

**Burkas, Babushkas, and Bombs: Toward an Understanding of the “Black Widow”**

**Suicide Bombers of Chechnya**

Elizabeth Frombgen Ph.D.  
Hastings College  
[lfrombgen@hastings.edu](mailto:lfrombgen@hastings.edu)  
(402) 461-7321

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“You’re having a bad day, but we’ve had a bad 10 years,” a Chechen “Black Widow” barks to a Russian hostage during the standoff between Chechen terrorists attempting to wrestle Chechnya from the Russian Federation and Russian forces at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in October 2002. This quote is striking because it illuminates in one line how the two Chechen wars have motivated civilians to engage in terrorist activities. The use of the term “we” seems to indicate that this woman was expressing a sentiment beyond herself as an individual and was perhaps referring to Chechens as a group. It also demonstrates the importance of first understanding the experience of Chechen women during the last ten years in order to understand how and why some become suicide bombers.

This research is driven by two primary research questions: 1) why has the phenomenon of women suicide bombers occurred in Chechnya? (i.e. what conditions allow for this to happen?), and 2) what motivates a few Chechen women to become suicide bombers? In the Chechen case, the first female suicide bombing took place in June 2000, while the use of terrorism occurred first when Chechen forces took hostages at a hospital in Budennovsk, Russia in 1995. That is, the use of suicide bombers is a new phenomenon, suggesting that structural and societal changes allowed it to occur. So the question is, what changes took place during the current war, which began in

1999, in Chechen society to produce this phenomenon of women becoming suicide bombers? **This is especially significant** because **the constraints of Chechen society do not** allow women to **have a political role, making suicide terrorism their first direct act of political participation.** Chechnya is a traditional Muslim society in which gender roles are extremely well-defined with women existing largely in the private sphere. As Mia Bloom (2005) asserts: “Women’s most relevant role, historically, was to raise children, form their character, and make them strong so that they became Mujahideen when they grew up” (154). From the available data, “Black Widows” tend to be young women in their late teens or early twenties for whom the context of war, violence and deprivation have been fundamental experiences. But there is no clear profile:

They are not necessarily young, although a majority of those whose identities have been established were younger than 30. Not all of them were religious before disappearing from their homes only to resurface for attack. Not all of them have lost close relatives in the fighting against Russian troops or in the brutal purges of Chechen civilians by Russian security services. The identified suicide bombers have not been living in abject poverty, nor were they known to have been raped or otherwise tortured and humiliated at the hands of the Russian military...” (Abdullaev 2005, 1).

In contrast to Chechen women, given the constraints of Chechen society, male suicide bombers had access to other avenues of political participation prior to becoming suicide bombers.

There are two theses of this paper: 1) through the reading of this case from a feminist perspective we can begin to understand how the experience of Chechen women during the two Chechen wars affected them as women, and mothers in some cases, and how this might have contributed to some of these women’s politicization as

expressed through suicide bombings, and 2) the phenomenon of female suicide bombing is a form of political participation **which** occurs due to women's experiences during war with the absence of men and the occupying of new roles formerly held by men. **But** this seems to occur only in cases in which there is a history of terrorism or suicide bombings carried out by men. This is to suggest that the experience of war, deprivation, and extreme loss do not automatically produce women suicide bombers, as is evidenced by most cases of war, but rather it is the sociological changes associated with the experience of women during war **of occupying** new roles that men have already occupied that creates a sufficient condition through which women become suicide bombers. Using this logic, we should not expect to see women suicide bomber in cases without at least prior terrorism committed by males.

Many journalistic accounts assert that these women were "driven" by the deaths of their husbands, despite the fact that not all of them were widows of Chechen men killed in combat. This understanding suggests a revenge motive, which is not supported by the empirical data for some of these women. Part of this **revenge motive is the** desire to bring the war to Russia **due to** the destruction of Chechnya and the human rights violations committed by Russian soldiers toward Chechen civilians, commonly referred to as "mopping up" operations. Wanting Russian civilians to experience some of the horrors Chechen civilians have experienced seems to be a better explanation than that of a narrow understanding of revenge. Even if all the "Black Widows" sought to avenge the deaths of male relatives at the hands of the Russian military, this doesn't illustrate the context within which such decisions are made. It simply doesn't tell the whole story. Only a few Chechen women have become suicide

bombers, but all have experienced the last decade of war, which for many includes the loss of male relations, atrocities committed by the Russian military, and economic deprivation. There is no evidence that the experiences of women who became “Black Widows” or “shadidats” were worse than those of other Chechen women. Therefore, the desire to bring the war to Russia is a necessary but not sufficient cause of the occurrence of **this** phenomenon. It is necessary, then, to examine how these women, as well as other Chechen women, experienced the **two wars** so as to gain some insight into the events which might have constructed the way in which these women made their decisions.

To be clear, this **paper** does not take a biologically essentialist understanding of gender, but rather a sociologically essentialist one insofar as women’s socially accepted roles were those typical of traditional societies where women’s roles tend to exist in the private sphere. More specifically, this approach understands the important role society plays in constructing women’s lives and therefore experiences. Therefore women’s socially prescribed roles determined their experiences, *not* biology.

This paper has three main goals: 1) to write women into the narrative of the Russian-Chechen conflict as actors by examining the lives of Chechen women, including would-be suicide bombers, during the two Chechen wars, 2) to provide a preliminary framework through which to view women’s political participation, and 3) to begin to understand the conditions which create the context in which female suicide bombers emerge. Thus, this piece is a feminist reading and writing of Chechen women. Rather than viewing Chechen women only as the victims of war, which serves to marginalize them, this piece attempts to view them as actors. The journalistic accounts

all seem to indicate that these women are/were being manipulated by the Chechen movement, **which** is most likely the case. Using women as a strategy seems to have been successful insofar as the gendered understanding of women, especially Islamic women, as passive, non-violent, and apolitical has served to shock the Russian state and public.

### Background on Chechnya and Chechens

As discussed above, Chechnya is a very traditional, patriarchal Muslim society, in which gender roles are extremely well-defined. This is the context within which Chechen men and women are socialized. This section attempts to provide the reader within the necessary background on Chechnya so as to understand the gendered nature of Chechen society and to begin to understand how some Chechen women might become suicide bombers.

Chechnya has been an almost continuous source of conflict for Russia since the eighteenth century. In general, the history of the relations between Chechens, Russians, and the Russian state has been hostile. After thirty years of battle, Shamil, a Dagestani (a neighboring republic) who led the Chechen resistance against Russian expansion, was forced to surrender in Dagestan in 1859, marking the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. One well-known feature of the wars between the Russians and the Chechens is the determination of the Chechen people to prevent complete Russian victory over themselves or their culture.

**The Russian Empire never fully passified the Chechens, which is evidenced by their rebellion** in 1877-78 and again in 1920-21, but failed after the Soviet Army

intervened. In addition, the forced collectivization of the Soviet period produced intense dislike, perhaps hatred, among these people, resulting in violent rebellions. Most importantly, during World War II thousands of Chechens were deported to **Kazakhstan**. It is estimated that one-third of Chechens perished during the deportation and exile, which lasted until 1957.

As an introduction to Chechnya and its people, it is useful to look at the social structure of Chechnya. Chechnya is located in the southern part of Russia in the Caucasus Mountains, which is important to Chechen identity. The social structure is made up of *teips*, or clans, with familial ties being very strong. As one of the many small nations/nationalities in the Caucasus Mountains, Chechens have a strong warrior mentality from centuries of defending themselves and their land against foreign invaders. Moreover, as a result of this mountainous location, many Chechen traditions have survived foreign invasion. One such tradition is the ability of Chechens to name approximately nine generations of ancestors. It is often said that “it is hard to be Chechen.” I imagine this includes Chechen women. Given the constraints of Chechen society, it seems it would be hard to be a Chechen woman.

The mentality of the warrior is well engrained in the minds of most Chechens and this image is also well engrained in Russian history and culture. While this image of the warrior is not directly applied to women, it seems that Chechen women would have to be strong to maintain households and maintain Chechen family traditions. Russian folklore talks about the great Caucasian warrior of which the Chechen is the **fiercest**. Leo Tolstoy describes the Chechen **warrior** in ways similar to the Western idea of the Noble Savage in his short story titled “Hadji Murat”, a Chechen warrior who

is betrayed by the Russian Empire. Although fiction, Tolstoy's description of the character, Hadji Murat, comes from his experience serving in the Russian Imperial Army during the Caucasian Wars. One comes away from reading this text with the understanding that Tolstoy **respects** the Chechen warrior as a warrior, partly as a result of fearing **his** capabilities. Similarly, Solzhenitsyn aptly describes the simultaneous fear and respect he felt for Chechens during his exile in **Kazakhstan**:

But there was one nation which would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission—and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to the man. These were the Chechens (Alexander Solzhenitsyn 1976, 401).

By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Chechnya shared republic status with Ingushetia, which granted it a significant degree of autonomy from Moscow. In the wave of separatism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chechnya, under President Dudayev, declared its independence on 1 November 1991. President Yeltsin responded with a failed invasion of the republic. In acts of defiance, Chechnya refused to sign the Russian Federation Treaty of 1992 and the Russian Federation Constitution of 1993.

**Chechnya remained effectively independent from 1991-1994 when the Russian state invaded the republic on 12 December 1994 and fought a protracted guerrilla style war until it was forced to withdraw in 1996.** Surprising to everyone, Russia lost a war against a nation of less than one million people, with at most ten thousand fighters. Moreover, this was a war that Yeltsin asserted could be won by Russia in a couple of hours. As an end to the war, Russia was forced to withdraw in defeat and sign a peace treaty with Chechnya in 1996, which was finalized in May

1997. This agreement left Chechnya's status undefined until 2001, which never came because of the 1999 Russian invasion. **The time between 1997-1999 was fraught with corruption, crime and kidnappings in Chechnya, due, in part, to the stalled rebuilding of Chechnya after its destruction in the war.**

On 7 August 1999, just prior to Vladimir Putin's appointment as Russian Prime Minister and the Moscow apartment bombings, Chechen separatists, who were labeled "Islamic insurgents," invaded the republic of Dagestan and declared its independence from the Russian Federation. President Yeltsin issued a state of emergency in Chechnya and commanded Aslan Maskhadov, the then-Chechen President, to deal with the Chechen warlords and terrorists, and then hand them over to the Russian government. On 10 August 1999, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister

of the Russian Federation. His primary function was to deal effectively with Chechnya,



In September 1999 Yeltsin renounced his support for Maskhadov as the legitimate Chechen leader, citing Maskhadov's inability to control Chechen warlords, and invaded the republic for the second time.

Even though the rebel Chechen government did not participate in Russian politics, the Russian government established a pro-Moscow government during the second war. The 2000 Russian presidential election was held in Chechnya, with the turnout being almost exclusively Russian soldiers stationed there. The Russian government appointed Akhmed Kadyrov as Chechnya's President-Elect in 2000 who was elected President in October 2003. He was assassinated in a suicide bombing in May 2004. An election to replace him took place on 29 August 2004, with Alu Alkhanov being elected president, just after two Chechen women simultaneously detonated bombs on two Russian airplanes.

The 1999 Moscow apartment bombings helped to garner support for this war among the Russian population, **unlike** the first war, which not supported by the Russian population. Most accounts have suggested that the second war has been more brutal toward the Chechen civilian population, but it's unclear if the conditions are objectively worse than during the first war, or rather that it is a cumulative effect of years of war and instability. Regardless, countless commentators and scholars of Chechnya have referred to Chechnya as "Hell". John Reuter (2004) explains the context within which the phenomenon of Chechen suicide bombers occurs:

Years of war and social upheaval have left the people of Chechnya with nothing but misery. Throughout the second Chechen war, Russian forces have radicalized the resistance and humiliated the populace by committing widespread human rights abuses against civilians. These actions, combined with the Kremlin's unwillingness to negotiate with moderate members of the resistance, have continued the Chechen

conflict and correspondingly engendered extremist tactics such as



Bloom (2005) aptly describes the desperation that many Chechens feel:

Stories about Russian soldiers laughing as they charge Chechen fathers 300 rubles (nearly \$15) not to rape their daughters circulate widely throughout Chechnya, adding credibility to the notion that Russian Counter Terror tactics have morphed into a cruel sadistic justification for violence against women. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 80,000 Chechens and 6,000 Russian troops have died. President Vladimir Putin's strong-arm tactics have turned Chechnya into an anarchic wasteland where Russian soldiers roam freely, dispensing summary justice in house-to-house raids and skirmishing with armed rebels (157).

Although this does provide some understanding of how the Chechen civilian population has been marginalized, it does not explain how women become political actors in a society which previously did not allow them to have a public and political role, or why only a few members of Chechen society have become suicide terrorists.

As mentioned above, 1995 was the first time Chechen fighters used terrorism against a civilian population to force the Russian state to negotiate with the Chechens. The August 1999 Moscow apartment bombings were the first use of bombings against civilians committed by Chechens, or at least reportedly committed by Chechens. At the time, there was much discussion and even some evidence that the Russian government perpetrated the Moscow apartment bombings to justify a second invasion of Chechnya to divert attention away from the the criticism of the government's corruption. June 2000 witnessed the first time a Chechen woman blew herself up in the name of the Chechen nationalist cause, which also was the first use of suicide terrorism in the Chechen conflict. Since then, more than sixty Chechen women have participated in suicide terrorist attacks, including eighteen **of the forty-one terrorists that took over**

the Dubrovka Theater in which hundreds of civilians and several terrorists died, and between two and four of the thirty-two terrorists responsible for the September 2004 hostage-taking in Beslan, North Ossetia, Russia, in which hundreds of civilians, including many children, died.

#### Gender/Feminist Analysis and Chechen Women

The two Chechen wars disrupted Chechen women's lives through the absence of men, which cast them into a new space, one held traditionally by men, resulting in the breakdown of the public/private, political/nonpolitical dichotomy. Reuter (2004) aptly discusses this idea, "the war in Chechnya has profoundly changed the role of women in Chechnya, and due in large part to this fact, females comprise a shocking majority of Chechen suicide bombers" (2). Until 2000, women's participation in the Chechen insurgency was limited to auxiliary roles, such as supplying "medical aid, food and water to the men; they carried weapons and ammunition across enemy territory and played an important role in maintaining the guerrillas' morale during battles" (Bloom 2005, 154). That is, indirectly political expressions rather than directly political expressions. It could be that serving such auxiliary roles was a training ground of sorts for some Chechen women who eventually became suicide bombers insofar as providing a channel for politicization. However, not most or all of the "Black Widows" were members of the Chechen insurgency prior to blowing themselves up.

| **The phenomenon of women** becoming political actors as a result of their



One of the most famous examples is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who have effectively protested against the Argentine government to release



These women were seemingly unlikely political activists in that, for the most part, they understood politics to be a male-dominated arena and therefore an unsavory place for women to participate (Bouvard 1994). However, driven by grief and anger toward the government, these women were politicized by their own experiences:

The Mothers' profound inner transformation fueled their political activism and led them to analyze their situations through new lenses. Because they had no previous political education or affiliation, the analyses they made came out of their own experience. They found a similar thread in their stories, perceiving a pattern of lies and deception on the part of the government... (Bouvard 1994, 175).

Mason (1992) analyzes women's participation in the revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua and El Salvador and argues that women were active participants in combat positions, and politicized due to socio-economic changes that placed women in activist roles out of necessity which had previously been occupied by men, but were open to rural, nonelite women precisely because men were absent. Moreover, women became activists to address local and immediate economic problems and facing political repression from the state, by joining insurgent movements.

Since Joan Scott's (1988) groundbreaking work on gender in history, a new generation of researchers has emerged to continue to aid in the paradigmatic shift in



All feminist analysis assumes gender to be a category through which actors experience reality. The major international relations paradigms of Realism, Liberalism/Idealism and Marxism largely ignore women and gender (Enloe 1988, 2000; Pettman, 1996; Sylvester 1994).

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s feminist approaches to the study of international relations and Comparative Politics were effectively marginalized to the fringe of the field; however, with the increasing participation of women and feminist scholars in the field, gender has become a viable category to study. Feminist approaches to the study of war assume that there is a reality of war which exists outside of the conflict zone, which has been largely occupied by women.

In the Chechen case this is mitigated by the fact that these women experienced the two wars outside the conflict in terms of combat, but they also occupied the conflict zone, thereby witnessing the realities of war everyday. Guerrilla wars allow women to experience war in a different way than conventional wars as they collapse the boundaries of the public/private dichotomy by dismantling the gendered idea of the “front” and the rear” (Enloe 1988). Moreover, as O’Gorman (1999) asserts regarding guerrilla wars,

It [the artificiality of space] is also paradoxical in war situations where military tactics involve civilian involvement. This is the case in guerrilla wars, where a daily war of attrition along with counterinsurgent responses involve the development of local supply and intelligence networks that implicate civilians and place them on the frontline (94).

War can also be a transformative experience for women because the additional and thus multiple roles that women play from soldiers to victims and anywhere in between

challenge the existing gender constructions while making no distinction between political and nonpolitical spaces because it,

involves the opening up of roles and categories for women in war to give space and voice to the agency of women even in the most circumscribed of situations. It allows women to bear witness to their own experiences, which may otherwise be ignored, defined as nonpolitical, or individualized to an extent that the lack of a collective manifestation of agency is read as passivity (O’Gorman 1999, 101).

By giving women a voice to bear witness to their experience, a public legitimacy is extended to women and similar experiences among women might be uncovered. Accordingly, despite important differences between individual women, the commonality of life experiences could provide some degree of mutual understanding among women from which a bond might be created, known as a sisterhood (Fox-Genovese 1991). Sisterhoods existed in countless peasant societies, and have been one the focuses of the modern women’s movement in advanced industrial societies as a way to create networks of mutual support and to encourage a new independence for women (Fox Genovese 1991, 12-15). However, gender identification must compete with other important identities such as race/ethnicity, class and clan in the Caucasus, which makes creating sisterhoods difficult. In the Chechen case, clan identifications may be the only identification to separate Chechen women. Valery Tishkov (2004), **an ethnographer and former Nationalities Advisor to President Yeltsin**, examines life in Chechnya during the current war, and finds that there were no special *teip* connections in the creation of armed groups or squads of Chechen fighters (94). While this does not immediately apply to Chechen women, there is no reason to expect them to organize along *teip* lines if the fighters did not.

Given the official Soviet ideology of gender equality, Chechen women may be more emancipated than women in other Muslim societies, however, Sovietization was not as successful in the Caucasus as elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Chechen society is still relatively traditional and patriarchal which constricted the real choices Chechen women had in their lives. After being allowed to return from exile in Kazakstan in 1957 Chechen women may have had the opportunity to attend school and then university, but the traditional cultural norms of female subservience exist today in Chechnya. Family structures still require women to exist in the private sphere and be subservient to males. Speckhard and Akhmedova (2005) argue that Chechen women who became suicide bombers had experienced being pushed out of life's options, by the two wars, that had been open to them previously and began to take on more traditional Islamic dress which had not existed in Chechnya while also taking on previously the male-dominated role of warrior (11). It's not clear if Chechen women *actually* were able to enjoy life's options prior to and during the two wars as Chechen traditions place a premium on women's role as wives and mothers. In contrast, I argue that the experience of war emancipated women because the men were absent from their daily lives and women had to take on the role of providing for their families. So, I argue that the wars actually helped to emancipate the women into becoming political actors.

In addition, Speckhard and Akhmedova (2005) argue from their "psychological post-mortem" from talking with some of the bombers family members and close associates that all of the bombers in their sample had "experienced deep personal traumatization" and they indicate that they are "quite sure that some level of posttraumatic stress disorder and dissociative phenomena as a result of direct personal

traumatization was present in the entire sample” (4). While this is probably the case for at least most of the bombers, it doesn’t explain why only a few Chechens, either men or women, choose to become terrorists, because the entire Chechen population experienced pain, loss, and deprivation during the two wars.

The potential experiences of Chechen women during the two Chechen wars include the absence of men, arbitrary detention, torture, ill treatment and rape, “disappearance”, destruction of their homes and livelihoods, displacement and refugee status, and the loss of families, etc. For example, it is reported that in the video recorded just before her death, Khava Barayeva “pleaded to Chechen men to ‘not take the women’s role by staying at home’” (Dolnik 2005, 2). Rape during war is a relatively common device used to specifically attack women. The experience of rape in this context is two-fold: 1) those committed by Russian troops as part of the campaign, and 2) kidnapping and rape by Chechen fighters. These rapes are sometimes videotaped as a way to humiliate a Chechen woman and making it impossible for her to return to her family, thus making martyrdom seem a blessing. This is one method of *zombification*, which has been widely argued as a main method of recruiting Chechen women to become suicide bombers. Rape is generally an underreported crime in every society, but is likely to be more so in Chechnya given the strict moral codes prescribed for women and the need to remain pure to be marriable as evidenced by Sophie Shihab (2003) in her article for *Le Monde*,

Reports of raped have emerged despite the strong taboo in Chechen culture against revealing instances of sexual assault. Chechnya’s Muslim culture and national traditions strictly regulate relations between men and women, and inappropriate behavior is subject to severe and violent sanctions. Unmarried women who have been raped are unlikely to be able to get married, and married women who are raped are likely to be divorced by their husbands (2).

According to their mother, two of the female terrorists that were involved in the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theater, were raped: “I do not know what happened there [in Russian custody]. When at home, they did not speak about it, they did not tell about it even their mother. But after that arrest hatred gripped them” (Shihab 2003, 3). Groskup (2004a) cites Maria Zhirkova who is a Russian journalist who writes frequently about female terrorists and the status of women: “...It is very difficult for anyone to understand the low position Chechen women hold in their society: their lives are not valued. Rape is a big issue: if a woman is raped and it is filmed, she can be blackmailed into doing anything because it is regarded as a dishonour to her entire family...” (3).

It has also been suggested that some “Black widows” were kidnapped, drugged into a zombie-like state and then raped so that these young women will never be able to return to normal life in Chechnya given the premium placed on virginity for unmarried women (Bloom 2005, 158). It is easy to understand how this might motivate someone who has nothing left to lose by becoming a suicide bomber, but again it doesn’t explain how women who have been raped do not become suicide bombers. An alternative understanding is that this simply another example of how the patriarchal structure of Chechen society constricts women’s choices.

Most of the press covering the “Black Widows” suggests that these women were driven to commit terrorist acts through pain, hatred and deprivation. The Chechen foreign minister, Ilyas Akhmadov, stated at a forum at John Hopkins University that since most of these women had lost families to the war they felt as though they had nothing to live for: “It is easier for some Chechen women to become martyrs than to

bake a loaf of bread” (The Chechen Times, 2004). This might be an overstatement, but it does make the point that without their families to take care of, these women may have felt as though they had no role to occupy, so they created a role for themselves. For example, the lone “Black Widow” in Russian custody, Zarema Muzkakhoyeva, was a mother and a widow, though it’s not clear if she a war-widow, whose life was marred by deprivation and ill-treatment. After her husband’s death (see below), she and her daughter “belonged” to her husband’s family, according to Chechen tradition (Groskup 2004a, 2). She was treated poorly and eventually escaped, surviving by stealing and borrowing money, but her debts became too much and she claims to have been forced into paying back a loan with her life (Groskup 2004a, 2). Illustrating the importance of the role of motherhood and the absence of men, in an article from the 10 July 2003 edition of the *Economist*, Jabrail Gakayev, a Chechen Historian at the Russian Academy of Sciences, states: “It is completely alien to our culture, women only took up arms when the men were killed and they had to protect their children.” In addition, Steven Lee Myers (2003), in an article published in the *New York Times*, cites Imran Yezhiyev, the head of the Society of Chechen-Russian Friendship, regarding the motivation for the suicide attacks as, “an inevitable response to the ‘most crude, the most terrible’ crimes Russian forces have committed against Chechen civilians during the war” (1). While it seems easy to understand how such experiences might motivate someone to want revenge, it still doesn’t explain why women who have experienced such horrors do not become suicide bombers.

In the case of Chechen women, one of the results of the last decade of war has been to force women to occupy positions in both the private and public spheres

previously held by men, simply because of the absence of men. Clara Beyler (2004) asserts that, “while women have been forced by societal changes to become breadwinners, they have also sadly adopted other formerly males roles—including that of suicide terrorist” (4).

All individual women have unique experiences, but as I argue, women share similarities as women due to the gendered power structure in society, especially traditional patriarchal societies with well-defined gender roles such as Chechnya. As marginalized individuals, women are seemingly able to understand and appreciate the experiences of other women. This is to suggest women are more similar than they are different based on their structural position in society.

Some Chechen “Black Widows” seem to have been driven by Islamic Fundamentalism or by the horrors described above. It appears that in the cases of Khava Barayeva, the first Chechen woman to become a suicide bomber, and at least some of the eighteen women who participated in the 2002 Dubrovka Theater hostage-taking, Islamic Fundamentalism, did, in fact, play a role in their motivation. The world was shocked when 22 year-old Barayeva drove into a building which housed Russian soldiers in Chechnya. Her last words **reportedly** were: “I know what I am doing, paradise has a price, and I hope this will be the price for Paradise” (Beyler 2003, 2). Although Barayeva does not make an explicit mention of Islam or Allah, the reference to “Paradise” might be evidence of Islamic Fundamentalism. The Chechen terrorists who took over the Dubrovka Theater on 23 October 2002 made repeated references to Islam and Allah during the fifty-seven hour ordeal, including a banner, referencing Allah. These terrorists included a video tape of themselves explaining their reasons for

the hostage-taking, which had been dropped off at Moscow office earlier in the day on 23 October. The tape includes a group of women terrorists with their faces covered and with one woman saying, “We might as well die here as in Chechnya. Here we will die taking hundreds of unbelievers with us” (cited from Nedkov and Wilson 2003, 112). It is also reported from survivors of this hostage-taking that the terrorists would yell, “Allahu akhbar”, which means “God is great!” I must say that I assume these women were Islamic Fundamentalists, however, it unclear if they had any control over the situation in **the** Dubrovka Theater **hostage-taking** as survivors have suggested that it appeared to them that the men were in charge and **therefore making** the decisions. It has also been suggested that these women appeared to be young and appeared to be desperate, as Irina Filipova, one of the survivors reported: “They would say, ‘My whole family was killed. I have buried all of my children. I live in the forest. I have nowhere to go and nothing to live for’” (Groskop 2004b, 1). Continuing, Filipova states: “The women all had different motives: some were obviously Muslims and maybe it was a divine mission for them. Others, I thought possibly they had been drugged, I don’t know. I thought the younger ones must have been forced. A Chechen friend told me that they must have been raped—which means in Chechnya you can never marry or have children, so you might as well die” (Groskup 2004a, 4). Another survivor, Tamar Starkova expressed some sympathy for the Chechen hostage-takers: “My abiding memory of the Chechen men is of them running around shouting. But the women would say ‘please’ when they asked for something. I related in some small way to the women. One said she had lost her husband and child, and maybe any mother in that position would be capable of that” (Groskup 2004a, 3). Survivors suggest that it

seemed as though the female and male hostage-takers had different roles, specifically that the women had support roles: “There were female terrorists who helped people. They brought medicine, food and water into the theatre. They allowed certain people to go to the toilet without queuing” (Zaucha cited in Groskup 2004a, 4). Zaucha claimed that one hostage stated: “They [female terrorists] were like nuns.” (Cited in Groskup 2004a, 4). In particular, one female terrorists, most likely Aset Gishnurkayeva, is reported to have told hostages that she was involved in the mission “so that our children can grow in peace” (Groskup 2004a, 4). One survivor, Nastya Kruglikova spoke of one woman terrorist by the name of Asya, perhaps Aset Gishnurkayeva: “She [Asya] told us about her life in Chechnya. She was the only one I wasn’t afraid of. She hoped they would give up, that there would be a conversation with the government and it would end well. She said, ‘please don’t worry’. She tried not to frighten us” (Groskup 2004b, 2). To illustrate the complexity of motivations of these women, one survivor, Nastya Kruglikova reported:

There was a grenade laid by a woman between my cousin and my aunt. I asked ‘what is going to happen, are you going to blow us up?’ And she said, “ ‘no, it will be OK. And then she seemed to change her mind and said, ‘well, maybe you will be blown up but at least you won’t know anything about it. You won’t regret it. You don’t know what’s happening in Chechnya. You can’t know what your soldiers have done there to our people. You can’t have any idea how terrible our lives are.’ She said she had a child she had left behind, that God would look after him. Some of them started crying. They looked around 16 (Groskup 2004b, 2).

In contrast, one terrorist, Zura Barayova, is reported to have seemed as ease with what was going on in the theater. Filipova said,

She seemed very normal. She hid her feelings behind a mask of courtesy. She seemed to take pleasure that she was in this situation, that people were listening to her and wanting to talk to her, that she was in control. She would ask people

if they had children. She would always say, ‘Everything will be fine. It will finish peacefully’. She took off her bomb belt and carried it over her shoulder, all very relaxed (Groskup 23004b, 2).

I have been able to identify nine of the eighteen (or nineteen) female terrorists, who participated in the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theater. Of the nine, only three were documented widows, though it is unclear if they were war widows. Moreover, two others were reportedly taken in custody by the Russian forces and raped. I believe these two women to be Fatima and Khadzhad Ganiyeva, however all I know for certain from the story discussed above regarding rape is that of two sisters and the only sisters I have documented as participants are the Ganiyeva sisters. For the other five women, I could not find any information about their lives to suggest a revenge motive beyond wanting to bring the war to the Russia.

Evidence seems to indicate that only one of the “Black Widows” actually chose to become a suicide bomber to directly avenge the death of a male family member, who is Luisa Gazueva. She reportedly approached Geidar Gadzhiev, the Russian commander in Chechnya, who is reported to have killed her husband with his own hands about which he **mocked** her (Abdullaev, 1). The following exchange was reported by witnesses: She asked, “ ‘Do recognize me?’”, To which the commander said something like, ‘I have no time to talk to you’” (“Memorial”, 1).

Aside from the two examples discussed above, there is no evidence that the majority of Chechen female suicide bombers were motivated by Islamic Fundamentalism or direct personal revenge. Perhaps they adapted the specific experiences of other Chechen women to their own, as all Chechen women have experienced extreme loss and deprivation. In fact, some do not seem to fit this sort of profile at all, suggesting that there is not a profile of a female suicide bomber. As W.

Andy Knight and Tanya Narozhna (2004), assert, “Among Chechen suicide bombers only two women became widows after 40; seven women were aged from 25-35; others were 15 to 16 years old. Some were widows, others never married; some had professional careers, others were unemployed and poor” (2). For example, Zulikhan Elikhundzhiyeva, the suicide bomber who blew herself up at a music festival in Moscow in July 2003, was not a widow and seemingly had a promising future in Chechnya as she was studying medicine (Myers 2003). Continuing, her neighbor reportedly characterized Elikhundzhiyeva in the following manner: “She studied. She was a cultured girl, a modern girl. She could not have had anything like this in her mind” (Myers 2003). Her family has claimed that she was kidnapped by her half-brother (Groskup 2004a, 3). Likewise, Zarema Muzhikhoyeva, the suicide bomber who unsuccessfully tried to detonate a bomb in a Moscow café in July 2003, was not motivated as a widow of the Russian-Chechen conflict because her husband was reportedly killed at a checkpoint by **the** Ingush police, in a business dispute unrelated to the war, or in a car accident, **but** not in combat against Russian forces (Myers 2003).

It is possible **that** during the wars and between them, Chechen women spent time in physically close proximity to other women without men, except little boys and old men, which could reinforce gender identification and create some kind of sisterhood through the sharing of personal experiences which would likely have revolved around their families. While this is speculation, it is not illogical to assume that women can adapt other women’s experiences to their own lives insofar as being able to imagine themselves in that same position. One only has to look as far as organizations that act as support groups as well as advocacy groups for victims of rape, sexual violence and

domestic violence. While some of the participants in such groups have had a personal experience with this type of violence, most have not, but have experienced situations in which they **may** have felt or been powerless and can potentially imagine what it would be like to experience such a violation, therefore having some understanding of other

women. That is, the bond of gender can be a very strong one, especially if significant



Differences in *teip* membership might play a divisive role among Chechen women, but Chechen women in the same *teip* could form a bond.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to begin the process of uncovering the experiences of Chechen women during the last ten years in order to gain some insight into the context within which some Chechen women chose to become suicide bombers. These women became explicit political actors through several years of deprivation and their experience of the two wars. The content of their experience as women who were largely non-combatants, but still experienced the war physically as they were living in the conflict zone and psychologically insofar as maintaining their families during war with the absence of men, contributed to the context within which Chechen women made their decisions. These women made their private experience a public expression through their self-sacrifice, thereby breaking down the public/private and political/nonpolitical dichotomy. While expressing anger and hatred toward the Russian state, these women occupied a new and previously male-held role of suicide bomber.

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