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, analy 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-

ing to Human Rights Watch. “Aset Asi-
movea” (not her real name), a widow of
43, survived a gang rape by Russian sol-
diers, which happened in her own home.

Credible reports of rapes and sexual
abuses are received for Russian check-
points within Chechnya. According to
Human Rights Watch, “Alisa Riskhan-
ova” was detained in a checkpoint be-
cause her passport picture did not re-
semble 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 de-
tention centers, where women are fon-
dled and treated as a form of entertain-
ment 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 nak-
ed in front of them.4

Given the specific culture of the re-
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 infe-
rrior to the male who is the main actor
and public figure. The female reproduc-
tive purpose is overemphasized in the
patriarchal tradition. Women are consid-
ered 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 hus-
band 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 per-
forming their masculine duty—the re-
ponsibility to protect their wives. A
Chechen woman’s rape, despite the fact
that it is by the enemy and during war-
time, seriously reduces her chances for
marriage. In some cases the husband di-
vorces 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 threaten-
ing 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 in-
tended 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 ethni-
cally clean and create a homogenous na-
tion (2000). In the case of Chechnya,
Russia’s nationalist ideology could ex-
plain much of the dynamics behind the
actions of sexual abuse and rapes of
Chechen women. First the Russian
forces removed a great number of Che-
chen men in massive slaughters, or dis-
placed them by sending them to camps
or detention centers. Then, when the
Chechen women were left more vulner-
able, 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

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4 Human Rights Watch: “Russian Federation
Serious Violations of Women’s Human Rights in
Chechnya,
http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya_wom-
en.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. 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

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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.

References


