

Russia: Do Women Want to “Keep Their Place?”

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What is feminism like in the North Caucasus? What makes the women in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia more vulnerable? Who helps them to fight for their rights and escape domestic violence? Journalist and human rights advocate Svetlana Anokhina explains

Tell us a little about your experience and journalistic activities.

For years I have been an editor of [Daptar: Caucasus Female Space](#). The portal was founded in 2014, and I initially collaborated as a freelance writer. I then became the editor-in-chief. The topics covered by our publication are very close to me. I was born and spent the majority of my life in Dagestan, and I understand its local agenda very well. Daptar was initially created in order to highlight different aspects of women’s life in the North Caucasus, including cultural aspects: who is she, the Caucasian woman who “keeps her place?” Where is this “place?” Does she want to be “keeping” it? Eventually we began publishing more stories on human rights issues.

There is a section dedicated to Caucasian feminism on your website. What is it like?

There are many differences within Caucasian feminism, and it’s very interesting to me to talk with women about what feminism means for them, what they feel about the idea, and what they have experienced in their lives. Efforts by “metropolitan” feminists to tell us what to do, to “emancipate” and “empower” us (and I say “us” because I hardly identify myself with Central Russia’s bigger cities but identify strongly with the Caucasus) are seen with suspicion by our women.

For instance, there are great difficulties surrounding the issue of hijabs. The way Caucasian feminists have been talking about the hijab for more than a decade aligns with the modern tendency to see various phenomena through a decolonial lens. Many women think that the choice to wear the hijab is the result of their own struggle, a right they need to defend. Women’s fight, a fight for the right to have your own opinion, is a feminist phenomenon. Some people, who think that the hijab represents women’s subordination, may not like this opinion, and there is some truth to what they say. But when someone begins lecturing Caucasian Muslim women that they must take their headwear off and throw it away, it isn’t very different from patriarchal men telling women what to do. One should keep in mind that in the modern Caucasus the niqab [a dark headdress covering the face] is a sign of free thinking. It is considered dangerous and sometimes seen as extremist. If women decide to close themselves like this, they are facing serious risks, and so it must be important to them.

How did the [Marem crisis](#) group come about and what does it do?

I had been working on women’s issues, and there are phone numbers published on Daptar’s website for those in need of legal or psychological support, so I had to deal with direct requests for help. At

that point I had already known many human rights groups and people working on women's issues, and was able to answer some requests on my own. By 2019, I'd had enough experience of evacuating women and helping in opening criminal cases. I acted as the victim's representative in a gang rape case. It was a shocking case, a traumatic experience. And I have seen such cases go to court.

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In 2019, I met Maryam Alieva, a popular blogger in Dagestan. She runs a page "[Diaries of a Highland Woman](#)," which has been shut down several times because of the outraged public's complaints. I interviewed her: I wanted to write about this girl, who wears the national costume while living in Moscow. Our conversation moved quickly from ethnography to human rights. We teamed up and then another woman joined us, so we decided to recruit a responder group for the North Caucasus, including lawyers, activists and psychologists. On 20 July 2020 we went public with this initiative.

We took the name "Marem" to commemorate a young woman Marem Alieva from Ingushetia who went missing. She had a terrible fate, suffering from all the horrors that could happen to a woman in the North Caucasus. Her husband kidnapped her as a very young girl, and he had already had two wives. He once punished her by cutting off a part of her thumb and threatened to take her children away from her. She ran away several times. In 2015, she went missing after much physical and psychological abuse and was never found, dead or alive. It felt important to take this name because people try to forget about her. I wanted the name to be a reminder that every request needs to be taken seriously, that you can't brush things off saying, "She's just getting wound up." This kind of carelessness can cost a human life.

The work went well at first, there were many of us and we worked together to solve difficult problems. Then we had a shelter apartment where women fleeing from violence could stay temporarily. They could recover there while we decided how to help them and where to send them next. The shelter closed down on 10 June 2021 when a joint force of the Dagestan and Chechen police raided it in search of Halimat Taramova. All three of us who were in the apartment at the time, as well as the woman whose name was on the rental contract, were forced to leave Russia.

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Some people, however, keep working on the ground in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. These are the regions where the most requests for help come from. There are fewer requests from Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia and Karachay-Cherkessia. Our people work in the republics, otherwise we wouldn't be able to manage. They prefer to remain anonymous, since all initiatives defending women's and children's rights are under a lot of pressure. It started before the Covid-19 pandemic and grew worse with each month. NGOs are declared foreign agents; they have to close down and deal with obstacles created by the police. We work as a partisan team of activists and volunteers without official registration, so there is no way to shut us down.

You mentioned in an interview that there have been fewer requests to Marem since the full-scale invasion began. What is the reason for that?

The reason why there have been fewer calls is exactly the same as during the pandemic. Back then, we expected a higher number of requests, but in fact there were fewer. We think that, in situations like these, women who may have cursed their tormentors before suddenly feel that their family needs them and that they have to put up with all the problems. If their brother, husband or another

relative has gone to war (not to kill and rob, but to “defend their motherland”), they feel the pressure to support their family and wait for them to return, according to women’s traditional role. I don’t think that is going to last. As soon as these men return from the war zone and show what they learned there, we will, sadly, get many more requests.

How does the situation with women’s rights and gendered violence, in particular domestic violence, differ in the republics of the North Caucasus from the situation in Russia as a whole?

The situation with women’s rights in Russia is dire. It became even worse when domestic violence was decriminalized [note: *In early 2017, assault against close family members was reclassified from a criminal offense to a misdemeanor if such an act was committed for the first time*], which analysts and NGO workers have pointed out. The situation in the North Caucasus has always been even more difficult than in other parts of Russia. Here it is very difficult to imagine an organization that could openly engage in the protection of women’s rights.

For example, it’s a woman’s right to live with her child after a divorce. It is virtually impossible to secure this right in court in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Olga Gnezdilova, a lawyer working for the Legal Initiative Foundation, noted the Russian officials’ response to the European Court of Human Rights’ objections to this: “It is their custom. Giving custody rights to the father after a divorce and not allowing the child to see the mother is their tradition.” It is evident from this response that it is the state’s deliberate policy to condone local traditions that oppress women not to angry local men. Ramzan Kadyrov’s statements on this matter also speak volumes. They boil down to the view that a man may beat his wife from time to time. And I hardly need to comment on the cultural norms prescribing women to be submissive and subordinate, to do household chores and bear children.

What is the law enforcement’s role in maintaining an ultra-patriarchal order? Why does “justice” and law work differently for Caucasian women?

As far as we know, law enforcement bodies in Russia are informally told not to interfere in cases from the North Caucasus, so they facilitate the return of runaway victims of violence to their families. This is something we see very often: the police in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other regions all act similarly in these situations. Our shelter apartment in Makhachkala was raided by a joint force of Chechen and Dagestani police. How is this the business of another republic’s police department? Apparently, they collaborate on the issue of runaway women.

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There are also special rules in place within the republics themselves. Lawyers from Ingushetia and Chechnya noted that “it is easier to defend guerrillas than to defend women.” The women are only supported by their families during court sessions, while many sympathizers show up to side with the men. Consider, for instance, the case of Shema Temagova, nearly killed by her husband, who hit the back of her head with a shovel. He was released in the courtroom! A lot of men came to the hearing and supported him. They would convene after *ruzman* [*Friday prayer*], come to court, and sit there nodding approvingly. The argument that “the wife behaved badly and annoyed her husband” is convincing for many.

Lawyers have a hard job because they are constantly pressured and shamed: “Look who you’re defending! Are you siding with a ‘prostitute’? What clan are you from?” and so on. Quite often there are two lawyers working on a case, and only the Russian, who is less sensitive to this kind of manipulation, comes to court sessions, while her Chechen or Ingush partner does not. This was how

I worked with a colleague on a gang rape case. The men in the room expected we would look down and just sit there in embarrassment, because we can't bear to say and hear words describing sexualized violence. This is what they always count on.

When a woman tries to have custody over her children or take back a child who has already been kidnapped, she will face serious difficulties as well. She may even win the case, only to have it obstructed by bailiffs. Out of solidarity with the man, the bailiffs will sabotage the process of returning the child to the mother. According to Ingush, Chechen and some Dagestani beliefs, the child belongs to the father's clan. That is why things don't end at winning a case: you still have to make sure that the court's decision is actually enforced.

Are there any other self-organized initiatives or mutual help groups in the North Caucasus that fight for women's rights?

There is, for instance, a team that runs the Telegram channel "What I Want to Say, Mado" in Ingushetia. There used to be a discussion club in the republic, which at some point dared to raise the issue of feminism to find out what about it was bothering the public. The discussion was shut down immediately. People were so outraged that they began harassing the girls, making threats, publishing their personal information, contacting their relatives, calling on them to "sort it out." As far as [Chechnya](#) goes, one shouldn't even be talking about self-organized groups, as it entails the risk of exposing them. Things are slightly better in Dagestan, and the best situation is in North Ossetia. There is an organization there called [«XOTÆ»](#) [*"sisters" in the Ossetian language*], founded by Agunda Bekoyeva and her allies. They talk about women's problems and try to solve some of these problems. There was also a group of young women in Dagestan who ran the "Feminist Dagestan" page.

"It is the state's deliberate policy to condone local traditions that oppress women not to angry local men"

Generally speaking, many people in the North Caucasus may not associate themselves with feminism but hold feminist views and defend women's rights to the extent they consider possible. I consider any fight for women's rights initiated by women themselves as a feminist fight. This includes the rights existing within Islam, which is also something that can't be taken for granted in the North Caucasus. I once saw an amusing argument in a Muslim group: "Brothers, it's our own fault! If we respected women according to Islam, feminists wouldn't have come to us." They aren't entirely wrong: had people followed Muslim norms more closely, women would have fewer reasons to run away and seek our help. For instance, I was told about a husband extorting money from his wife for a divorce. In fact, if a woman wants a divorce, she is supposed to be given a "mahr", or the possessions gifted to the wife by the man when they got married. This can be an apartment, a ring, anything. But these decisions are made by men who think that women are stupid, and they interpret the norms as it suits them. We've had cases when we approached Islamic clergy to respond to requests of this kind.

To what extent are women in the North Caucasus involved in the broader political and activist agenda?

Women are fairly well represented in different organizations. For example, there are many women in the [Crew Against Torture](#) NGO. Many women worked at [the Memorial Human Rights Center's](#) North Caucasus branch as well. As far as grassroots initiatives go, there is an activist group in Makhachkala with an urban protection and ecological agenda, called Our City. It formed when the city authorities tried to destroy the only urban park in Makhachkala to build a "Russian History" museum in its place. Many people came out to defend the park, and the activist group lingered on

and remains active.

Women in Dagestan are politically active. This was very evident during [the protests against military drafting](#). Before the rallies in Dagestan, there was an attempt to protest in Chechnya, and there were women who took to the streets. But we know very well how it ended: the women were dragged to the police office, their husbands were called up and told to give their wives a beating, unless they wanted the police to do it. In addition, the women's sons were handed summonses to the military draft. Things were easier in Makhachkala, where women have more freedom. But you must understand that they never come out to protect themselves, they always come out to protect the men in their families. This is a socially approved protest, and even law enforcement officers agree that women have the right to protect their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands.

It should also be understood that the Dagestani protest was not against the war, it was against the military draft. There were some with a more pronounced political stance, of whom many were detained, and some were beaten and humiliated in police stations. When things like these happen, women rarely report beatings. As Ekaterina Vanslova, head of the North Caucasus branch of the Crew Against Torture, notes, in order to initiate a case, one must undergo forensic examination and document marks of violence. This may be unacceptable for Muslim women, because, first, they would have to undress (likely in front of a man), and second, photographs of naked body parts would be sent to the prosecutor's office. Politically active women in the North Caucasus are more vulnerable confronting not only men's violence but also state violence.

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