explained how he decided to travel to South Africa, the country where his brother had gone missing, to search for him – a process not exempt from challenges:

“ I went to South Africa in 2008 to look for my younger brother. When I got there, I didn’t know where to start because South Africa is big. ... It is difficult to search for someone especially if they crossed the border [irregularly].

Similarly, Mr Chayamiti, who had also attempted to search for his missing brother in South Africa, expressed his frustration at the immensity of this task: “Searching for someone in South Africa – it’s like searching for a needle in the grass at night.”

2. Challenges with the search

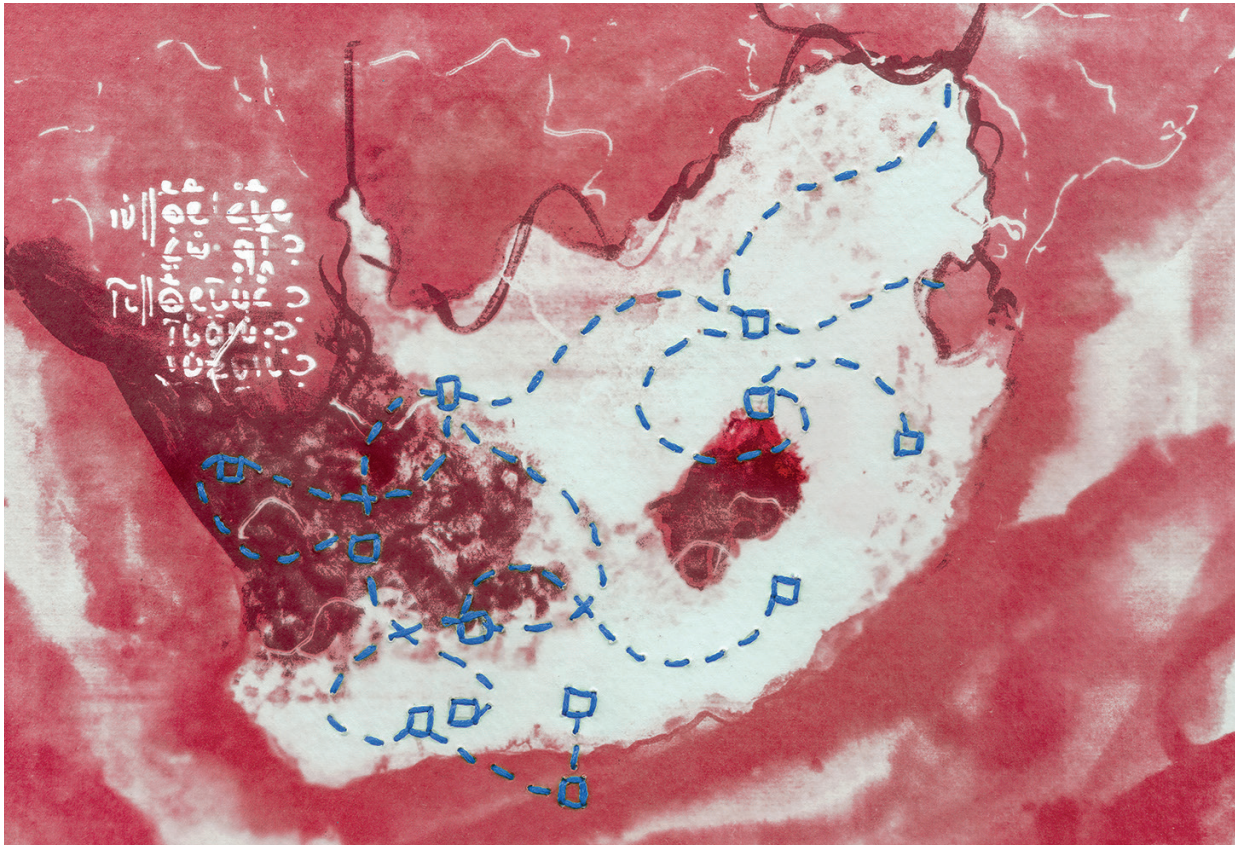
The research provided an overview of the overlapping and structural challenges faced by families in two communities in Zimbabwe, who have been searching for their missing relatives who migrated to South Africa – issues which have ultimately prevented them from tracking down information about their loved ones. An overarching issue has been the lack of procedures, resources, and trust between the families and the police, which has contributed to the families’ reliance on the informal strategies outlined in Section 3.1. Families also faced barriers related to their limited financial means and lack of knowledge about their rights to file cases and how to effectively seek information regarding the disappearance of their relatives.

2.1. Interactions with the authorities and the police

The families interviewed were not aware of the existence of formal search channels. They did not know of any agency or government unit they should approach to report their missing relatives and/or were highly sceptical of doing so, particularly when it came to reaching out to government institutions such as the police and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Those interviewed doubted that government authorities had the mandate and/or the capacity to assist them in their search for their missing relatives. Some respondents felt that the disappearances were private family matters, while others feared that by bringing the cases to the attention of the Government, they risked exposing their missing relatives, especially those without regular migration status in the country of destination.

² “Homeboys” are people from the same region or area, and here, they are part of the diaspora in another country.

³ According to Afrobarometer survey data from 2017 and 2018, a majority of Zimbabwean households do not have mobile phones with Internet access or computers. In Manicaland province, where this study was carried out, only 7 per cent of households have computers. While the majority of households in Manicaland have access to cell phones, only a third of them have mobile phone access to the internet. While radios are a bit more common, one third of residents in Manicaland reported that their household did not have one (Moyo-Nyede and Ndoma, 2020).



X Marks the Non-spot. “Searching for someone in South Africa is like searching for a needle in the grass at night,” said Mr Chamayamiti, who travelled to South Africa in search for his missing brother. © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

The few families who had contacted the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) did not receive any meaningful support with their cases. To them, it appeared that the police officials with whom they interacted lacked tools, guidelines or training to assist in cases of missing migrants, especially to search for those lost in another country. In general, families felt that the police did not take them seriously when they reported the disappearance of their relatives, as a result of a general lack of awareness and insensitivity towards cases of migrants going missing. Grace, whose brother-in-law has been missing for seven years after migrating from Zimbabwe to South Africa, recalled:

“ The police will not even open a missing person’s case once you said they left for South Africa. You will be lucky if they actually take you seriously. When I tried, the police officers expressed disdain and impatience, and after recounting my story, they just sent me back and said, “Ask ... friends or relatives that are in South Africa.” ... We tried to engage the police again, and they asked us to lead the search ourselves, which meant a lot of travelling, and this was costly and time-consuming. ... We felt if only the police had taken us seriously, we could have made better progress.

Some families also felt that the police had a dismissive, disrespectful attitude when approached for assistance in missing-migrant cases. Mr Chayamiti, whose brother had been missing for close to five years at the time of the interview, leaving behind his wife and children, said:

“ The police [kept] us just to hear the story and laugh among themselves, making jokes about how my brother had run away from his wife and now probably has a beautiful South African [wife] and cannot be bothered. We felt hurt and bitter, but there was no one else to tell.

Other testimonies from families demonstrated how the police claimed that their lack of jurisdiction prevented them from providing help to those who suspected that a relative was missing, either en route or in the country of destination. Ms Nyemba, whose brother went to South Africa in 1998 when he was 17, shared her experience with the police:

“ My family once went to the local police station when they started suspecting that my brother went missing after spending close to eight months without communication. The police said they could not help because [the disappearance had taken place] out of Zimbabwe.



Help Is Nowhere to Be Found. Testimonies from families demonstrated how the police claimed that their lack of jurisdiction prevented them from searching for missing migrants when families reported their disappearance. Ms Nyemba, who is searching for her little brother, explained: “The police said they could not help because [the disappearance had taken place] out of Zimbabwe.” © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

The lack of clear protocols and procedures on how to respond to missing-migrant cases also resulted in some families contacting multiple agencies or units, having to repeat their testimony numerous times, which had emotional implications. For instance, Mrs Chauke, whose brother had been missing for three years at the time of the interview, explained that she reached out to the police but did not receive any help, and then she tried approaching the Ministry of Home Affairs after being directed there from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. Neither of these institutions provided her with support or guidance in her search.

2.2. Challenges related to the lack of immigration status and documentation

As explained in Section 2, obtaining passports and visas to travel abroad is not an easy task for Zimbabweans, and this plays a role not only in their disappearance, but also in the search for them. For those who want to leave the country to search for work or for other reasons, the challenges of obtaining a Zimbabwean passport were well known, as Grace recounted:

“ Getting a passport is an extreme challenge. We used to go and queue at the passport office until we decided to sleep there just to get a number for you to be in the line for submission. This would take days or even weeks before you get the number and more days actually to submit your passport application. After going through all this, it would still take more than a year of you making follow-ups before you even get your passport.

In addition to the processing time and delays, costs also prevent people from obtaining travel documents. For instance, the cost of a passport alone is out of reach for many Zimbabweans. This was corroborated by one of the research participants, Ms Nkoma, who explained that her grandson crossed irregularly to South Africa because she had no money to cover the costs of his passport application. At the time of the interview, Ms Nkoma's grandson had not returned or communicated with her since he left.

While some participants, like Ms Nkoma, reported that their loved ones had travelled without a passport or a visa, others said that they had these required documents initially, but then they stayed in the destination country after their visas expired. In both of these cases, a lack of legal documentation motivated migrants to use irregular channels to cross the border and intentionally “go missing” once in the country of destination to avoid immigration-related enforcement and deportation. This also meant that it had been difficult to use formal channels to search for them, because they likely would not be registered in any systems of the South African Government. This was the case of Garikai, whose cousin migrated to South Africa without a passport and without telling his family. Garikai explained that the lack of formal travel documents was the major hindrance in finding him:

“ When the police ask you for his passport number, you are stuck. When I tried to follow up, I was simply told that if we don't have their passport number, there is no way of even beginning a search.

Despite the desire to know the whereabouts of their missing loved ones and/or to regain contact, the families' fear of jeopardizing the safety of their missing relatives made them very cautious of where and how they asked questions. Families feared that if they would go to the authorities in search of their missing relatives, they could be inadvertently reporting them, putting them at risk of being arrested in the country of destination, where they had gone missing, and deported (particularly if they lacked authorization to enter or stay). For instance, Grace said that the search for her uncle, who left for the United Kingdom on a traveller's visa and has not been heard from since, is hindered by fears that if they ask too many people about him, it might expose his irregular migration status and lead to his deportation. When asked about using informal channels to trace her uncle, Grace said she had heard rumours that some Zimbabweans were known to alert the authorities about their fellow nationals who do not have regular migration status.

Almost all of the respondents felt that if their missing relatives had proper documentation, including a work visa, it would be easier to track them down. Mrs Chirigo, whose relative has been missing for close to two years, said that the latter had crossed the Limpopo River into South Africa as she did not have travel documents:

“ She crossed into South Africa via the rivers as she didn't have a passport. Because of the route she used, we have no way of following up. We cannot even go to Beitbridge to find these people. We fear being arrested by the police or even being killed by the people who facilitate border jumping.

In some cases, families blamed themselves for having allowed their relatives to travel without documentation. Matigwe, whose brother went missing on his journey to South Africa, said:

“ I hate myself for not restraining my little brother from crossing the border illegally. Maybe it was going to be easy to look for him if he had crossed the legal way.

2.3. Financial limitations

Financial challenges were a major stumbling block to families' efforts to search for their loved ones. Most of the families interviewed highlighted that their precarious living and financial conditions were another barrier preventing them from effectively exhausting all options to search for their relatives. Searching for a missing person requires money and time,

and in several of the cases, the family's economic situation had worsened due to the disappearance of their loved one, especially if they were relying on the latter's remittances. Mr Bumhira explained how the disappearance of his little brother in South Africa impacted his family:

“ The whole family has been directly affected by this since he was the one who was buying food staples and sending money for us.

As already mentioned, some families felt that it would be most effective to travel to the point where their relatives either last communicated with them or were seen last. In most cases, that place was Zimbabwe's Beitbridge border post with South Africa. However, this often involves embarking on a very long and expensive journey. For example, families located in Chimanimani would have to travel nearly 600 km to reach Beitbridge using indirect transportation routes. The difficulties involved in retracing their loved one's steps were clear in Ms Dhliwayo's testimony, whose grandson has been missing since he left Chimanimani in 2018. She asked, “Who will go to Beitbridge for me?” She explained that it was more than a day's journey for her and that she would need to factor in accommodation and food costs, as well as money to bribe either officials or smugglers in order to get answers.

Like Ms Dhliwayo, several families expressed their regret for not having the resources or the option to travel to South Africa themselves to search for their relatives. The belief that the families' lack of resources prevented them from finding information about their loved ones had desolating emotional consequences, as reflected in the testimony of Ms Nyema, who has been searching for her missing brother:

“ I do not know even where to go for help, and what hurts most, I do not have any money to go to South Africa to look for my brother.

Families also mentioned that they could not afford the costs of transportation to police stations or relevant government agencies where they could potentially seek help in searching for their missing family members. For example, participants living in villages in Chipinge District reported that there is only one bus and a few private cars that provide transportation from their communities to Chipinge town, the largest city in the district, where judicial and law enforcement institutions are located, and they could not afford the cost.

The families' lack of resources was also reflected in their limited access to the Internet, data connectivity or network coverage. Many interviewees lacked Internet or computer access at home, or even a cell phone. Some families reported that when their loved ones lost touch or went missing, they generally did not have the means to search for them beyond asking return migrants if they had any information. For example, Mr Chireya, whose nephew who migrated to South Africa had been missing for four years at the time of the interview, explained:

“ I don't even own a basic phone. I have no way of communicating. I just enquire from the people who arrive from [South Africa] if they have seen my child.

3. Impacts of absence

The research provided harrowing and disturbing evidence of the multidimensional impacts of having a missing relative in the context of migration. Besides the enduring psychological and emotional impacts, the families in Chipinge and Chimanimani also articulated social pressures and stigma associated with having a missing relative, which affected not only their search process but also their day-to-day lives. In particular, having a missing relative exacerbated the economic and social disenfranchisement of women, children and older relatives left behind. These impacts also illustrate how the needs of families with missing relatives change over time – for example, children's schooling and other development can be hindered if their parents are not able to provide needed finances or documentation.



I Don't Even Own a Basic Phone. Mr Chireya, whose nephew is missing, explained that generally he did not have the means to search for him: "I don't even own a basic phone. I have no way of communicating." © IOM 2021/Salam SHOKOR

3.1. Psychological impacts

Many of the families who participated in the research suffered ongoing psychological anguish, including trauma and depression as a result of not knowing what happened to their relatives. They did not have a sense of closure and lived in a constant state of apprehension and ambiguous loss.⁴ While they wanted to have answers about what happened to their loved ones, they also feared the worst. Muyambo from Chipinge, whose brother left for South Africa and went missing, said his family was devastated by the disappearance:

“ Never a day passes without making efforts to look for our brother. ... What frightens us most is the fact that everyone we ask do[es] not seem to know his whereabouts, and now we are thinking that maybe he is dead.

Mr Bumhira from Chimanimani said that he believed his little brother's disappearance could have contributed to the deteriorating health of his parents, who were under tremendous strain and could not bear the thought that their son might have died:

“ Our mother now suffers from [high] blood pressure, and sometimes she stays quiet thinking about her son. We have tried to help each other and support each other in these difficult times. The church also comforts us.

Mr Foroma from Chimanimani, whose brother left without telling them where he was going, spoke about his family's pain. They believed his brother followed his friends who migrated to South Africa:

⁴ Coined by Pauline Boss in 1999, the term refers to unresolved grief emerging from a loss without resolution or closure (Boss, 2017).

“ The years I have lost my brother have been the most painful years, not only for me but for all of us as a family. When your brother goes missing like this, without a trace, not a day would pass by without thinking about it and reliving the pain. Relatives, friends and neighbours have tried to give us the emotional support we need, but the pain is just unbearable.

While a few families reported being able to rely on their relatives and neighbours to cope with the psychological impacts of the disappearance of their loved ones, the majority reported that the fear of social stigma (as explained in the next section) had led them to keep their suffering to themselves, which deepened their psychological distress.

3.2. Shame and stigma

The lack of information and certainty about the whereabouts of a missing relative resulted in families and communities constructing their own explanations about the absence of the missing person. Families expressed concerns that the disappearance of their relatives would lead their neighbours or other community members to think that the missing had abandoned them, or was failing or avoiding their responsibility to send money home. Failure to effectively fulfil these responsibilities and expectations was considered as a source of shame and embarrassment by families and communities. The fear of being stigmatized meant that families would try to keep disappearances private and not talk about their missing relatives openly.

When the absence of a relative was known in the community, some families reported that their fears were well founded, and they recounted experiences of stigmatization by other community members. Mr Bumhira shared how the disappearance of his younger brother, interpreted by the community as abandoning his family, was a source of shame and stigma:

“ At first, [my brother's] phone used to ring, and no one would pick it up, but these days we cannot get through, and it's so heartbreaking. Our neighbours here who came back from South Africa or those with children who work in South Africa, they tell us they see him. We have become the laughing stock in the village as everyone says we have been rejected by our own blood.

While the sample size for this research was limited, it appears that women disproportionately experienced shame and stigma following the disappearance of a husband or a son. Women reported that communities often interpreted the disappearance of a husband as him running away because the wife was “nagging, disrespectful and no man could put up with it”. Ms Sithole, whose husband migrated to South Africa and, at the time of the interview, had not made any contact with the family for nearly a year, explained:

“ Wherever I go, I have a tag that my husband ran away from me. I feel exposed and vulnerable. The community has lost all respect for me.

To mitigate the impact of this shame, families may lie about the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives, hiding their true fears about the situation to avoid stigmatization. One older woman who participated in the research mentioned that her sister's only child has been missing for seven years and the family believed him to be dead. Yet they did not admit this to community members for fear of the stigma that could arise if this would be known. The mother of the missing man reportedly suffered from severe depression as a result of the situation.

The fear of stigmatization thus emerged from the conversations with families as a well-established and persistent barrier to seeking help, leading family members to suffer in silence. In some cases, the shame and stigma experienced by families who had sought help in their search led them to isolate themselves. For example, Mr Chayamiti explained how he and his family decided not to seek support in their search for his missing younger brother when rumours were circulated in the community after they reached out to the police:

“ From that day, we realize[d] the shame that we carry and that the police had not even been professional to keep the story to themselves after they turned us away. We heard people talk about us, and we couldn't get ourselves to reach out to anyone again.

3.3. Gender- and age-specific impacts of the disappearance

Conversations with families in Zimbabwe revealed how gender and age are two intersecting factors that have specific impacts on family members carrying out the search. The majority of those reported missing by research participants were men, who in some cases had left behind their partners, older relatives and children. Quite often, the disappearances of men are not seen by their families as problematic – at least initially. As outlined in this project's comparative report, relatives tend to assume/believe that if a man failed to stay in touch with his family, this was only natural, as this was what men were expected to do as part of their migratory process: learn how to fend for themselves, interact with other men their age, and find a way to reach their destination. Ms Chiringo, who has been searching for her missing grandson, stated:

“ The last time I saw my grandson was in 2007. Since then, we have not seen him, but he used to communicate. I cannot say I remember the exact day I last spoke with him. At that time, as a family we were not very worried because this is what young men do – they look for work to take care [of] themselves. Then in 2010, he never called, and we started to suspect something bad had happened.

In most of the missing cases reported during the research, men had migrated alone, leaving behind their relatives. Restrictive migration policies that discourage living arrangements among families, a result of how labour migration was historically constructed in South Africa, mean that this is often the case: partners and children stay behind while the male members of the family migrate on their own in search of employment (Chereni, 2015). When migrant men disappear or go missing during their migration journeys, their disappearances have disproportionate impacts on women, children and older relatives left behind.

While Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and gender, and states that all persons are equal before the law, customary norms and social practices influence women's access to rights, property and inheritance, and social status. In rural communities in Zimbabwe, social status, respectability and financial security are often traced to the male members of the family. Women do not have the same decision-making authority over access to or ownership of assets and/or land as men (FAO, 2017). As such, the disappearance of a male relative (being a father, husband or son) has financial, sociocultural and legal impacts on the women who stayed behind.

According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, around 86 per cent of women in Zimbabwe depend on farming for their livelihood and food production for their families (2017). However, according to customary law, women can only access land through their husbands, fathers or other male relatives, as only married male members of a community have the right of access to arable plots and the right of allocation (FAO, 2017). Therefore, if male relatives go missing or die on their migration journeys, women's lack of direct relationship with the land puts them in a very precarious and insecure position. In fact, the eviction of widows from their land by in-laws upon the death of their husbands is a widespread practice in the country (HRW, 2017). While no cases of eviction were reported by women participating in this research, most of them said that they lived in daily fear of being dispossessed of their farmlands.

The uncertainty surrounding their male relatives' fate and whereabouts also affects women's access to inheritance. According to customary inheritance practices in the communities where the research took place, inheritance (referred to in Shona as *kugova nhaka*, translated as “the distribution of the deceased's state”) can only be determined after burial, and depending on the ethnic group, some traditional rites have to be performed. In order to undertake these rites prior to distributing the inheritance, there is a need for confirmation that the person has indeed passed away. As there was no certainty whether the missing husbands or fathers were alive or dead (and no supporting evidence), women were not able to make any claims on the property of their male relatives, which increased their economic vulnerability.

Additionally, women also faced stigmatizing attitudes derived from the disappearance of their male relatives. As explained above in Section 3.2, when a married man goes missing after emigrating, his disappearance is sometimes interpreted by family members and the wider community as linked to relationship problems, and there is a tendency to blame the wife who stayed behind. Women participants reported that they had become more vulnerable and felt exposed without any source of protection after their male relatives went missing. For example, Ms Sithole from Chipinge, who has been searching for her missing husband, explained:

“ I feel exposed and vulnerable. The community has lost all respect for me. My children are harassed willy-nilly at the township and at school. Where do I start to look for my husband? Did he arrive well? Is he alive? Is he coming back? I cannot even reach out to community members.

Children whose parents disappear on their migration journeys are also deeply affected by their absence. Parental absence has negative impacts on children's development and well-being. Some families reported that upon the disappearance of a parent, some children were harassed at school (as described in Ms Sithole's testimony above), absent from school for long periods, or sent home because their tuition was unpaid. Frequently moving from one home to another was also mentioned as having a negative impact on children's development. Grace explained how the children of her brother-in-law, who had been missing for seven years at the time of the interview, are traumatized and feel unwanted:

“ The two children were left as toddlers. ... They have heard the story of how their father is delinquent [irresponsible] and the extent of his neglect [of his obligations as a father], and the precarious position that they are in. They have been moved from house to house, and at one point, they were dumped at a local township, only to be picked up by their grandmother's sister. This has affected their education and development.

A key challenge faced by children of missing migrants, which emerged during the research, is the lack of birth certificates that would allow them to access identity documents. With no access to birth certificates and identity papers, children are prevented from accessing services, including education and health care, and from fully exercising their rights. The impact on their education is particularly drastic, as children without birth certificates are not able to fully participate in school activities, including sitting in national examinations needed to attend higher levels of education.



Impact on the Children Left Behind. Children whose parents disappear on their migration journeys are deeply affected by their absence. Grace explained how her nephews, whose father went missing, are traumatized and feel unwanted: “The two children were left as toddlers. ... They have heard the story of how their father is delinquent [irresponsible] and the extent of his neglect [of his obligations as a father], and the precarious position that they are in.”

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Although Zimbabwe's Births and Deaths Registration Act⁵ provides for the compulsory registration of births, in practice registering a birth is a cumbersome and difficult process for many people, which results in low birth registration rates around the country (Amnesty International, 2021). A national inquiry conducted by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission in 2019 and 2020 identified many barriers to people's access to documentation – a specific one affecting children was the unknown whereabouts of parents due to migration (ZHRC, 2020). When one or both parents had migrated without registering their children first, subsequent attempts by other relatives to obtain birth certificates for the children were often unsuccessful, as they were not able to meet registration requirements. The national inquiry identified inconsistent practices by provincial and district offices of the Department of the Registrar General (DRG) regarding the registration procedures to obtain birth certificates and identity cards for children whose parents' whereabouts were unknown,⁶ and it documented multiple cases of children of missing migrants left in the custody of relatives, whom the DRG turned away without registering because parents were required to be present (ibid.).

This was the case of Grace's nephews, whose father had gone missing after emigrating to South Africa. Grace recounted how she had been unable to secure birth certificates for them, as she could not meet the requirements imposed by the DRG office:

“ After some time, we tried to get birth certificates for his two children ... The registrar wanted to [ensure] that the father is either dead or has given us permission to [obtain] the birth certificate in his absence [which was not the case].

Older relatives – most often parents, grandparents or in-laws – are also impacted by the loss. As shown by other studies, parents or older relatives often use their land or other property as collateral for loans or other agreements that allow their younger relatives to migrate (Mengiste, 2021). When the journeys are successful, they may benefit from remittances and other forms of support and/or subsistence sent in by those abroad. A disappearance means that older relatives may ultimately lose their source of income, and their age, compounded by their virtual inability to travel across the border, hinders their ability to engage in a search. When age is compounded by other intersecting factors – such as gender, socioeconomic situation and their status as relatives of missing migrants – older people face even more heightened vulnerability. As explained by Grace, who has been trying to support the family of his brother-in-law in their search after he went missing:

“ The mother and her sister are old and do not have the kind of resources that would allow them to continue with this search.

The testimony of Ms Chiringo, who has been searching for her grandson, also reveals some of these dynamics:

“ When he left in 2007, he used to communicate and send money and food. In 2010 [he stopped] being in contact with me here. I tried calling him on the number that he used, but I could not get through. I started asking relatives and his friends in South Africa if they know his whereabouts, but no one seem to know where he was. South Africa is a big country, and I did not even know where to start looking for him. I am 75 years old, and I do not have the capability to look for him in that country. ... I would want him to come back home. I hope that he will come back to us alive.

⁵ More information is available at <https://data.unicef.org/crvs/zimbabwe/>.

⁶ For example, the Provincial Registrar for Matabeleland North Province requested from family members the submission of a police report indicating that the police had investigated the whereabouts of the missing. Offices in Matabeleland South and Manicaland provinces requested an affidavit and a Traditional Leader to stand in as informant indicating that the person's whereabouts were unknown. In Mashonaland West, the Provincial Registrar asked for a sociological report from the Department of Social Welfare stating that the whereabouts of the parents were unknown (ZHRC, 2020).

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions and recommendations



The data collected alongside families for this report reveals important insights concerning the disappearances of Zimbabwean migrants and the search practices carried out by their families. The research, carried out with families of missing migrants in communities in Chipinge and Chimanimani districts (in Zimbabwe's Manicaland province), shed light on the efforts and challenges that families encounter as they seek answers about the fate of their relatives.

Most families who participated in the research have been looking for relatives who went missing on their migration journeys to South Africa in the early 2000s, a time when the deteriorating economic and political situation in Zimbabwe led many people to leave the country in search of a better life. The initial confusion concerning when and how to start a search after not receiving any news from their loved ones was shared by all participants. At first, many families did not interpret the lack of news as unusual, believing that it might take their relatives some time to settle and establish themselves before contacting those left behind at home. Often this was the result of gendered perceptions: when the missing person was a man, there was also a tendency to explain his absence as "normal", as this was what men were expected to do as part of their migratory process – learn how to fend for themselves, interact with other men their age, and find a way to reach their destination.

Additionally, once families made the decision to start searching for their relatives, the lack of clearly identifiable and accessible search mechanisms meant that most families did not even know where to start or whom to contact. Many families were not aware that they could report the disappearances of their relatives to the authorities. They did not know which agency or unit they should approach to file reports, or were highly sceptical of doing so. Several participants kept the disappearances private for fear of being stigmatized in their communities, while others were concerned that by bringing the cases to the attention of the Government, they were putting their relatives at risk of being arrested in the country of destination, where they had gone missing, and deported (particularly if they lacked authorization to enter or stay). The few families who had contacted the authorities did not receive any meaningful support with their cases.

Most of the families interviewed highlighted that their precarious living and financial conditions were a major barrier preventing them from effectively exhausting all options to search for their relatives. Searching for a missing person requires money and time, as families need to forgo income-generating activities to file reports, meet with authorities, and travel to locations where the missing persons were last seen, which can generate significant costs. These costs were often out of reach for families interviewed in rural communities – many reported that they could not afford the costs of transportation to police stations or relevant government agencies where they could potentially seek help in searching for their missing family members, let alone to embark on their own search journeys to retrace their loved ones' steps.

The fear of stigmatization emerged from the research as a well-established and persistent barrier to seeking help, as shame, embarrassment, and stigma attached to the absence of a partner, parent or other relative limited the extent to which families reached out to community members for assistance. Women were disproportionately affected by stigma following the disappearance of a male relative – the absence of a married man was often interpreted by family members, in-laws and the wider community as linked to relationship problems caused by the wife, which often led to stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours towards wives and children of missing migrants.

Beyond social stigma, the disappearance of a male relative (being a father, husband or son) also had financial, material and legal impacts on the women and children who stayed behind. Many women whose male relatives were missing expressed fears of being dispossessed of their farmlands (on which their livelihoods and that of their children depended), as according to customary norms, they did not have a direct relationship with the land nor could they make any claim on it except through their male relatives or husbands. Additionally, the lack of certainty (and evidence) of the fate and whereabouts of their missing husbands or fathers meant that they were not able to make any inheritance claims to the property of their male relatives, which increased their economic vulnerability.

A key challenge faced by children whose parents were missing was the lack of birth certificates that would allow them to access identity documents. Without these documents, children are not able to fully participate in school activities, including sitting in national examinations needed to attend higher levels of education, or accessing other services and fully exercising their rights. When one or both parents had migrated without registering their children first, subsequent attempts by other relatives to obtain birth certificates for the children after the parents went missing were often unsuccessful, as they were not able to meet registration requirements.

With these findings in mind, the recommendations below propose ways in which families with missing migrant relatives in Zimbabwe could be better supported. They seek to provide a starting point for the Zimbabwean Government to fulfil its commitments in relation to missing migrants and their families in line with Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration. To be achieved, they will require support and cooperation from governments and other stakeholders at the local, national and regional levels:

1. Develop a multipronged national strategy to address cases of missing migrants

The research found that the current institutional response to missing-migrant cases is not effective as the existing framework is not adapted to address the particular dynamics of deaths and disappearances during migration. As a result, authorities do not know how to respond to these cases, which have a transnational component; families face multiple structural constraints in their efforts to search for their relatives; and they deal with a myriad of economic, legal, administrative and sociocultural impacts derived from the absence of their relatives. The development of a multipronged national strategy to address missing-migrant cases would create a holistic approach to the implementation of Zimbabwe's commitments under the Global Compact for Migration and existing legal provisions that protect the rights of missing migrants and their families.

- (a) The strategy should contain different elements:
 - (i) Prevention strategies to reduce the number of people who go missing on irregular migration routes, which would include removing barriers to accessing travel documents to allow more people to travel safely;
 - (ii) Search strategies to ensure that authorities provide a uniform response to cases of missing migrants and that they work with key stakeholders to clarify their fate and whereabouts;
 - (iii) Support and guidance provisions for families of missing migrants to ensure they know how and where to access help.
- (b) The strategy should provide for the development of a protocol establishing clear cross-departmental and transnational procedures and mechanisms for government departments, State institutions, and regional and local authorities on how to address cases of missing migrants, including guidance on their respective roles regarding search strategies, identification methods, information-sharing pathways, and data collection, centralization, and sharing.

- (c) The proposed protocol should include clear and effective guidelines for how families can engage in the process and report cases of their missing loved ones regardless of where the disappearance occurred. It should follow an intersectional approach and be sensitive towards differences among affected families based on intersecting factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, location and dis/ability. It should be clear where families with missing migrants can go for assistance locally and what support they can expect to receive to cope with the economic, social and legal impacts of the disappearance.
- (d) The strategy should include goals to periodically evaluate the response to missing-migrant cases to compile and make public a report on good practices and lessons learned that can contribute to a more successful response in the future.
- (e) The strategy should be aligned with international standards developed for the treatment of cases of missing or deceased migrants and their families – in particular, the principles governing interactions with the relatives of missing migrants, the guidelines on coordination and information-exchange mechanisms assisting the search for missing migrants, and the minimum standard data set for the search of missing migrants developed by the ICRC,¹ as well as the international standards outlined in the Mytilini Declaration for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons and Their Families developed by the Last Rights Project.²

2. Develop standardized police procedures to address missing-migrant cases

- (a) The national strategy should envisage the development of specialized and standardized procedures for police response when migrants are reported missing, which should include: clear steps on what the police should do when a disappearance linked to migration is reported, what steps to take when it comes to transnational cases (including how to communicate these cases to their counterparts in countries of transit or destination, in line with Recommendation 3), and clear standards for informing families about the progress of the investigation and what they can or are expected to do to contribute to the process during its different phases.
- (b) Training on how to implement the procedures should encourage an “attitude shift” so that moving forward, officials understand their duties and how best to respond to the needs of the families, take missing-person cases linked to migration seriously, and respect the fact that having a family member disappear in any context is a tragedy, not something to be blamed on the family.

3. Establish mechanisms allowing transnational coordination on missing-migrant cases

- (a) By its very nature, cross-border migration involves different jurisdictions, and the search for missing migrants has to include actors from countries of origin, transit and destination. To address the transnational element inherent to disappearances on migration routes, it is recommended that a dedicated cross-border mechanism is established to ensure an integrated, harmonized and systematic approach.
- (b) This mechanism could be set up bilaterally (for example, through a bilateral agreement between Zimbabwe and South Africa) and/or through broader multilateral arrangements (for example, at the SADC level).
- (c) This mechanism would provide a structured framework to facilitate the bidirectional flow of information between authorities in Zimbabwe and South Africa (and ideally in the SADC). It would clarify the roles and responsibilities of actors across both jurisdictions dealing with investigations that have a cross-border element, to foster a close working relationship between counterparts (including consular authorities, law enforcement and forensic agencies). It should establish procedures to enhance cross-border exchange of information and data and ensure mutual access to existing databases (or provide for the creation of regional or transnational databases to centralize data). This cooperation should be proactive and systematic (not merely on an ad hoc basis).

¹ More information is available at www.icrc.org/en/document/draft-minimum-standard-dataset-search-missing-migrants.

² More information is available at http://lastrights.net/LR_resources/html/LR_mytilini.html.

4. Fund and support the establishment of legal empowerment programmes with the aim of connecting families of missing migrants in rural communities with tools that will help them access justice and support

Families of missing migrants face significant obstacles to accessing official channels to search for their loved ones. In many of the cases documented in this report, families said that at the time of their relatives' disappearances, they did not know how to file complaints; how to request certificates of absence, death or birth; or make a claim on inheritance or property. In part, this is linked to the absence of clear and effective mechanisms to safely report a missing migrant and the lack of clear support structures available to the family left behind (a gap that the national strategy in Recommendation 1 aims to address). But also, the low levels of awareness of their rights and the duties of authorities mean that families may not know that they can go to the police station to report their relatives' disappearances, that they have a right to report their cases and that their cases should be recorded, and that due process should be followed. This has also allowed the police in some cases to take advantage of people's lack of awareness and dismiss their cases or argue that they cannot investigate them. The lack of knowledge, along with other hurdles – such as high costs, the far distances from rural communities to government institutions in urban centres, and cumbersome and unclear procedures – limits families' access to justice.

- (a) The national strategy to address missing-migrant cases (mentioned in Recommendation 1) should provide for the empowerment of people with information and knowledge of their rights and available avenues to seek justice and support to search for their missing relatives and deal with the financial, legal and administrative impacts of their absence.
- (b) The State (and other key stakeholders, such as international organizations and donors) should fund and support the establishment of legal empowerment programmes with the aim of connecting families of missing migrants in rural communities with tools that will help them access justice. This can involve a range of activities, such as engaging in public awareness-raising campaigns to inform families of their rights and of the avenues available to them to seek support, and/or equipping people from affected communities to act as "community-based facilitators".
- (c) A model of community-based facilitators would be particularly helpful to reach families in rural communities, mitigate issues of trust, and support families in overcoming fears of interacting with authorities. Facilitators would raise awareness among families of their rights, provide support in individual cases and help families navigate legal and administrative processes in their search and pursuit of remedies, and could document and collect data on missing-migrant cases for case management and for evidence-based advocacy. Facilitators could also engage village leaders to address sociocultural and gendered issues leading to stigmatization.

5. Create mechanisms to enable safe reporting of missing-migrant cases

The research found that another obstacle preventing families from filing missing-person reports with the authorities was the fear of putting their relatives at risk of being arrested in the country of destination, where they had gone missing, and deported (particularly if they lacked authorization to enter or stay).

- (a) As part of the national strategy and the dedicated cross-border mechanism, a safe-reporting provision should be included, establishing that the data collected from families of missing migrants will be used only for the humanitarian purposes of the search, with the aim of clarifying the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives. Information provided by the families should not be used for immigration control and enforcement purposes (either in Zimbabwe or in countries of destination).
- (b) Families should be made aware of their opportunities to report a missing person safely, as this is a necessary premise for the effectiveness of this measure. Equally, local police officers in charge of the application of these mechanisms should receive training, in order to avoid limited and inconsistent implementation due to a lack of awareness of the existence of this provision.
- (c) When filing a report, authorities should ensure that families have the space to exercise agency and meaningful choice over how their information is collected and used. This involves providing them with information about the purposes for which their data will be collected and how it will be used and shared. This should take place in an environment of trust.

- (d) Partnerships at the community/local level (for example, with community-based facilitators as mentioned in Recommendation 4) could be helpful to build trust and play an intermediation role between families of missing migrants and local police bodies.

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