
Rape and Sexual Assault in Chechnya

By Valentina Rousseva

This article sheds light on the horrors of ethnic cleansing practiced upon the women and men of Chechnya by Russian soldiers since 1994.

About 15 to 20% of the Chechen population died or disappeared during the wars of 1994 and 1999.¹ Many lost their homes, their belongings, as well as their identification papers. A great number of Chechens were placed in camps like Ingushetia or sought asylum from the terror of the war in neighbor nations. Structural violence has affected all Chechens, but most powerfully the women, who exist as the marginalized group in a patriarchal society.

Violence against Chechen women is multi-layered. The extreme poverty-evidenced by an unemployment rate of 60% (about 10% of the population lives in extreme poverty), lack of comprehensive and affordable health care and education- greatly influences their lives.² The wars of 1994 and 1999 brought new forms of suffering to Chechen women. In addition to structural violence, many of them experienced painful losses of relatives, friends, and members of their immediate family. Still, the most traumatic and debilitating experiences were the sexual abuse and rapes by Russian soldiers, which many Chechen women refer to as worse than death. This analysis will focus on rape and sexual abuses as powerful tools of oppression. The implications of rape by a non-Moslem man on a Moslem woman's life, seen through the lenses of the specific culture and religion, could alter fundamentally her

prospects to marry and have a family, and her role in society. In addition, rape has become a weapon of ethnic cleansing in Chechnya. Women's bodies are controlled by the enemy, in order to obtain control over the ethnic group's future.

Because of the lack of transparency in the region, the actual numbers of human rights violations against civilian Chechen women is unknown, however, the reported cases are considerable in numbers. These have and continue to happen at checkpoints, the outskirts of towns, and in camps like Ingushetia. Some reported cases describe Chechen women dragged out of their homes during the Russian "sweep operations". They were beaten, molested, raped, and in many cases brutally murdered by Russian soldiers or "kontraktnik" (contracted soldiers). Eighteen-year old Kheda Kungaeva was taken from her home in Tangi-Chiby by Russian soldiers.³ Colonel Yuri Budanov, a tank commander, was the leader of the group. Kungaeva was brought to a military camp where, according to a forensic examiner cited by Human Rights Watch report, "Kungaeva was beaten, anally and vaginally penetrated by a hard object, and strangled at about 3:00am". She was violently raped before her death. Similar cases happened in 2002, accord-

¹ Human Rights Violation in Chechnya, <http://www.hrv.net/main.htm>.

² Global IDP Project: Russian Federation, <http://www.db.idpproject.org>.

³ Human Rights Watch: "Russian Federation Serious Violations of Women's Human Rights in Chechnya, http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya_women.htm.

ing to Human Rights Watch. "Aset Asimova" (not her real name), a widow of 43, survived a gang rape by Russian soldiers, which happened in her own home.

Credible reports of rapes and sexual abuses are received for Russian checkpoints within Chechnya. According to Human Rights Watch, "Alisa Riskhanova" was detained in a checkpoint because her passport picture did not resemble her appearance. Russian soldiers told her: "you will never have children again" and began kicking her and hitting her. She was then gang raped.

Rape is being used as a threat in detention centers, where women are fondled and treated as a form of entertainment without any respect for them as human beings. They are stripped of their personality and become just bodies. In a recent report, Russian soldiers made Chechen women undress and dance naked in front of them.⁴

Given the specific culture of the region, rape and sexual assault have very complex implications for the lives of women. The majority of the Chechen population is Moslem. In a patriarchal society the role of the female inside and outside of the family is set. She is inferior to the male who is the main actor and public figure. The female reproductive purpose is overemphasized in the patriarchal tradition. Women are considered the continuum of the ethnic group, and are the bearers of the ethnic identity and culture through their ability to give birth to new generations. A Moslem woman's best virtue is her virginity and chastity. This is a guarantee to the husband that the children she bears are his

and will continue his clan. The loss of virginity before marriage or any sexual acts outside of the marriage bond are shaming to the women, as well as to their husbands who have failed in performing their masculine duty--the responsibility to protect their wives. A Chechen woman's rape, despite the fact that it is by the enemy and during wartime, seriously reduces her chances for marriage. In some cases the husband divorces his wife because he cannot live with the shame. The issue of honor of the male is of greater power than the compassion for the suffering of the woman.

Rape of enemy women during war is the key to dishonoring enemy males, taking away their power and threatening the future of the ethnic group by possible impregnation of the women. Rape, as stated by Yugoslavia war survivor Rabija, is "planned in advance and intended to destroy the soul of a nation" (Barstow, 2000, p.62). As Todd Salzman states, violation of the female body is a "weapon of war" used to ethnically clean and create a homogenous nation (2000). In the case of Chechnya, Russia's nationalist ideology could explain much of the dynamics behind the actions of sexual abuse and rapes of Chechen women. First the Russian forces removed a great number of Chechen men in massive slaughters, or displaced them by sending them to camps or detention centers. Then, when the Chechen women were left more vulnerable, Russian soldiers started the rapes. The use of rape as a strategy is tied to the possible impregnation of Chechen women. In Russia, babies are always given their father's name and are brought up with their father's culture and religion. Chechen women are thus viewed by the Russian military as being

⁴ Human Rights Watch: "Russian Federation Serious Violations of Women's Human Rights in Chechnya," http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya_women.htm.

the key to “ethnic cleansing”. The control over them could lead to the complete extinction of their ethnic group and this could ensure that Russia would be an ethnically homogenous nation in the future.

The second use of rape as ethnic cleansing is to prevent births within the ethnic group. Brutal rapes could debilitate women and make them incapable of childbearing in the future. The traumatizing experience by itself might make them unwilling to have a child. According to Salzman, the reduction of number of births might be the result of rape (2000, p.89). Feminists view war as the powerful expression of patriarchal power. Rape during wartime is the most extreme case of enforcement of the men’s control over women and their traditionally inferior roles. The numerous cases of violence against women at home and at work, along with the well-known problems of the Russian Federation with trafficking of women and forced prostitution, form the context of the existing mistreatment and women’s rights violations in Russia. This makes rape and sexual abuse much more likely to occur in the war zones.

Because of fear that they might be divorced by their husbands, unable to marry, or ostracized by society, many Chechen women never report rape or sexual assault.⁵ The secret is a yet another torture for them, one they may live with for the rest of their lives. In addition, reporting the crime is pointless in most cases since Russian authorities show a lack of interest in prosecuting military men. The investigations of rape and disappearances of women are very rare. Even in the brutal Kungaeva case, Colonel Budanov was tried for murder

but not rape. Chechens remain deeply suspicious of the Russian authorities’ work and have little faith in their impartiality. Chechen women fear that their reports could expose them to further violations. Chechen women are also treated as second-class citizens. Without witnesses, their testimonies mean little against the testimony of the Russian soldiers. This lack of punishment and enforcement of women’s rights in Russia creates an environment that welcomes more sexual abuses of Chechen women in the future.

Article Four of the Geneva Convention defines rape as a war crime, and Article Twenty-Seven clearly prohibits it. The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, adopted in 1993, states that violations of the human rights of women in armed conflicts, including rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy, are violations of the fundamental principles of international human rights and humanitarian law. With the establishment of the International War Crime Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in February 1993, rape is now defined as a crime against humanity. The United Nation Commission for Human Rights has adopted a resolution urging Russia to investigate human rights abuses within Chechnya and to cooperate with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in studying the situation. But Russia rejected this resolution and no further actions have been taken from the international community. The United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) condemned the human rights violations in Chechnya on May 16, 2002. At its 60th session the United Nation Commission on Human Rights condemned all further violations of human rights in Chechnya.

The international community’s response to the violations of women’s

⁵ Human Rights Watch: “Russia: Investigate Sexual Violence by Troops in Chechnya.”

rights in Chechnya has been weak. Russia refuses to cooperate with INGOs and its government has done little to prosecute those who have committed crimes against Chechen women. This sexual abuse is an urgent issue which needs to be addressed immediately by the international community. It is a real every day threat for all Chechen women. The lessons of Bosnia are still fresh in our memories.

The Russian Federation's government should undertake immediate actions to ensure that sexual abuse of Chechen women becomes uncommon. Measures should focus on training the

Russian military personnel (including contracted soldiers) on gender sensitive issues and stress the importance of women's rights. Authorities should ensure the protection of the women survivors who are willing to report the cases, along with the proper investigation of the perpetrators. Cooperation with INGOs is necessary for the elimination of all forms of violence against Chechen women. Equally important is the government's cooperation with international governmental organizations like the United Nation, foreign investigators, and the foreign media.

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