

Protection Denied: State and Institutional Pressure on Women Survivors of Domestic Violence



This report analyzes the systemic use of coercive and administrative-legal resources against women and girls who have experienced domestic violence in Russia. The study is based on seventy-five women's rights cases, as well as expert interviews with lawyers, attorneys, crisis centers' staff, and specialists working with women affected by violence. The majority of the cases analyzed below involve the North Caucasus region, mainly Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.

The findings of this study show that state structures tasked with protecting women from domestic violence often become accomplices in their persecution or contribute to it through inaction, fabrication of charges, transfer of women or girls to relatives after escape, disregard for threats to their lives, and failure to enforce court decisions. Across all cases, we observe a form of privatization of state structures, whereby the police, investigative bodies, and courts are used to serve the interests of private individuals, transforming state institutions into instruments of patriarchal control. Under these conditions, women are effectively deprived of the possibility of obtaining effective protection within the country. Their safety often depends on support from human rights defenders or on the possibility of leaving the country.

This problem is most acute in several republics of the North Caucasus, where family, religious, and state structures are closely intertwined. Police, investigative bodies, courts, guardianship authorities, the muftiate, and women's relatives often act jointly, as a single mechanism. The influence of kinship ties and local social practices becomes a key factor determining a woman's fate. Typically, persecution takes the following forms: declaring women wanted on fabricated charges; subjecting them to surveillance and unlawful detention; forcibly returning them to their families and to situations involving violence; intruding directly into shelters; removing children; failing to enforce court decisions; exerting psychological and moral pressure; engaging in intimidation; and ensuring impunity for the aggressor. The report examines situations in which women and girls fled forced marriages, systematic beatings and torture, threats of so-called "honor killings," and unlawful loss of custody over their children.

The report pays particular attention to discriminatory and violent practices of pressure against women in custody cases. In Chechnya, Ingushetia, and to a lesser extent Dagestan, a prevailing social norm continues to dictate that children stay with their father after divorce. As a result, courts, bailiff services, and guardianship authorities systematically side with fathers, disregarding the interests of the mother and the child. Even when courts rule in the mother's favor, inaction by bailiffs deprives women of the ability to realize their right to raise their children, and often even of the right to contact and communicate with them. In a number of cases, men used their connections within law enforcement agencies to initiate criminal cases, unlawful detention, or serious threats against the mothers of their children. The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly pointed to the discriminatory nature of such practices.

At the same time, pressure against human rights defenders, lawyers, and shelter staff is increasing. They also face threats, surveillance, and the risk of criminal prosecution. This is especially true for those who assist women from the North Caucasus region. Such assistance is perceived by the families of aggressors—and in Chechnya, by local authorities as well—as unlawful interference in private life and the existing traditional order, rendering human rights work in the region extremely dangerous and undermining effective protection for women subjected to domestic violence and discriminatory practices.

All these trends are unfolding against the backdrop of a state policy promoting 'traditional values,' which seeks to strengthen reproductive control, decriminalize battery, preserve the absence of a domestic violence law, and withdraw from international obligations in the field of women's rights protection.

The study underscores the need for urgent, systemic action to address the identified problems. Priority measures include ending the practice of forcibly returning women to dangerous environments; ensuring the effective enforcement of court decisions in custody cases; limiting interference by religious institutions; implementing judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in domestic violence cases; and protecting human rights defenders working with women affected by violence.

In the absence of a comprehensive approach and political will, these violations are likely to increase, particularly as military personnel and mobilized individuals return from combat zones, while women's capacity for self-protection continues to decline.

Introduction

Domestic violence remains one of the most acute and systematically overlooked human rights violations today. It is not a private, isolated issue, but a structural phenomenon rooted in gender discrimination and violence, perpetuated by social norms, cultural attitudes, and the inaction of state institutions.

According to estimates by UN Women, one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in her lifetime, most often at the hands of an intimate partner.¹ Thus, domestic violence is not an exception but an everyday reality for millions of women. This phenomenon exists in all societies, regardless of their level of development, political system, or cultural differences.

According to international studies, the cumulative economic losses from domestic violence comprise up to 5.5% of global GDP, which is equivalent to approximately 4.7 trillion US dollars annually. In terms of scale, violence against women costs states more than terrorism and armed conflicts combined.²

Domestic violence entails severe and long-term consequences for the physical and mental health of survivors, reduces their economic independence, and undermines their sense of security, dignity, and trust in state institutions. Moreover, it is transmitted across generations: children who grow up in an atmosphere of violence face an increased risk of psychological trauma, chronic illness, and ongoing cycles of violence in adulthood.³

When violence has become normalized, and state structures respond inadequately - they refuse to intervene, or sometimes even become complicit in exerting pressure, - monitoring and raising public awareness of the problem become particularly important.

This report analyzes the use of coercive and administrative-legal tools to exert pressure on or control women and those who support them. Our objective was to identify and describe recurring patterns of such pressure, and to demonstrate how political beliefs and the socio-cultural environment contribute to the perpetuation of these practices. The study draws on cases handled by human rights organizations, including lawyers from Ad Rem, as well as interviews with other lawyers, attorneys, and activists, who support women affected by violence. Together, these materials allow us to understand domestic violence not as an isolated personal conflict, but as a form of structural violence embedded within the institutional and social mechanisms of contemporary Russian society.

Methodology

This report is based on a qualitative analysis of 75 cases handled by the Ad Rem team, as well as cases shared with us by partner human rights organizations and activists working with women affected by domestic violence and persecution. For the purposes of this study, "cases" are defined as documented accounts of specific episodes of coercive and/or administrative-legal pressure against women, supported

¹ UN Women. (2025). *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

² Every Woman. (2020). *Safer sooner*. <https://everywoman.org/safer-sooner-report/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³ Antonova, Y. A., & Ayrapetyan, I. K. (2023). *Problema pokhishcheniia rebenka/detei u materi na primere Respubliki Dagestan, Respubliki Ingushetiia i Chechenskoj Respubliki* [The problem of child/children abduction from mothers: The cases of the Republic of Dagestan, the Republic of Ingushetia, and the Chechen Republic]. *Ad Rem*. <https://adrem.help/pdf/kidnapping/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

Antonova, Y. A., & Ayrapetyan, I. K. (2024). "Iyrvannye iz detstva". *Nasil'stvennoe razluchenie rebenka s mater'iu* ["Torn from childhood": The violent separation of a child from their mother]. *Ad Rem*. <https://adrem.help/pdf/kidnapping2/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

by documentary evidence, including court decisions, police reports, petitions and motions submitted to various institutions, and decisions of international bodies.

This study uses the term coercive pressure to refer to actions carried out by structures vested with the authority to enforce control or compulsion. These include law enforcement and security agencies such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Guard, the Federal Security Service, the Prosecutor’s Office, the Investigative Committee, and private security services.

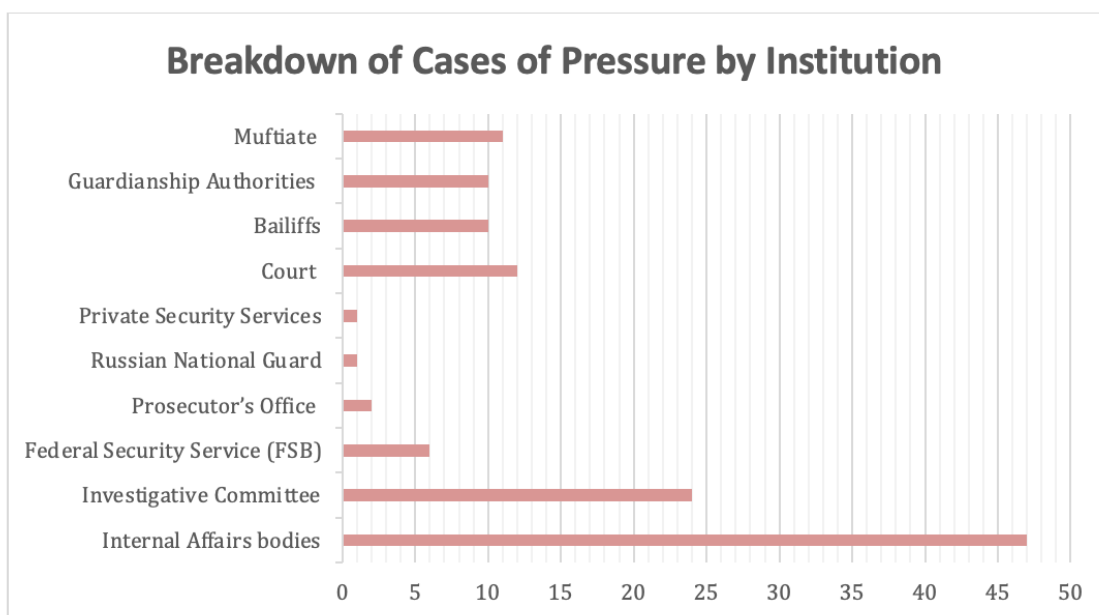
Administrative-legal pressure refers to the use of judicial, religious, and administrative authorities to discriminate against and restrict women’s rights. This includes both intervention and inaction by courts, guardianship authorities, the bailiff service, and the muftiate (Islamic religious authority). Notably, in the cases we analyzed, combined mechanisms of pressure are often observed - where coercive agencies and administrative-legal institutions work together to exert control over women and girls, forcing them back into dependent and dangerous situations.

The cases provided to us span the period from 2018 to 2025. While we did not initially intend to focus exclusively on the North Caucasus, the empirical data revealed that the majority of cases originate from this region. Of the total 75 cases, 46 pertain to the Chechen Republic, 13 to Ingushetia, 12 to Dagestan, 1 to North Ossetia, and only 3 to other regions of Russia.

This distribution can be explained by several factors. First, systemic problems are especially pronounced in regions where state structures are closely intertwined with informal social institutions, face less oversight, and enjoy greater autonomy - making them easier to subvert for personal purposes. Second, in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, social norms in family matters often prioritize customary law (adat) over Russian legislation. Adat discriminates against women in child custody issues, leading to severe family conflicts when women seek to raise their children independently after divorce. Third, several women’s organizations actively operate in the North Caucasus, carefully documenting violations, and they were willing to share their findings with the Ad Rem team.

The cases can be categorized according to the nature of the situation as follows:

- 50 cases involve women who experienced domestic violence inflicted by their husbands and/or their relatives and attempted to obtain custody of their children after divorce;
- 23 cases involve girls and young women who were subjected to violence by parents or other relatives;
- 2 cases involve the persecution of young women for feminist or other views.



The majority of incidents of pressure (summons to police stations, informal threats against women and their relatives, inaction) and persecution (violent detentions, fabricated criminal cases, placement

on wanted lists, surveillance) is associated with the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation (47 out of 75 cases), confirming their key role in the system of control and coercion over women. The Investigative Committee ranks second (24 cases); it is often used to initiate criminal proceedings against women or their relatives. Among administrative structures, courts, guardianship authorities, and the muftiate are mentioned most frequently, each in approximately ten cases, suggesting the systemic involvement of these institutions in exerting pressure.

The cases were provided by human rights defenders who worked directly with the affected women. For security reasons, all cases referenced in this report are presented in anonymized form, without indicating names, places of residence, or other identifying details. Direct interviews with women and girls who experienced violence or pressure were not conducted as part of this study due to safety considerations. Many of them remain in vulnerable situations, are forced to hide from their abusers, and public exposure could cause them harm. To confirm the identified patterns and verify the information, interviews were conducted with human rights defenders and lawyers who worked directly with these women and had detailed knowledge of their circumstances. Additionally, some cases similar to those analyzed in this report have been published in the media, further confirming the observed trends.

While some of the cases examined here have been previously documented in human rights materials, this study is the first to systematically analyze them with the goal of identifying recurring patterns of pressure exerted by law enforcement and administrative structures, and to demonstrate how these mechanisms interact in the context of violence against women and the restriction of their rights.

CHAPTER 1. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN RUSSIA: THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM, LEGAL GAPS, AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF COERCIVE POWER

According to the results of a 2025 domestic violence survey conducted by the VCIOM center (Russian Public Opinion Research Center), one in ten respondents in Russia reports that conflicts in their family escalate into physical violence.⁴ Women and young people speak about the problem more often than men - they have either personally experienced violence or know someone in their close circle who has. As of early 2025, according to Rosstat (Federal State Statistics Center), Russia had approximately 146 million residents.⁵ If we extrapolate this statistic to the entire population of the Russian Federation, around 14 million people in Russia directly experience violence within their families.

According to data from an independent online survey conducted in 2021 (the most recent large-scale survey to date), the share of women who experienced physical violence by a partner was 38.2%.⁶ This figure exceeds the 30% average reported worldwide and in Europe.⁷

According to the independent project Algorithm of Light, in 2022 and 2023 alone, out of 3,436 documented cases of murdered women, 2,284 died as a result of domestic violence, and the majority of them - 2,123 women or 93% - were killed by their partners.⁸

There are no unified statistics on domestic violence cases in Russia. The absence of a legal definition of the phenomenon itself makes it impossible to adequately record such cases in official statistics. Relying solely on fragmented data from law enforcement agencies, medical institutions, or social services is insufficient to assess the true scale of violence. Many cases remain outside the scope of these institutions and are not reflected in their reports.⁹ Firstly, the majority of victims do not seek help from the police; on

⁴ Smak, T. (2025, September 25). *Semeinye тайны: Monitoring* [Family secrets: Monitoring]. VCIOM. <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/semeinye-tainy-monitoring>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁵ Interfax. (2025, January 31). *Chislennost' naseleniia Rossii k nachalu 2025 goda snizilas' do 146,028 mln chelovek* [Russia's population declined to 146.028 million by the beginning of 2025]. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1005747>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶ Kamalov, E., & Sergeeva, I. (2023). *Partnerskoe nasilie v Rossii: Rezul'taty serii oprosov* [Intimate partner violence in Russia: Results of a survey series]. Violence Monitor. https://www.violencemonitor.org/report_2023. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2024). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova (A/HRC/57/59)*. <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/HRC/57/59>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸ Algoritm Sveta. (2023). *Masshtaby domashnego nasiliia v Rossii za 2022–2023 gody* [The scale of domestic violence in Russia in 2022–2023]. <https://algoritmsveta.com/алгоритм-света-2022-2023/>

⁹ Kamalov, E., & Sergeeva, I. (2023). *Partnerskoe nasilie v Rossii: Rezul'taty serii oprosov* [Intimate partner violence in

average, only 10% of survivors do so.¹⁰ Secondly, even those who do seek help from the police may not be included in official departmental statistics. Frequently, police simply refuse to respond to women's reports of violence.¹¹

1. Legal Framework and Law Enforcement Practices

In Russia, the state system for responding to domestic violence remains ineffective. The country has no domestic violence legislation. Attempts by civic movements, human rights defenders, and some politicians to advance such legislation have yielded no tangible results, and most draft bills have been frozen under pressure from proponents of ultra-conservative values.¹²

At the same time, the existing criminal law framework is poorly adapted to protecting women from violence within the family. Physical violence is regulated by general provisions on crimes against the person (Articles 105–115 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Public prosecution is possible only in cases of murder or grievous bodily harm leading to prolonged deterioration of health, disability, or incapacity for a period of at least 21 days. Minor bodily harm and many battery cases fall under private prosecution. This means that the survivor must independently gather evidence, establish the perpetrator's identity, and maintain the accusation in court. In the context of domestic violence, the private prosecution procedure for cases involving minor bodily harm (Part 1 of Article 115 of the Criminal Code) provides inadequate protection to victims, as such proceedings require time and resources from the victim and cannot prevent the recurrence of similar incidents. The private prosecution procedure places an excessive burden on the survivor, shifting onto her the responsibility for gathering evidence of the perpetrator's guilt in accordance with the criminal standard of proof and defending the charges in court. Prolonged delays in private prosecution proceedings and the significantly lower likelihood of conviction undermine victims' access to justice.

This problem became even more pronounced after the adoption of the law decriminalizing battery in February 2017. Under this law “battery or other violent acts causing physical pain but not resulting in the consequences specified in Article 115 of the Criminal Code,” when committed against family members or other close persons, were reclassified from criminal offenses to administrative violations.¹³ As a result, only repeat offenses entail criminal punishment. This effectively removed a significant number of domestic violence cases from the scope of criminal law, creating a legal vacuum and reinforcing aggressors' sense of impunity. In practice, this means that even systematic violence within the family is treated by the state as a minor offense, for which a woman must pursue justice on her own.

By the end of 2017, the number of reports of domestic violence submitted to the police and other state institutions had fallen by half, while the number of appeals to organizations providing support to women had increased by 35%.¹⁴ This shift reflects a lack of trust in state institutions in cases involving violence, as well as the police's failure to respond to women's reports.

In December 2017, ten months after the amendments were adopted, the widely publicized case of Margarita Gracheva occurred. Despite the fact that she had filed a police report stating that her husband was threatening her, the district police officer did not initiate an inquiry and refused to open a criminal

Russia: Results of a survey series]. Violence Monitor. https://www.violencemonitor.org/report_2023. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch. (2018). “*I could kill you and no one would stop me*”: Weak state response to domestic violence in Russia. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/25/i-could-kill-you-and-no-one-would-stop-me/weak-state-response-domestic-violence>, Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹¹ Kozkina, A. (2017, August 2). “*I zachem im muchit'sia, esli eto ni na chto ne vliiaet?*” Pochemu uchastkovye ne reagiruiut na zaiavleniia o domashnem nasilii [“Why suffer if it changes nothing?” Why local police officers do not respond to domestic violence reports]. *Mediazona*. <https://zona.media/article/2017/08/02/ot-slova-uchastiye>, Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹² Verstka. (2024). “*Vvedeno okonchatel'noe veto*”: Kreml' poobeshchal RPTs ne prinimat' zakon o domashnem nasilii [“A final veto has been imposed”: The Kremlin promised the Russian Orthodox Church not to adopt a domestic violence law]. <https://verstka.media/rpc-i-zakon-o-domashnem-nasilii>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹³ Russian Federation. (2017, February 7). *O vnesenii izmeneniia v stat'iu 116 Ugolovnogo kodeksa Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [On amendments to Article 116 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation] (Federal Law No. 8-FZ). <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/view/0001201702070049?index=1>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹⁴ Spring, M. (2018, August 16). *Decriminalisation of domestic violence in Russia leads to fall in reported cases*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/16/decriminalisation-of-domestic-violence-in-russia-leads-to-fall-in-reported-cases>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

case. A few days later, her husband cut off her hands.¹⁵ A year earlier, Yana Savchuk, a resident of Oryol, encountered similar police inaction; her story ended even more tragically - her former partner attacked her in the street near her home, and she died from her injuries. The day before, she had called the police. Officers responded to the call but took no measures against the aggressor.¹⁶

Certain criminal offenses, such as torture (Article 117 of the Criminal Code) or threats of murder or grievous bodily harm (Article 119 of the Criminal Code), could theoretically be applied in domestic violence cases. However, they are used rarely and primarily in the most extreme situations, when prolonged abuse or an obvious threat to life is involved. At the same time, an entire range of typical acts of domestic violence - stalking, total control, humiliation, economic abuse, threats to take away children or leave a woman without housing - do not constitute independent criminal offenses under Russian law. In Margarita Gracheva's case, for example, numerous episodes of controlling and coercive behavior by her husband did not serve as grounds for police intervention until he escalated to an extreme form of physical violence.

A similar situation exists in cases of sexual violence. Formally, Russian legislation makes no exceptions for violence committed by a spouse or partner. Rape and other violent sexual acts within marriage are as illegal as those committed outside it. In practice, however, women who report sexual violence in relationships almost inevitably encounter distrust from investigators and demands to prove the use of brute physical force, explicit threats, or a state of complete helplessness. Cases in which sexual contact is imposed through psychological pressure, blackmail, dependency, or fear of another beating often fall outside the scope of criminal law. Even the specific provision on coercion into sexual acts through the use of material or other dependency (Article 133 of the Criminal Code) is, in reality, extremely rarely applied and fails to cover a wide range of situations women face in the context of domestic violence.

As a result, the police face significant difficulty in initiating criminal cases based on complaints filed by women. In the majority of cases, even if opened, criminal proceedings are terminated at the preliminary investigation stage and never reach a court.¹⁷

Investigators and law enforcement officers largely hold ... gender stereotypes. They do not undergo adequate training on the specific nature of domestic violence cases. Moreover, the existing legislation does not take into account the specific features of domestic violence - its cyclical nature, the dependency between partners, and the wide range of coercive mechanisms an aggressor may use. In this situation, some police officers continue to treat episodes of domestic violence as domestic disputes that will "resolve themselves." Others, however, acknowledge the seriousness of the situation but lack sufficient legal tools to intervene effectively and protect the victim. Amid this, a persistent assumption endures that complaints may be withdrawn and cases stalled, which is seen as an unjustified burden and diminishes their motivation to act. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women's cases, Moscow, May 2025.)

Domestic violence is often perceived by law enforcement officers as a private family matter in which intervention is undesirable. Work on such cases requires a great deal of time and concentration, yet cases rarely reach court, and penalties imposed on perpetrators are minimal. This situation significantly undermines the motivation of law enforcement officers:

Domestic cases are not a priority for them. Accordingly, why spend time and make an effort... More experienced district officers say... what is the point of spending half a year collecting all this paperwork if, in the end, the fine is smaller than a parking ticket? And, in essence, these words discourage women from filing complaints - nothing will happen to him anyway; at most, there will

¹⁵ Rogoza, A., & Araslanov, A. (2018). Rita Gracheva, kotoroi muzh otrubil ruki: "Seichas on, naverno, zhaleet, chto ne ubil menia" [Rita Gracheva, whose husband cut off her hands: "Now he probably regrets not killing me"]. *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26908/3953884/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹⁶ Kozkina, A. (2017, August 2). "I zachem im muchit'sia, esli eto ni na chto ne vliiaet?" Pochemu uchastkovye ne reagiruiut na zaiavleniia o domashnem nasilii ["Why suffer if it changes nothing?" Why local police officers do not respond to domestic violence reports]. *Mediazona*. <https://zona.media/article/2017/08/02/ot-slova-uchastiye>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch. (2018). "I could kill you and no one would stop me": Weak state response to domestic violence in Russia. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/25/i-could-kill-you-and-no-one-would-stop-me/weak-state-response-domestic-violence>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

be a fine; you will be dragged through the trial; your husband will have a criminal record; your children will not be admitted anywhere... In 90% of cases, even with good police work, this is an absolutely inadequate punishment, and there are no protective measures for the victim. They all understand perfectly well that, afterward, in 90% of cases, the situation will repeat itself. None of them are trained to act under these conditions, and none of them have any mechanism they could use. (Interview with Mari Davtyan, attorney specializing in women's cases, September 2025.)

2. International Standards

The tendency of law enforcement authorities to refuse initiating the necessary measures to prevent domestic violence gained international attention in July 2019, when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) delivered its judgment in *Volodina v. Russia*,¹⁸ noting not only violations of the applicant's rights but also "the Russian authorities' refusal to acknowledge the gravity and scale of the domestic violence problem and its discriminatory effect on women."¹⁹ The Court found that the state had failed to take timely and adequate measures to protect the woman from threats and violence by her former partner. In a subsequent judgment, *Volodina v. Russia (no. 2)* (No. 40419/19, 2021), the Court additionally examined elements of digital violence, including the use of GPS tracking, hacking and monitoring of electronic correspondence, and the unauthorized dissemination of intimate photographs, and qualified these actions as a violation of Article 8, "Right to respect for private and family life."

In another landmark judgment, *Tunikova and Others v. Russia* (No. 55974/16 et al., 2021), the Court found that the Russian authorities had failed to provide the applicants with effective protection from violence by their partners, had not assessed the risk of repeated violence, and had not conducted an adequate investigation. The ECHR pointed to the absence in Russia of a necessary legal framework enabling the prevention, suppression, and investigation of domestic violence. In particular, the Court stated: "The existing legal framework in Russia does not provide adequate protection against domestic violence" (Paragraph 138); "The authorities have not created and do not apply a legal framework that would allow them to take preventive measures, promptly and effectively investigate allegations of domestic violence, and hold perpetrators accountable" (Paragraph 139); and "These shortcomings indicate a systemic problem requiring urgent legislative reform" (Paragraph 142). The Court found violations of Article 3 (prohibiting inhuman or degrading treatment) and Article 14 (prohibiting discrimination), emphasizing that domestic violence predominantly affects women and that the lack of protection has a discriminatory character.

Despite these ECHR rulings, the Russian authorities have not taken systemic steps to eliminate the identified structural problems. Criminal and administrative policies that are supposed to protect women from violence remain ineffective. Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe in 2022²⁰ significantly limited international oversight mechanisms and led to the termination of its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights as of 16 September 2022, except for its responsibility for violations committed before that date. The Court continues its review of applications relating to the period before 16 September 2022; these will be analyzed in Chapter Two.

The ECHR rulings constitute an important recognition of the systemic nature of the problem; however, they represent only part of Russia's international obligations related to protecting women from violence. Russia remains bound by a number of international agreements that treat domestic violence as a human rights violation and a form of discrimination.

Russia has joined international agreements that establish a robust legal framework for the protection of women from violence. All the more striking, therefore, is the gap between the accepted obligations and implementation in practice.

¹⁸ European Court of Human Rights. (2019, July 9). *Volodina v. Russia* (Application No. 41261/17). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-194321%22%5D%7D>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

¹⁹ Gorbunova, Y. (2019, July 29). *The chilling inaction on domestic violence in Russia is endangering women's lives*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/29/chilling-inaction-domestic-violence-russia-endangering-womens-lives>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

²⁰ Council of Europe. (2022). *General'nyi sekretar': milliony rossian bol'she ne nakhodiatsia pod zashchitoi Evropeiskoi konventsii o pravakh cheloveka* [Secretary General: Millions of Russians are no longer protected by the European Convention on Human Rights]. <https://www.coe.int/ru/web/portal/-/secretary-general-millions-of-russians-no-longer-protected-by-the-european-convention-on-human-rights>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set the global agenda for preventing violence against women and eliminating discrimination. States recognized that gender-based violence affects all spheres of life and requires systemic measures, ranging from legislative change to the transformation of social norms. Russia supported these approaches and later ratified several key United Nations conventions on women's rights.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Russia, explicitly treats gender-based violence, including domestic violence, as a form of discrimination. In General Recommendation No. 19 (1992), and subsequently in the updated General Recommendation No. 35 (2017), the CEDAW Committee characterized gender-based violence, including domestic violence, as a form of discrimination. States must exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, and suppress violence against women. In its decision in *T. v. Russia* (CEDAW/C/75/D/119/2017), the Committee for the first time found Russia responsible for violating the rights of a woman affected by domestic violence, noting the absence of effective legal protection and response mechanisms.

The UN Human Rights Committee follows similar logic in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In General Comment No. 28 to Article 3 of the Covenant, the Committee emphasizes that violence against women, including domestic and sexualized violence, simultaneously undermines several rights: the right to equality; the right to freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; the right to privacy; and the right to freely enter into marriage.

The state's obligation in this context is not limited to officially prohibiting torture. The state must also intervene when violence is committed by husbands, relatives, or religious leaders, including by removing legal and cultural barriers that prevent women from enjoying their rights on an equal basis.

“The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment”, which Russia has also ratified, places responsibility on the state to prevent cruelty not only by its own agents but also by private individuals, where the authorities knew or should have known of the risk and failed to take adequate measures. In its General Comment No. 2 (CAT/C/GC/2), the Committee against Torture explicitly extended this obligation to the context of domestic violence. Systematic inaction in such cases is regarded as a failure to comply with obligations under the Convention.

Even though Russia remains a party to important international treaties directly obligating the state to protect women from violence and eliminate its structural causes, their mechanisms have not been integrated into the national legal system. Against this backdrop, the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention is particularly striking. This key international document treats violence against women as a human rights violation and establishes legally binding mechanisms for its prevention and punishment. The Convention has been open for signatures since 2011. The signature shows a state's intention to participate in the process; however, legal obligations arise only after the Convention is ratified and entered into force. In that case, states are required to bring national legislation into compliance with the Convention's requirements and to provide the necessary information for monitoring the fulfillment of these obligations.

The Convention provides for a comprehensive set of measures to ensure effective assistance to survivors, including the training of specialists to facilitate access to medical and social services, as well as establishing shelters and support hotlines.²¹ States are obliged to criminalize stalking, punish sexualized violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment. Article 42 of the Convention explicitly prohibits the use of culture, religion, traditions, or the argument of “honor” as justification for violence; references to an alleged violation of behavioral norms by the victim may not mitigate the perpetrator's responsibility.²²

The absence of ratification releases the state from obligations to implement a comprehensive system of violence prevention and survivor support, directly influencing the effectiveness of protecting women and ensuring gender equality.

International mechanisms set clear requirements for states: to prevent violence, ensure protection, and conduct effective investigations. However, actual law enforcement practices in Russia demonstrate a different dynamic. Instead of acting as a guarantor of safety, coercive structures may be used in private

²¹ Lomazzi, V. (2023). *The cultural roots of violence against women: Individual and institutional gender norms in 12 countries*. *Social Sciences*, 12, 117. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030117>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

²² Lomazzi, V. (2023) cont.

interests to exert control over and commit violence against women. This leads to a form of “privatization” of coercive power, in which the police and investigative bodies can be instrumentalized to resolve personal matters through connections, influence, and, at times, simple male solidarity.

3. “Privatization” of Coercive Power

The historical evolution of law enforcement and security agencies in Russia helps explain why today they can function not as instruments of protection, but as tools of suppression and control - not only over political opponents, but also over ordinary citizens, including one of the most vulnerable groups - women. In the Soviet era, control over the security agencies – including the army, state security bodies, and internal affairs agencies - was built on the principle of strict centralization, with power concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party.²³ Law enforcement agencies functioned primarily as elements of political governance rather than as guarantors of citizens’ safety. After the collapse of the USSR, reforms of these structures were expected to result in decentralization and civilian oversight; however, the creation of numerous agencies with overlapping mandates contributed to the emergence of a system in which institutions competed with one another. Gradually, they began to increasingly serve the interests of specific influence groups.²⁴ Various forms of coercive partnerships emerged, bringing together representatives of law enforcement agencies, private security companies, officials, and criminal groups. The so-called *krysha* (“protection”) became a tool for the selective use of violence and law enforcement in the interests of particular individuals and/or groups.²⁵



In *The Privatization of the Police* by L. Gudkov and B. Dubin, half of the surveyed police officers stated that law enforcement agencies had turned into a private, corporate, or clan-based police force. When asked, “Whom does the police protect?”, only 59% of officers replied that they protect all citizens equally. At the same time, 26% said the police protect those in power, and another 25% said they protect those

²³ Volkov, V. (2012). *Privatizatsiia silovykh vedomstv* [The privatization of coercive agencies]. *Istoriia novoi Rossii*. <http://ru-90.ru/content/волков-в-приватизация-силовых-ведомств>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

²⁴ Volkov, V. (2012) cont.

²⁵ Volkov, V. V. (2020). *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo, XXI vek: Ekonomiko-sotsiologicheskii analiz* [Violent entrepreneurship in the 21st century: An economic-sociological analysis]. European University at St. Petersburg.

who have money. According to respondents, experienced and qualified employees of district police departments and investigative units are more inclined to abuse their authority or misuse their official position, and resort to corruption more frequently.²⁶ This situation has direct consequences, namely the selective application of the law and the erosion of the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.

This primarily affects vulnerable groups, including women experiencing violence. Although Russian legislation formally provides for the possibility of contacting the police, obtaining protection, and having crimes investigated, in practice, this right is seldom fully realized. Women often encounter situations in which their reports to the police are ignored, complaints about violence are not registered, and procedural actions are deliberately delayed. Coercive resources are used to pressure human rights defenders and lawyers assisting women; perpetrators pursue women with the acquiescence of local authorities; and in the North Caucasus, law enforcement officers fabricate criminal cases against survivors in order to place them on wanted lists and forcibly return women and children to situations of ongoing domestic violence.

Frequently, the combination of a perpetrator's personal connections within the administrative system and access to coercive resources renders any formal legal measures virtually meaningless, leaving women defenseless. To illustrate the real consequences of these processes, we present a case provided by one of the human rights organizations for the purposes of this study.

Case of I.

(Moscow Region, 2024)

I. left her husband with three children. Her husband, a former Federal Security Service officer, systematically subjected her to physical violence and exercised total control over her, to the point of preventing her from leaving the house. After escaping, she sought refuge at a shelter run by a non-governmental organization, where she received temporary housing and support for herself and her children. Her husband used his connections in law enforcement to track her down. He gained access to the contents of her mobile phone, including call records, contacts, and geolocation data, which allowed him to determine her whereabouts. Together with police officers, he managed to enter the shelter and take one of the children. Then, the woman turned to another organization, where, under security measures, she managed to go into hiding again, this time with two children. Nevertheless, her husband continued to surveil the shelter and the organization's staff. He used various forms of pressure: arriving at shelters accompanied by police and threatening staff; filing complaints with the prosecutor's office and other supervisory bodies against the activities of human rights centers and shelters; alleging supposed "violations" and "extremist activity"; using his law enforcement connections to track the movements of psychologists and center employees in an attempt to locate the new safe place where I. was hiding; and threatening shelter staff with arson. I. and her children had to relocate several times to different cities, which temporarily allowed them to avoid persecution. Her husband monitored the social media accounts of I.'s relatives and followed the center's staff in attempts to find her. After once again determining her location, he attacked her, attempted to force her into his car, and inflicted physical injuries. Local police officers who arrived at the scene intervened only after the incident, when the woman required a medical examination. At present, I. remains in hiding in another region.

This example clearly demonstrates how the combination of personal connections and official position places both survivors of violence and the organizations that assist them at risk. The following sections of this report will examine the mechanisms of such pressure in greater detail.

CHAPTER 2: THE USE OF COERCIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE-LEGAL RESOURCES AGAINST WOMEN IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Despite a nationwide crisis in law enforcement with regard to the protection of women, the use of coercive and administrative-legal resources is most pronounced in the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. Our analysis of the cases collected for this study confirms that pressure on

²⁶ Gudkov, L., & Dubin, B. (2006). *Privatizatsiia politsii* [The privatization of the police]. *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia: Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*, 1. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/privatizatsiya-politsii>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

women in this region takes on specific forms, due to gender inequality, the institutional weakness of the state, and specific regional practices, in which family control is supplemented and reinforced by state structures, effectively turning them into instruments for the continuation of violence.

Of the 75 cases analyzed, 21 concerned unmarried women who fled their families to escape domestic violence, forced marriages, or other forms of coercion and control. The remaining 54 cases involve married women attempting to protect themselves and their children after divorce, to obtain custody, or to leave an abusive partner. Entities vested with coercive authority appear in all cases, one way or another. This indicates the systemic involvement of coercive power in the resolution of conflicts, including cases of domestic violence, custody disputes, and the persecution of women who attempted to hide from their aggressors. In most cases, police and Investigative Committee officers not only failed to act in women's defense, but also assisted relatives in locating them by providing information about their whereabouts, exerting psychological pressure, or threatening with criminal proceedings.



Administrative structures such as courts (12 cases), guardianship authorities (10 cases), the bailiff service (10 cases), and the muftiate (11 cases) appeared less frequently; however, their role was no less significant. In these instances, pressure had a legitimizing character, meaning that administrative bodies formally affirmed women's unequal positions by depriving them of their children, refusing to consider complaints, or ignoring decisions issued in their favor.

The involvement of the muftiate is especially characteristic of the North Caucasus, where religious institutions are actively employed to exert moral pressure, justify violence, and enforce norms of women's subordination to the family and to their husbands.

Notably, most cases tend to combine coercive and administrative-legal mechanisms of pressure. In other words, coercive and administrative-legal resources operate in tandem, transforming individual conflicts into a regime of systemic suppression. In practice, this takes the form of coordinated actions by the police, the Investigative Committee, or the prosecutor's office, alongside court decisions, inaction by the bailiff service, and pressure from guardianship authorities and the muftiate.

Such institutional connection creates a closed system of control, which deprives a woman of access to fair justice and forces her to submit to the will of her family or the authorities. Every case described

below, despite differing circumstances, reflects recurring patterns - namely, the use of coercive and administrative-legal resources to exert pressure on women who have experienced violence or are seeking custody of their children.

1. Persecution Initiated by Families and Law Enforcement

In the absence of any protection, escape often appears to be one of the few viable means of self-defense for women and girls, whose lives and health are under threat. Regardless of their marital status, when attempting to break free from control, women encounter similar mechanisms of pressure, as well as state interference, often in the interests of those from whom women are trying to hide. Most often, such cases involve the following mechanisms of persecution: a girl or woman is declared missing and placed on a wanted list, or a criminal case is initiated against her - usually based on false accusations of theft of money or jewelry. The police then detain the woman in other regions, and sometimes even in other countries, where her closest relatives arrive to take custody of her. In these instances, law enforcement agencies often act in coordination with families who have personal connections within local coercive structures. These cases frequently receive media coverage, as publicity often becomes the only effective way to influence the situation and secure a favorable outcome for the woman.

However, even widespread media coverage does not always protect a woman. One of the most notorious cases is that of Seda Suleimanova, who fled Chechnya fearing a forced marriage.²⁷ In September 2023, she was detained in Saint Petersburg after her relatives reported the theft of jewelry. Seda was forcibly returned to Chechnya, despite explicitly stating that she faced danger there. After returning home, the connection with her was lost and she is still considered missing.²⁸ Human rights defenders believe that Seda may have become a victim of an “honor killing.”²⁹ This practice persists in some republics of the North Caucasus. As a rule, such crimes are virtually undocumented and not investigated.³⁰

Through the concept of honor, society defines “what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man.”³¹ Various mechanisms exist to enforce compliance with these norms, and their violation results in various punishments, including killing. Women most often face the harshest forms of punishment, which reflects how the concept of honor is deeply gendered. Female honor is viewed as a “symbol of national purity and identity.”³² The loss of honor is understood as a “collective trauma” of the entire clan.³³ In August 2024, a criminal case under the “murder” charges was opened in connection with Seda’s disappearance, but this produced no results that could help in establishing her fate.³⁴

A similar detention scenario occurred in the case of Selima Ismailova.³⁵ She was detained at Vnukovo

²⁷ Vorob’eva, A. (2025). *Delo Sedy Suleimanovoi: chto izvestno o propazhe chechenki, kotoraa bezhala ot sem’i* [The case of Seda Suleimanova: What is known about the disappearance of a Chechen woman who fled her family]. *Forbes Russia*. <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/538236-delo-sedy-sulejmanovoj-cto-izvestno-o-propaze-cecenki-kotora-a-bezala-ot-sem-i>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

²⁸ Novashov, A. (2024). *Chto proiskhodit s delom ob ubiistve Sedy Suleimanovoi, pokhishchennoi kadyrovtsami i vyvezhennoi v Chechniu bol’she goda nazad* [What is happening with the case of the murder of Seda Suleimanova, kidnapped by Kadyrov’s men and taken to Chechnya more than a year ago]. *Current Time TV*. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/chto-proishodit-s-delom-ob-ubiistve-sedy-sulejmanovoy/33150839.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

²⁹ Vot Tak. (2025). *Pokhishchennuiu Sedu Suleimanovu mogli ubit’ po prikazu priblizhennogo Kadyrova deputata Gosdumy Adama Delimkhanova* [Abducted Seda Suleimanova may have been killed on the orders of Kadyrov ally and State Duma deputy Adam Delimkhanov]. <https://vot-tak.tv/88478477/seda-suleimanova-adam-delimkhanov>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁰ Antonova, Y. A., & Sirazhudinova, S. V. (2018). *Ubiyete spletnyami: Ubiystva zhenshchin po motivam “chesti” na Severnom Kavkaze* [Killed by gossip: “Honor” killings of women in the North Caucasus]. Legal Initiative Project. https://srji.org/upload/iblock/681/Pravovaya_initsiativa_Otchet_UBITYE_SPLETNYAMI_2018.pdf. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³¹ Sen, P. (2005). Crimes of honour: Value and meaning. In L. Welchman & S. Hossain (Eds.), *Honour: Crimes, paradigms and violence against women* (p. 48). Zed Books. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³² Faqir, F. (2001). Intrafamily femicide in defence of honour. *Third World Quarterly*, 22(1), 65–82.

³³ Abu-Odeh, L. (1997). Comparatively speaking: The honor of the East and the passion of the West. *Georgetown University Law Center*. <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/2414>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁴ Mimikonian, O. (2024). *SK priznal nasilstvennym vozvrashchenie Sedy Suleimanovoi politsei v Chechniu* [Investigative Committee признал насильственным возвращение Седы Сулеймановой полицией в Чечню]. *Forbes Russia*. <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/519928-sk-priznal-nasil-stvennym-vozvrashchenie-sedy-sulejmanovoj-policiej-v-ccenu>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁵ Meduza. (2023). *19-letnuiu chechenku, pytavshuiusia bezhat’ v Germanii iz-za nasiliya v sem’e, zaderzhannuiu v aeroportu Vnukovo, otpravili v Grozny* [A 19-year-old Chechen woman who tried to flee to Germany due to family violence was detained at Vnukovo Airport and sent to Grozny]. [13](https://meduza.io/news/2023/06/13/devushku-iz-chechni-pytavshuy-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Airport due to a criminal case opened against her for theft. Moscow law enforcement officers transferred the girl to Chechen security forces at the airport. After being handed over to her family, Selima's fate remains unknown.³⁶

Another case in which a woman was placed on the federal wanted list for theft, detained, and returned to her relatives involved Leyla Gireeva from Ingushetia, who had been hiding from her family in Saint Petersburg.³⁷ A common feature of these cases is police intervention favoring the family and working against the victim of violence. All occurred in Moscow or Saint Petersburg—regions where access to protection would presumably be greater.

Fugitives are wanted not only by their relatives but also by the police. Moreover, the police search for them not to verify that the young woman has not been abducted, but to forcibly return her. Statements such as “this is how things work where you come from, this is customary, and you must obey your elders” can be heard not only in Chechen, Ingush, and Dagestani police departments. They are heard in Moscow and Saint Petersburg as well. They pressure the women, make attempts to shame them, and do not accept reports of their abduction when such incidents occur. (Interview with Svetlana Anokhina, human rights defender and journalist, July 2025.)

Formally, in all these cases, relatives initiate the searches by filing reports of theft or disappearance. In practice, coercive structures are immediately involved, turning what begins as a family conflict into criminal prosecution, and transforming women from victims of violence into alleged offenders.

2. Forcible Return to the Family

In Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, unmarried women very rarely seek help from local law enforcement authorities because they understand that doing so will only worsen their situation. Even when a woman or girl independently approaches the police for protection, law enforcement agencies use their powers to return her to her family. As a result, access to protection depends on who seeks help from the system - a woman or her family that possesses influence and connections. For example, Patimat Idrisova from Dagestan, who faced severe control and violence from her family following an unsuccessful marriage, sought protection at a police station. Instead of receiving help, she was detained there for three days before being handed back to her relatives.³⁸

Often they [the police] do not take the statements of ordinary people seriously... Women who become victims of violence file reports of beatings. A month passes, then another... nobody even calls them back. But if a person has connections, if it is, for example, a police officer, if he starts activating this system, it begins working immediately, quickly, without any evidence or grounds. A mere unsubstantiated statement by an influential person is enough to open a criminal case, place a woman on a wanted list... Neither a video address by the woman stating that she left voluntarily, nor the fact that she is an adult, nor her statement, nor her personal appearance at the police station matters... all of this is ignored, and she is baselessly declared wanted. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women's cases, Moscow, July 2025.)

Sometimes, even the absence of charges or a wanted status does not guarantee women's safety. The case of four sisters from Dagestan, who fled domestic violence and threats of forced marriage, provides a striking illustration. The sisters were detained at the Georgian border at Verkhny Lars, despite the

[usya-sbezhat-v-germaniyu-iz-za-nasiliya-v-semie-i-zaderzhannuyu-v-aeroportu-vnukovo-sobirayutsya-uvezti-v-groznyy](#). Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁶ Efimova, K. (2024). *God molchaniia: Selima Ismailova propala posle vozvrashcheniia v Chechniu, kak i Seda* [A year of silence: Selima Ismailova disappeared after returning to Chechnya, like Seda]. *Argumenty i Fakty*. <https://stav.aif.ru/society/person/god-molchaniya-selima-ismailova-propala-posle-vozvrashcheniya-v-chechnyu-kak-i-seda>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁷ Melnikova, A. (2022). *Zaderzhana devushka iz Ingushetii, sbezhavshaia ot nasiliia v sem'e* [A woman from Ingushetia who fled family violence has been detained]. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-peterburge-zaderzali-devusku-iz-ingusetii-sbezavsuu-ot-domasnego-nasilia/a-63865084>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

³⁸ Kavkaz.Realii. (2022). *Urozhenka Dagestana sbezhala iz respubliki posle domashnego nasiliia i prinuditel'nogo lecheniia* [A woman from Dagestan fled the republic after domestic violence and forced treatment]. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/urozhenka-dagestana-sbezhala-iz-respubliki-posle-domashnego-nasiliya-i-prinuditeljnogo-lecheniya/31992700.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

fact that they were not on the wanted list, no criminal cases had been opened against them, and their documents were in order. The intervention of influential relatives was the sole cause of their detention.³⁹

All these cases demonstrate that in some republics of the North Caucasus, kinship ties override the law, and state structures are utilized for personal purposes to return women to potentially deadly conditions.

3. Persecution in Shelters

Even more alarming trends emerge in cases where persecution involves not only wanted notices, but also direct incursions into shelters that provide refuge to survivors. In June 2021, Dagestani police officers, accompanied by unidentified men from Chechnya, broke into a shelter in Dagestan, where Khalimat Taramova, a young woman who had fled Chechnya, was hiding. Although she publicly stated her intention to remain in the shelter, Chechen security personnel, with the support of local police, forcibly transported her back to Chechnya. This case became one of the clearest examples of interregional coordination among security agencies being used to forcibly return women to dangerous conditions.⁴⁰



A similar incident occurred outside the North Caucasus. In that same year, police officers broke into a shelter in Kazan that housed two young women who had fled Dagestan.⁴¹ Furthermore, the authorities

³⁹ BBC News Russian Service. (2022). *Chetyrem sestram iz Dagestana udalos' uekhat' v Gruziiu, spasaias' ot rodstvnikov* [Four sisters from Dagestan managed to escape to Georgia, fleeing relatives]. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-63435696>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁰ Kavkaz.Realii. (2021). *Neizvestnye iz Chechni napali na zhenskii shelter v Dagestane* [Unknown attackers from Chechnya attacked a women's shelter in Dagestan]. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/31301298.html> ; Tagaeva, L. (2021). *Razgrom sheltera v Dagestane kasaetsia kazhdoi zhenshchiny v Rossii* [The destruction of a shelter in Dagestan concerns every woman in Russia]. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/kommentarij-razgrom-sheltera-v-dagestane-kasaetsja-kazhdoj-zhenshchiny-v-rossii/a-5788055>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴¹ Cherta. (2021). *Siloviki vorvalis' v shelter v Kazani i vernuli sbezhavshikh iz Dagestana devushek ikh muzh'iam* [Security forces stormed a shelter in Kazan and returned women who had fled Dagestan to their husbands]. <https://cherta.media/siloviki-vorvalis-v-shelter-v-kazani-i-vernuli-sbezhavshix-iz-dagestana-devushek-ix-muzhyam/> ; Meduza. (2021). *V Kazani politseyskie vorvalis' v krizisnyi shelter i zabrali dvukh devushek iz Dagestana* [In Kazan, police stormed a crisis shelter and took two women from Dagestan]. <https://meduza.io/news/2021/10/18/v-kazani-politseyskie-vorvalis-v-krizisnyy-shelter-i-zabrali-dvuh-devushek-iz-dagestana>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

refused to open a criminal case regarding the unlawful intrusion into the shelter and the use of force.⁴²

As a result, women effectively have almost no safe spaces to which they can turn for real protection. Russia already has an extremely small number of shelters, with only a handful of them in the North Caucasus. While domestic violence remains one of the most acute problems in the country, the system to assist survivors is virtually nonexistent.

Experts state that Russia has no more than 150 to 200 active crisis centers and shelters, while the estimated need is approximately 14,000 places.⁴³ This means that most women - especially those living in the regions – have no physical opportunity to escape violence. In the North Caucasus, the situation is aggravated not only by the pressure of traditional norms but also by the fact that women often face economic dependence on their husbands or family, unemployment, restrictions on movement, and control by senior relatives.

However, in recent years, even these fragile islands of safety have come under threat. For many years, most non-governmental shelters existed on grants and private donations. Organizations assisting women that were designated as “foreign agents” have seen a sharp decline in the volume of individual donations, and their access to state grants has been completely cut off. For example, the Nasiliu.net [No to Violence] center was forced to close its programs or fully stop its activities.⁴⁴ For women, this means that their already limited support network continues to shrink, and leaving a violent environment will become even more challenging. In the absence of funding, professional security personnel, reliable premises, and digital safeguards, shelters become vulnerable to incursions by aggressors:

We supported a woman, F., who ran away from her husband with two children. He had been beating her systematically, and after yet another such episode, she turned to us for help. We sent her to a shelter that turned out to be completely unprotected... Foolishly, F. switched on an old phone, and the ‘Find My Device’ function activated. It works with an accuracy of up to five meters. The shelter assured us that its location had been spoofed, which led us to lower our vigilance. We relied on this spoofing for protection; however, it later became clear that location spoofing does not help in such cases. F.’s husband arrived, parked nearby, and monitored from outside for about a day... That is how he determined the specific house where F. was hiding with the children. A nanny also lived with them, and no one else... the territory was not guarded in any way. The only protection was a door lock. At one point, the nanny went out to the nearest store and did not lock the door behind her. The husband took advantage of that. He simply walked into the house, took the son, and walked out. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women’s cases, Dagestan, 2025.)

This episode clearly shows that when an aggressor actively uses digital surveillance tools and acts decisively, a poorly protected shelter creates a false sense of safety. In such circumstances, any mistake may lead to the abduction of the woman or the child. The absence of systemic support and the assisting organizations’ lack of resources turn a woman’s journey to safety into a series of constant risks, where any misstep can lead to a return to the same violent environment from which she tried to hide.

Physical departure from a republic - and even from the country - does not always guarantee a woman’s safety. In certain cases, persecution may continue even outside Russia, where relatives may also use personal connections and coercive resources to return a woman to her family. Currently, such documented cases involve only Armenia.

Fatima Zurabova from Ingushetia fled to Armenia after systematic beatings within the family.⁴⁵ Armenian

⁴² Daptar. (2023). “Uzhasnyi, iarostnyi, zhivotnyi strakh”: Napadenie na shelter v Dagestane i otvet Evropeiskogo suda [“A terrible, furious, animal fear”: The attack on a shelter in Dagestan and the response of the European Court]. <https://daptar.ru/2023/04/26/uzhasnyj-yarostnyj-zhivotnyj-strakh-napadenie-na-shelter-v-dagestane-i-otvet-evropejskogo-suda/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴³ Daptar. (2021). *V Rossii ne khvataet primerno poltory–dvukh tysiiach shelterov: Ekspertnoe interv’iu* [Russia lacks approximately 1,500–2,000 shelters: An expert interview]. <https://daptar.ru/2021/12/16/sheltery/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁴ Meduza. (2025). *Gosudarstvo ne vseгда zabolitsia o svoikh grazhdanakh. My byli gotovy vziat’ eto na sebja* [The state does not always take care of its citizens. We were ready to take this on]. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/10/24/gosudarstvo-ne-vseгда-zabolitsya-o-svoih-grazhdanah-my-byli-gotovy-vzyat-eto-na-sebja>; Novaya Gazeta Europe. (2025). *Prostranstva dlia raboty uzhe ne ostalos’* [There is no space left to work]. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/06/19/nasiliu-net-na-grani-zakrytiia>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁵ Kavkaz.Realii. (2023). *Sbezhavshiu ot nasiliia urozhenku Ingushetii zaderzhali v Armenii po zaiavleniiu rodstvennikov* [A

security officers came to the apartment where she was hiding from her relatives and detained Fatima, stating that she was on a criminal wanted list in Russia. At a police station in Yerevan, she was denied access to a lawyer and was locked alone in a room with her uncle.⁴⁶ According to human rights defenders, Fatima's uncle explicitly stated that he had connections and influential friends in Armenia's Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁴⁷

Another example is the recent tragic story of Aishat Baimuradova, who fled Chechnya to escape domestic violence.⁴⁸ In October 2025, Aishat was found dead in a rented apartment in Yerevan. According to human rights defenders who accompanied Aishat, her relatives worked in government bodies and in Chechnya's security structures; Aishat's father had previously worked in law enforcement, and she had kinship ties with the current Head of the Chechen Republic.⁴⁹

All the stories above demonstrate one key pattern: in some republics of the North Caucasus - especially Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan - a woman attempting to escape family control confronts not merely private violence, but a system in which family and coercive resources operate as a single mechanism. State institutions (police, investigative bodies) often not only fail to protect a woman but actively participate in returning her to a dangerous environment. This factor makes the North Caucasus region unique in the scale and intensity of pressure exerted on women.

4. Coercive Pressure in Custody Cases

One of the most striking manifestations of this system is arbitrariness in child custody decisions after divorce. Although Russian legislation formally recognizes equal parental rights, in several republics of the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan), guardianship authorities and courts in practice systematically favor fathers. Misguided references to adats and traditions, according to which children belong to the father's line of the family, are used to justify such measures. Women often lose custody without being given a real opportunity either to appeal effectively or to obtain protection.⁵⁰ Moreover, contrary to the child's interests, court decisions, and expert opinions, mothers are deprived not only of custody but also of the right to contact and communicate with their children. Human rights organizations working in the North Caucasus document a persistent practice of forcibly separating mothers from their children, carried out without legal basis and with the direct or indirect involvement of officials. In some cases, mothers are effectively deprived of parental rights through pressure exerted by former husbands who have access to coercive and administrative-legal resources.

According to lawyers from human rights organizations, virtually every custody case includes manifestations of such pressure.

When we take on a case, we almost always keep in our minds, we hold in our heads, that the police, the clergy – which cannot be ignored, especially in Chechnya and Ingushetia - and everyone else will not be on our side, will not be on the side of our clients, our applicants. This

woman from Ingushetia who fled violence was detained in Armenia following a complaint by relatives]. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/v-armenii-po-zayavleniyu-rodstvennikov-zaderzhali-sbezhavshuyu-ot-nasiliya-urozhenku-ingushetii-32685388.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁶ Kavkaz.Realii. (2023) cont

⁴⁷ Holod Media. (2023). *V Armenii politseiskie zaderzhali ingushskuiu devushku, sbezhavshuiu iz doma iz-za nasiliia* [In Armenia, police detained an Ingush woman who fled home due to violence]. <https://holod.media/2023/11/15/v-armenii-policzejskie-zaderzhali-ingushskuyu-devushku-sbezhavshuyu-iz-doma-iz-za-nasiliya/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁸ BBC News Russian Service. (2025). *“Dlia kadyrovcev ne vazhno, devushka ty, gei ili kritik”: Chto izvestno pravozashchitnikam o smerti chechenki v Erevane?* [“For Kadyrov's men it doesn't matter if you're a woman, gay, or a critic”: What human rights defenders know about the death of a Chechen woman in Yerevan]. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cwykddgp94ko>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁴⁹ Sysoev, O. (2025). *“Ee dostali i zdes'”: Gibel' urozhenki Chechni v Erevane* [“They got her here too”: The death of a woman from Chechnya in Yerevan]. *Kavkaz.Realii*. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/gibelj-urozhenki-chechni-v-erevane/33566104.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁵⁰ Antonova, Y. A., & Ayrapetyan, I. K. (2023). *Problema pokhishcheniia rebenka/detei u materi...* [The problem of child abduction from mothers...]. *Ad Rem*. <https://adrem.help/pdf/kidnapping/>; Antonova, Y. A., & Ayrapetyan, I. K. (2024). *“Vyrvannye iz detstva”: Nasil'stvennoe razluchenie rebenka s mater'iu* [“Torn from childhood”: Violent separation of a child from their mother]. *Ad Rem*. <https://adrem.help/pdf/kidnapping2/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

is almost always the case. (Interview with a lawyer from the Chechen Republic, July 2025.)

This is a system in which men very often have connections that allow them to activate coercive resources. The teip ('clan') based social structure and the prevalence of kinship ties in the North Caucasus republics make it easier. It is easier to find a way to a law enforcement officer who can help... In Central Russia, this is not as common in situations of violence against women. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women's cases, Dagestan, May 2025.)

The following case illustrates how coercive resources are used as an instrument of compulsion in custody cases.

Case of M.

(Chechen Republic, 2023)

In 2014, M. got married. Six years later, her husband decided to bring a second wife into the home and tried to persuade M. to take out a loan in her name to finance the wedding. M. refused, and her husband threw her out of the house with their two children (a boy and a girl). Several months after his second marriage, her former husband took their son "for a visit," did not return him to his mother, and then filed a claim for the children to reside with him. The father did not provide the boy with proper attention and care. After separation from his mother, the boy developed health problems - heightened anxiety and speech impairments. The boy was very afraid of his father, who often punished him and subjected him to cruel treatment. M. sought assistance from the guardianship authorities in Grozny. According to their assessment, both children were to live with the mother. However, the district court, and then the Supreme Court, ruled that the boy would live with the father and the daughter with the mother. The father strictly limited the boy's communication with his mother and did not allow them to see each other. M. secretly visited the boy at his school. During one such visit, seeing that her son was in an extremely severe psychological state, she took him with her. Upon learning of this, her former husband, together with his relatives, broke into the home of M.'s sister, demanding that the boy be returned to him. At that time, M. and the children were not there. M. reported the trespassing and the threats to law enforcement authorities, including the police and the prosecutor's office, but her complaints were either ignored or resulted in formal denials without any real action. Later, M. was summoned to the police station, ostensibly to remove the boy from the wanted list, on which the father had placed him. This was only a pretext. M. was detained for a day without any grounds; she faced the demands to return her son to his father and threats that, if she failed to do so, her brother would be sent to the war in Ukraine. Under such pressure, M. was forced to return her son to his father. When the boy found out that his mother was to hand him over to his father, he had a hysterical episode. He cried and begged not to be handed over, saying that he would be beaten for having been with his mother. M. was forced to return him and to flee the republic after further pressure and threats from her former husband, fearing that her daughter might also be taken from her.

The failure of the police to respond in any way to the woman's reports about the threats and the unlawful intrusion by her former husband and his relatives into her sister's house indicates inaction by officials. Moreover, coercive resources in this case were used to exert pressure and issue threats, including blackmail involving the mobilization of a relative to the combat zone. According to human rights defenders, this tactic became common after the start of the war in Ukraine. However, unlawful detentions of women are not a new phenomenon.

We call it 'keeping them in basements.' These do not have to be literal basements. They can be some designated spaces within a police station for holding people whom they can keep there for various reasons. It can be people with no connection to any criminal activity; or women in domestic violence situations, whose spouse or relatives successfully use this method. This happens primarily in Chechnya. We had no cases from other regions in which a woman would be detained and held at a police station. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women's cases, Dagestan, May 2025.)

Such cases show that coercive structures in Chechnya are part of a patriarchal system serving the private interests of specific families.

Obviously, in the Chechen Republic, such practices are impossible without the support and acquiescence of the leadership:

The policy approved by the current leadership of the Chechen Republic and its direction gives a carte blanche, a green light, for all these actions. Likely, even in cases where there is no... close connection to the law enforcement - kinship, friendship - a person can still find support. (Interview with a lawyer specializing in women's cases, Moscow, May 2025.)

This happened in June 2020, when a 23-year-old woman died in Gudermes and was buried secretly at night in a cemetery. The deceased's mother accused the husband of murder, demanded an investigation, and claimed that the cause of her daughter's death was being concealed because her son-in-law was a security officer. Although the prosecutor's office exhumed the body, the mother was later forced to publicly apologize on the local TV channel and the case was quietly closed.⁵¹ Some experts stated that the husband suspected of the murder was not a security officer; nevertheless, he received the support of the republic's leadership, which refused to conduct an independent investigation.

Representatives of the republic's leadership have repeatedly expressed their support for a traditional hierarchy that discriminates against women and have displayed tolerance toward violence against women. Thus, in a 2008 interview with Komsomolskaya Pravda, the Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, said: "A woman must know her place... A woman must give us love... A woman must be property. And a man is the owner... Things happen: a brother killed his sister; a husband killed his wife... As the president, I cannot allow killings. So, they shouldn't wear shorts."

Earlier, commenting on the murders of seven young women in the republic, he stated even more unequivocally: "According to our customs, if a woman leads a dissolute life, if she sleeps with a man, both of them are killed."⁵² Given such political attitudes, it is unsurprising that coercive structures are used as instruments of family pressure. The story of A., presented below, stands as one of the most vivid and serious examples of institutional violence. For many years, she sought to enforce a court decision granting her custody of the children, but instead of protection, she faced arrest and criminal prosecution.

Case of A.

(Chechen Republic, 2022)

In 2010, the husband expelled A. from the home. From that moment, she was prevented from even seeing her two children due to obstacles created by her former husband, despite national courts having awarded her custody. Although a court decision existed, bailiffs repeatedly avoided enforcing it. Their reports noted refusals by the former husband's relatives to cooperate, yet no effective measures were taken to ensure enforcement. When the children were temporarily returned to their mother, public order was grossly violated: the former husband physically assaulted her, took the children back, and law enforcement authorities refused to open a criminal case despite clear evidence.

In 2013, her former husband went further - he filed a report alleging theft on a particularly large scale, and A. faced baseless criminal charges. While the investigation of the fabricated case proceeded, she spent two months in a pretrial detention center, where she endured beatings and other hardships. Nine months later, the criminal prosecution was terminated due to the absence of corpus delicti, and the former husband faced no consequences for filing a false report.

He continued to intimidate A., threatening her with new criminal cases. A. continued to seek enforcement of the court decision, and attempted to initiate proceedings at the children's place of residence, but was refused. Only in late 2017, the Supreme Court of a neighboring republic recognized the refusal as unlawful and ordered the bailiffs to act. However, this changed nothing

⁵¹ Caucasian Knot. (2020). Zhitelnitsa Chechni zaiavila o popytke obelit' vinovnykh v smerti docheri [A Chechen woman reported attempts to whitewash those responsible for her daughter's death]. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/351015/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁵² Caucasian Knot. (2025). "Ubiistva chesti" na Severnom Kavkaze ["Honor killings" in the North Caucasus]. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/345826/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

- proceedings were formally opened, but again no real measures were taken. In 2022, the former husband “ordered” another criminal case against her, under an article for fraud. A. spent almost nine months in detention in an Internal Affairs office in Chechnya. Throughout the entire period, she was held incommunicado. Then she was issued a suspended sentence. She received assistance from lawyers and human rights defenders, but systemic obstacles prevented her from achieving justice.

Despite years of struggle, A. was unable to secure the right to raise her children. Her efforts to defend her and her children’s rights resulted in her actual deprivation of liberty for a total of one year and the initiation of multiple criminal cases against her. Following the second case, she was given a suspended sentence with a probation period of one year and six months. This case demonstrates how coercive and administrative pressure transforms into an instrument of institutional violence. For more than ten years, the woman attempted to exercise her lawful right to raise her own children, but state institutions (courts, bailiffs, police) systematically refused to enforce decisions and protect her rights. This case highlights not only the ineffectiveness of state institutions but also their selectivity. The system de facto serves the interests of the more influential party, which, in the North Caucasus, is almost always a man who either has connections or whose desire to punish a former wife for rejecting the established tradition of patrilineality resonates with and gains sympathy from other men with access to the state apparatus.

5. Use of Administrative Resource

As noted earlier, administrative and coercive resources are often used in tandem. If coercive pressure manifests in threats, detentions, and direct interference, then administrative-legal pressure takes the form of court refusals, procrastination, formal brush-offs, and bailiffs’ inaction. These actions, each seemingly minor, form a system that deprives women of a chance to find protection and justice.

Case of L.

(Chechen Republic, 2021)

After the divorce, at the insistence of her former husband, the muftiate, and her relatives L.’s two daughters stayed with their father. For many years, their stepmother subjected the children to physical and psychological violence. L.’s appealed to her former husband, his relatives, and her own relatives, asking that the children be transferred to her, but she was ignored. After yet another beating, the girls ran away from their father’s home to their mother. L. had the children examined at a hospital, where multiple bodily injuries were documented. A subsequent psychological and psychiatric examination found that the children had PTSD. Nevertheless, her former husband took active steps to ensure the children were returned to him. The former husband submitted complaints to various bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the prosecutor’s office, the Children’s Rights Commissioner, and the muftiate, stating that his former wife had “kidnapped” the children and asking for their return. The muftiate, in turn, summoned L.’s relatives and exerted every effort to persuade them to pressure L. into renouncing her children and handing them over to the father’s relatives. L. filed a complaint with the Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of Russia for the Chechen Republic regarding the crime committed against her daughters, but no criminal case was opened. Only after a video she had recorded in the hospital documenting the girls’ bodily injuries appeared online was a criminal case opened under Article 117 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (torture). Initially, the investigation was conducted by an investigator closely connected to the children’s father - calling his impartiality into question. After a complaint by counsel, the case was removed from the district unit and transferred to the central investigative department. Only then did the process gain traction. Alongside the criminal case, L. filed a petition with the court to establish the children’s residence with her, and the court finally ruled in her favor. Even after the violence was proven and the stepmother’s guilt was acknowledged, the court imposed a suspended sentence, citing her confession and the fact that she had three minor children as mitigating circumstances.

L.’s story illustrates the interplay of pressure at multiple levels: family, religious, administrative, and judicial. The muftiate in the North Caucasian republics also more often takes the side of a man and his interests. Although the muftiate has no legal authority to intervene in family matters or in child-custody issues, its de facto authority is used to legitimize patriarchal norms and to pressure women. A woman

who decides to defend herself and her children is confronting an entire system. The court's decision in this case reflected the systemic tolerance for domestic violence, prioritizing arguments about "preserving the family" over the protection of victims.

Case of K.

(Republic of Ingushetia, 2021)

K. divorced her husband because of systematic beatings that were not investigated by law enforcement, despite her complaints. She fled her husband and filed a claim with the Moscow court for dissolution of the marriage and to have their minor son's place of residence established with her; the court granted both requests. Her former spouse had connections - his sister was a District Prosecutor in Moscow. Despite the court decision that the child was to live with the mother, the man obstructed its enforcement for over three years by changing his registration addresses in Chechnya and Ingushetia. The woman repeatedly encountered administrative-legal manipulations - in lower-instance courts and guardianship authorities. She faced refusals and process delays, and counterclaims from her former husband were accepted. During a court hearing in Ingushetia initiated by the husband, the judge openly expressed bias, and representatives of the guardianship authority stated that "a child needs a father." The former husband used his family's administrative resources to spread rumors about the woman's alleged mental disorder. As a result, she had to undergo two psychological and psychiatric examinations, which failed to confirm any disorders. With the help of human rights defenders and after three and a half years of struggle, the court finally dismissed the father's claim, restoring the mother's rights.

In this case, the former husband resorted to discrediting K. by calling her mental fitness into question. Using his position and connections, he effectively sabotaged the enforcement of the court decision for over three years. He changed his registration addresses in Chechnya and Ingushetia, which enabled him to transfer proceedings to the regions where he had a better chance of challenging the initial decision in the mother's favor – the regions where judges and guardianship authorities most often side with the man in such cases.

Accusations of mental unfitness are common in such cases, especially against young women who have fled domestic violence. These accusations stigmatize the woman and serve as a convenient tool to delay proceedings, as each scheduled expert examination results in additional months of waiting and increased expenses.

One of the tricks they [the woman's relatives] use is to declare women legally incapacitated retroactively, to concoct a paper saying that she is "not of sound mind," has mental illnesses, and so on. Absolutely everything works in favor of those who want to destroy a woman. (Interview with Svetlana Anokhina, human rights defender and journalist, July 2025)

The wide range of manipulative tactics and forms of pressure that men in some North Caucasian republics can use with impunity to control, punish, or discriminate against women makes the region attractive to abusers from other areas.

There are "tours" from Central Russia to the North Caucasus of spouses who do not want to hand the children over to the mother as ordered by their court decision. The decision may be issued in Central Russia; they register the children in the Caucasus region, and the enforcement becomes impossible. Under the law, it must be enforced, but bailiffs in Chechnya and Ingushetia simply do not transfer the children to the mother. (Interview with a lawyer from Dagestan, May 2025)

The "tours" mechanism can be observed in the case below. In June 2022, the ECHR issued a favorable judgment in this case.⁵³ The Court found a violation of Article 8 of the European Convention - "Right to respect for family life."

⁵³ European Court of Human Rights. (2022, March 8). *Y.Y. and Y.Y. v. Russia* (Application No. 43229/18). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-216018%22%5D%7D>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

Case of Ya.

(St. Petersburg, Chechen Republic, 2018)

After the dissolution of the marriage, the court in St. Petersburg determined the child's place of residence with the mother, but the father refused to comply and did not hand the child over. After the court established the child's place of residence with the mother, Ya.'s former husband registered his address in the Chechen Republic despite not actually relocating there. Enforcement proceedings were soon transferred to the Chechen Republic, where local traditions support children being raised by fathers. This led to difficulties in enforcing the St. Petersburg court decision. Enforcement bailiffs in the Chechen Republic failed to enforce the requirements of the judicial ruling. In addition, the former husband hoped to obtain a new judicial ruling in his favor in the Chechen Republic. He attempted to initiate new proceedings in Chechnya, but the republic's Supreme Court terminated the case after discovering forgery. After enforcement actions began in Chechnya, the mother repeatedly received notifications at the last possible moment, making it impossible for her to attend the hearings on time. Subsequent enforcement efforts failed to transfer the child; bailiffs questioned the child in the father's presence, which may have influenced the child's responses. Guardianship authorities were also absent, violating proper procedure. The child was not handed over to the mother, and the enforcement proceedings ultimately concluded without implementing the court's decision. Only after two years and six months, when the case was transferred from the Chechen Republic to the Moscow Region, was Ya. able to get her son back.

Ya's case demonstrates how legal mechanisms formally intended to protect the child's interests and ensure enforcement of court decisions prove powerless in the face of local traditions. A court decision issued in one of Russia's largest cities effectively loses force when it collides with the realities of law enforcement in the Chechen Republic. Local bodies responsible for enforcing court decisions act not in accordance with the federal law, but within the framework of local cultural norms and patriarchal notions that a child, by default, should remain with the father.

In this, as in many other cases documented by human rights defenders, bailiffs in Chechnya effectively refused to enforce the court's orders, restricting their actions to procedural formalities - an approach that essentially reflects a systemic practice of interpreting federal laws through the prism of local traditions.

During enforcement actions, bailiffs may simply behave passively, fail to carry out their duties, fail to engage psychologists, and then conclude that the child "refuses to go to the mother," although the child is more often induced... That is, they take on a passive role in order to support the father, so that the court decision is not enforced. (Interview with a defense lawyer, Chechen Republic, June 2025)

The case of Anna Smirnova,⁵⁴ a resident of the Moscow Region, received wide public attention. After the divorce, her former husband took their children to Dagestan. Despite an order by the Krasnogorsk City Court to transfer the two boys to their mother for the duration of the proceedings determining their future residence, bailiffs in Makhachkala did not enforce the decision.⁵⁵

The ECHR rulings issued in 2025 only confirmed the systemic nature of this problem. In September 2025, a favorable judgment under "Right to respect for family life" was issued in the case of Zhanetta Tukhaeva, who, since 2014, has been seeking the return of her eldest son, abducted by her former husband.⁵⁶ Despite

⁵⁴ Suleimanova, A. (2025). *Opeka po-kavkazski* [Custody, Caucasus-style]. *Dagestanskaia Pravda*. <https://dagpravda.ru/pravoporyadok/opeka-po-kavkazski/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

Caucasian Knot. (2025). *Delo Smirnovykh pokazalo vol'niu traktovku reshenii po delam ob opeke v Dagestane* [The Smirnov case revealed arbitrary interpretations of custody rulings in Dagestan]. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/411276>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

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⁵⁶ As noted above, despite Russia's withdrawal from the Council of Europe in 2022, the Court continues to examine applications submitted prior to that date.

Caucasian Knot. (2025). *ESPCh priznal narushenie prav Zhanetty Tukhayevoy v tiazhe o detiakh* [The ECHR recognized violations of Zhanetta Tukhayeva's rights in a child custody dispute]. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/416201>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

court decisions in Zhannetta's favor, the child was not returned to her, and bailiffs failed to act. In the Tukhaeva case, the Court also found a violation of Article 14 - discrimination related to widespread gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices in the North Caucasus in child custody issues.⁵⁷

In September 2025, the Court found violations of Article 8 of the European Convention, "Right to respect for family life", in two more cases from the North Caucasus. The first case concerns a woman, who returned from Germany to Chechnya following the deportation, and her former husband abducted their child. She sought help from law enforcement, but to no avail. Her complaints were ignored, and she began facing threats from her former husband and his relatives.⁵⁸

The second case concerns a similar situation in Dagestan. Here, the father took the child from the Tyumen Region to Dagestan, despite a court decision in the mother's favor. The mother went to court in Makhachkala, which ordered the father to return the child. Enforcement proceedings were opened, and the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation ordered that the violations committed by the Federal Bailiff Service be remedied. Nevertheless, the court decision has not been enforced.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, as of today, recognizing violations will not lead to restoration of justice, because the mechanism for enforcing ECHR judgments no longer operates in Russia.

As the analysis of this chapter has shown, in some North Caucasian republics, legislative and law enforcement gaps are aggravated by social norms and informal practices. Women in this region face a double level of vulnerability. On the one hand, there are no effective state mechanisms of protection; on the other hand, women confront a social system in which they are regarded as subordinate figures, whose autonomy is strictly limited.

It can be said that in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and partly Dagestan, the use of coercive and administrative-legal resources is a system stemming from close kinship ties in the community, patrilineality, official policies encouraging the return of women to the family at any cost, and tolerance toward domestic violence in society. Coercive and administrative-legal mechanisms used to pressure women experiencing domestic violence not only perpetuate structural inequality but also reinforce its stability. It is crucial to continue documenting these violations and to view them as part of a systemic problem rather than isolated incidents. The ability to protect oneself and one's children, and to find genuine shelter, is often lacking even in other regions of Russia, making leaving the country the only viable escape.

6. Pressure against Human Rights Defenders

Coercive and administrative pressure is often directed not only at women seeking to defend their rights, but also at those who help them. Work to protect women from violence in the North Caucasian republics involves constant risks. Lawyers, human rights defenders, and activists handling such cases regularly face threats, public harassment, and attempts at discreditation.

After each high-profile case - although we try not to publicize our cases and make them public only when it benefits the woman - there are more and more threats. (Interview with a human rights defender, Dagestan, July 2025)

The system reacts to their activity as a threat to the established order. Even open threats against human rights defenders elicit no official response, and local authorities openly support their persecution.

The reaction to the recent case of Aishat Baimuradova⁶⁰ has been indicative. The Human Rights

⁵⁷ European Court of Human Rights. (2025, September 18). *Klymenko and Others v. Russia* (Application No. 23855/22). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-244811>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁵⁸ European Court of Human Rights. (2025, September 18). *Dymov and Others v. Russia* (Application No. 40866/21). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-244820>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁵⁹ European Court of Human Rights. (2025, September 18). *Dymov and Others v. Russia* (Application No. 17432/21). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-244820>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁰ Meduza. (2025). Nikto dazhe ne pytalsia skryt' sledov. Eto poslanie devushkam, kotorye ubegaiut [No one even tried to hide the traces. This is a message to girls who flee]. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/10/23/nikto-dazhe-ne-pytalsya-skryt-sledov-eto-poslanie-devushkam-kotorye-ubegayut>; Current Time TV. (2025). V Armenii vozbudili ugolovnoe delo ob ubiystve bezhavshei iz Chechni Aishat Baimuradovoi [Armenia opened a criminal case into the murder of Aishat Baimuradova, who fled Chechnya]. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/v-armenii-vozbudili-ugolovnoe-delo-ob-ubiystve-bezhavshey-iz-chechni-ayshat-baymuradovoy/33587058.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

Commissioner of the Chechen Republic publicly blamed human rights defenders, who helped the young woman leave the region, for her death. Such statements intensify the existing hostility toward organizations and activists and, in effect, legitimize violence against them.

...A feeling of constant threat and hatred directed at you from all sides - not coming from two or three idiots on social media, but of general condemnation, indignation... like a beast when you snatched its next prey from its mouth - this is what it feels like. Every time something happens, you can feel this. (Interview with Svetlana Anokhina, human rights defender, journalist, May 2025)

In addition to public campaigns and coercive pressure, human rights defenders regularly face threats from the relatives of the women they help. Such threats often become a tool of intimidation and emotional pressure intended to dissuade activists from helping the victims. Threats can come via direct messages, phone calls, and, sometimes, in the form of direct surveillance of human rights defenders and their families.

Very often it happens that they write me threatening letters... we had a woman four years ago, and her husband still writes to me. Just recently, the day before yesterday, he wrote, once again, that he had filed complaints against us with all authorities, that he would come with journalists, that he is making a video about us... People wrote to me that they knew which school my granddaughter was attending; that they would cut off my son's head. Well, they obviously won't do any of that, but even so, it is very unpleasant. There were instances of them organizing surveillance near our shelter, approaching our staff, and threatening them. (Interview with a human rights defender, Moscow, June 2025)

Such situations often occur in custody disputes, where coercive and kinship ties determine the outcome to a greater extent than court decisions. In such cases, not only human rights defenders face resistance, but open pressure from the system.

...For example, there was this case. The father took the children and would not give them back - even though all courts ruled in the mother's favor, he would not give them back. Next, there was a message from the school that the girl had come in beaten... The girl's beating was documented. The father was out of control - nearly got into a fight with me. I was shielding the girl and her mother with my body, while the juvenile affairs officers just stood off to the side... In the end, we took the girl with us that day. The next day, I got a call telling me to withdraw from the case, because the head of the district police department is the brother of one of the husband's relatives... He even wanted me to be brought to the station at night. I said I won't withdraw... Then the head of investigations called me and said, "Please leave. Don't push it. I have protected you now, but I won't be able to anymore. You know what kind of people they are. You don't want drugs or something else to be 'found' in your home." And I had to withdraw. The girl's mother, of course, didn't understand me and got offended. (Interview with a lawyer, Chechen Republic, August 2025)

Hostile rhetoric and threats sometimes escalate into direct violence. Human rights defenders and their relatives also face physical attacks. One of the most illustrative examples of such pressure was the case of the Chechen human rights defender Magomed Alamov. The incident occurred after he drove Marina Yandieva, who had fled Ingushetia from family violence, to the airport.⁶¹ First, Alamov was summoned to the Center for Countering Extremism for questioning, and three days later, Chechen security forces abducted his brother.⁶² When Alamov went to the woman's relatives in Ingushetia to explain the situation and his non-involvement in her "abduction," he was threatened with murder.⁶³ According to activists, Marina's relatives were connected to coercive structures and could influence Chechen and Ingush police.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Romashova, O. (2023). *Ia s detstva vizhu, chto zhenshchin lishaiut prava golosa...* [Since childhood I have seen women deprived of voice, subjected to violence, and killed]. *Mediazona*. <https://zona.media/article/2023/10/24/marina>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶² Novaya Gazeta Europe. (2023). *Esli za nedeliu vy ne vernetes', menia ubiut* [If you don't return within a week, I'll be killed]. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/10/24/esli-za-nedeliu-vy-ne-vernetes-menia-ubiut-news>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶³ Caucasian Knot. (2023). *Pravookhraniteli proignorirovali soobshcheniia ob ugroze ubiistva Alamova* [Law enforcement ignored reports of threats to kill Alamov]. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/393759>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁴ RFI Russian. (2023). *V Ingushetii pravozashchitniku ugrozhaiut ubiistvom rodstvenniki devushki, sbezhavshei ot domashnego nasiliia* [In Ingushetia, relatives of a woman who fled domestic violence threaten a human rights defender with murder]. <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/rossiya/20231026-v-ingushetii-pravozashchitniku-ugrozhaiut-ubiistvom-rodstvenniki->

This case clearly demonstrates how state structures are used to pressure human rights defenders, and how a defender's family can be used as an instrument of pressure.

The same mechanism operates outside the North Caucasus region. The influence of North Caucasus security forces, exercised through personal connections and informal arrangements, extends far beyond the borders of their republics. The following case occurred in the autumn of 2025 and involved a female lawyer providing assistance to women; it demonstrates how the influential relatives of a young woman, who held senior positions in a local police department in a city in the Republic of Dagestan, were able to use their official positions and the full range of operational resources for their personal purposes, without any legal grounds, while being hundreds of kilometers away from Moscow.

The young woman fled home because of a forced marriage. They wanted to marry her off against her will. After the escape, the parents put the girl on the wanted list. Her father and uncle hold senior positions in the local police department, which initiated the search. The girl sought help from a human rights organization. I advised and passed the contact details of a lawyer to the specialist assisting the woman, for legal support in having her removed from the wanted list. I myself was never in contact with the young woman.

After that, I began receiving calls from Dagestani police officers who were looking for her. Using my phone number, they pulled up all my data - my passport details, residential registration, and border crossing information. A few days later, they came to my home in Moscow... Several people came from Dagestan and... called a patrol to my address, telling the police that a young woman was being forcibly held at my home. Without any evidence or grounds, I was detained, taken to the police office, and questioned. In addition to the staff of the Moscow office, many people appeared to be from the North Caucasus and were not employed by the Moscow police. They were either Dagestani police officers or the woman's relatives. From the office, the police came to my home and inspected my apartment as the scene of the incident. Naturally, they found no one there - she had never been there.

The young woman's relatives did not act through official law enforcement channels and procedures, which had gotten them nowhere, but organized surveillance of me. Near my home, there was a car on duty with people from the North Caucasus whom I had previously seen at the department. They periodically approached my door, did something on the landing, and photographed my door and the electrical panel. The phone calls continued, now not only from Dagestani police officers, but also from relatives. They could call late at night or at 6 a.m.; they could call 10 times in one day. During one such call, the young woman's father, a police officer, started making threats. He said he didn't believe me, that they would keep checking me, that they would leave me alone only once they verified that I was not involved in this story, but if they found out otherwise, they would punish me. Moreover, my mother also started getting the calls...

I filed criminal complaints with the police regarding unlawful harassment, surveillance, abuse of authority by police officers, and the unlawful collection of information about my private life. However, the Moscow police took no action in response to my complaints.

This case shows that employees of regional coercive structures can plug into the federal coercive apparatus as easily as into local structures, using their personal influence, access to information systems, and informal arrangements. The case of the lawyer who, through a third party, advised a woman who had fled and merely helped her establish contact with legal counsel clearly demonstrates that even minimal involvement in protecting the rights of women and girls from the North Caucasus is enough to trigger persecution.

The privatization of coercive structures, strong kinship ties, and the entanglement of personal connections with administrative powers turn human rights work into a dangerous occupation. Threats, surveillance, intimidation, and attempts to remove lawyers from cases have become routine experiences.

Human rights defenders are forced to limit publicity, not name names, conceal shelter addresses, and evacuate not only women but also their own staff. Such pressure reduces the effectiveness of human rights work - organizations and activists lose opportunities for strategic action, concentrate on emergency

response and security, and women are left without systemic support.

In these conditions, protecting women requires not only professional competence but also personal courage and mutual support among activists. As long as human rights work is perceived as interference in the private affairs of the family or the region, the risk for those who help women remains real. Nevertheless, these individuals and organizations represent the last hope for women who have been failed by both their families and the state.

CHAPTER 3. TRADITIONAL VALUES, WAR, AND IMPUNITY

The cases examined in Chapter 2 show that violence against women in the North Caucasus cannot be explained solely by local customs or isolated abuses of authority. These practices rest on political and cultural trends common to contemporary Russia. To understand why coercive and administrative-legal resources are transformed into an instrument of control over women, it is important to move beyond regional details and examine the national ideological framework.

1. The “Traditional Values” Ideology

As noted in Chapter 1, despite the formal acceptance of some international obligations, the practical implementation of these norms remains fragmented. The reason can be found in a combination of interconnected political, socio-cultural, and institutional factors. The socio-cultural context shapes people’s behavior and sets the boundaries of what is considered permissible or acceptable in society. In the Russian reality, the notion that domestic violence is an internal, private family matter remains strong. According to the latest VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) survey,⁶⁵ most respondents believe that such issues should be resolved within the family, and that resorting to outside help (police, relatives, social services) is not advisable.

Society’s moral beliefs and collective indifference to such issues become powerful mechanisms that support the legitimation of violence as a way of preserving traditional gender roles. These moral norms and group solidarity serve as the foundation supporting a system in which violence against women is perceived as acceptable.

State institutions also play a significant role, forming cultural and legal reference points that determine which values and norms become dominant in society. The decriminalization of battery, the refusal to adopt a domestic violence law, and the ignoring of international obligations have become part of the political strategy in contemporary Russia.⁶⁶ Thus, when refusing to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2018, Russia stated that its provisions did not correspond to “traditional moral and family values” and the “Concept of the State Family Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025.”⁶⁷ This position not only entrenches patriarchal norms in state policy, but also systematically obstructs the adoption of effective measures to protect women from violence.

With the start of the war in Ukraine, the narrative of traditional family values gained renewed prominence. Under the slogans of protecting morality and the country’s demographic future, measures reinforcing the patriarchal concepts of the family and the woman’s role are being introduced into the public and legal sphere. A law “on banning child-free propaganda” was adopted in November 2024.⁶⁸ The law was “developed as part of implementing the Fundamentals of State Policy on the preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.”⁶⁹ This law became part of an overall

⁶⁵ Smak, T. (2025, September 25). *Semeinye tainy: Monitoring* [Family secrets: Monitoring]. VCIOM. <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/semeinye-tainy-monitoring>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁶ Rollins, K. (2022). *Putin’s other war: Domestic violence, traditional values, and masculinity in modern Russia*. *Harvard International Review*. <https://hir.harvard.edu/putins-other-war/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁷ Tyagai, E. (2019). *Strana sovetov: Chto meshaet uluchshit’ polozhenie zhenshchin v Rossii na zakonodatel’nom urovne* [The country of councils: What prevents improving women’s status in Russia legislatively]. *Forbes Russia*. <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/385837-strana-sovetov-chno-meshaet-uluchshit-polozhenie-zhenshchin-v-rossii-na>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁸ Business Online. (2024). *Deputy Gosdumy prinali zakon o zaprete propagandy chajldfri* [State Duma deputies adopted a law banning “childfree propaganda”]. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/news/654012>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁶⁹ Tyagai, E. (2024). *Molchanie ili monashestvo: Kak budet rabotat’ zapret “propagandy chajldfri”* [Silence or monasticism: How the ban on “childfree propaganda” will work]. *Forbes Russia*. <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/525307-molchanie-ili-monashestvo-kak-budet-rabotat-zapret-propagandy-cajldfri>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

strategy of subordinating women's reproductive choice to the interests of the state's demographic policy.⁷⁰ In some regions, special payments have been introduced for pregnant high school and college students, which de facto encourage early motherhood and entrench the notion of childbearing as a woman's social duty.⁷¹ Although Russia's abortion legislation formally remains liberal, access to safe termination of pregnancy is becoming increasingly limited.⁷² The situation is exacerbated under the current wartime conditions. The return of individuals who participated in the hostilities in Ukraine, recent legislative changes, and the recruitment of penal institution inmates for the front line create additional risks for women facing violence.

2. Impact of the War in Ukraine

Human rights defenders predicted an increase in violence against women once Russia's military actions in Ukraine began.⁷³ The key consideration was that many servicemen would return from the combat zone with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and this would become one of the reasons for the aggravation of intra-family violence. Another factor that gave rise to concerns and forecasts of a spike in violence was the participation of former convicted inmates in combat.

According to independent estimates, in 2022–2023 alone, about 50,000 prisoners of penal institutions ended up at the front, first as part of the “Wagner PMC,”⁷⁴ and then in the Ministry of Defense units.⁷⁵ Before 2022, Russian law did not allow incarcerated individuals to take part in hostilities. This practice was considered incompatible with the principles of the imposition of punishment. However, everything changed with the start of hostilities in Ukraine. According to calculations by independent researchers, at least 17,000 of them died, and many of those who survived returned home, including those who had committed serious violent crimes.⁷⁶ During the 2022–2023 recruitment of prisoners, no differentiation was made based on the nature or gravity of the offenses. Recruitment took place in minimum-, special-, and maximum-security penal institutions, encompassing both individuals convicted of murder and those serving sentences for relatively minor offenses.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Verstka. (2024). “*Muzhskie*” *professii, alimenty i reproduktivnoe davlenie* [“Male” professions, alimony, and reproductive pressure]. <https://verstka.media/kak-izmenilas-zhizn-rossiyskih-zhenschin-na-fone-voyni>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷¹ T–Zh. (2025). *V regionakh vvodiat vyplaty beremennym shkol'nitsam i studentkam* [Regions introduce payments to pregnant schoolgirls and students]. <https://t-j.ru/news/vyplaty-beremennym-shkolnicam/>; Chevtaeva, I. (2025). *Vyplaty beremennym shkol'nitsam v RF: pooshchrenie vmesto pomoshchi* [Payments to pregnant schoolgirls in Russia: Incentives instead of support]. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/vyplaty-beremennym-shkolnicam-v-rf-pooshchrenie-vmesto-pomoshchi/a-72411300>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷² Women encounter refusals, procedural delays, psychological pressure, and informal bans. Private clinics refuse to perform abortions under pressure from Orthodox activists and government officials; in state institutions, patients are shown embryo models, read letters from the Patriarch, or subjected to counseling sessions involving clergy. Since 2023, anti-abortion initiatives promoted by “pro-life” movements in cooperation with the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation have proliferated. Regional laws banning so-called “inducement to abortion,” which impose fines for any form of persuasion aimed at encouraging a woman to terminate a pregnancy, have become the primary instrument of pressure. Meduza. (2025). *Aborty v Rossii ofitsial'no ne zapreshcheny* [Abortions in Russia are not officially banned]. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/04/28/aborty-v-rossii-ofitsialno-ne-zapreshcheny-zakonodatelstvo-liberalnoe-no-iz-za-raznyh-zapretov-zhenschinam-vse-chashe-otkazvayut-v-preryvanii-beremennosti>; Verstka. (2024). “*Vy vsia bol'naia, a eshche abort sobiraetes' delat'?*” [“You're completely ill, and you still want an abortion?”]. <https://verstka.media/kak-vrachi-v-rossiyskih-klinikah-po-metodichkam-otgovarivayut-pacientok-ot-aborta>; Vol'ianova, S., Kiryukhina, Y., & Platonova, A. (2025). “*Ofitsial'no nikto nichego ne zapreshchaet*” [“Officially, no one bans anything”]. *BBC News Russian Service*. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cx2094r1dm3o>; Strel'nikov, A. (2023). *Aborty v Rossii: V chastnykh klinikakh uzhe vveden zapret?* [Abortions in Russia: Has a ban already been introduced in private clinics?]. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/aborty-v-rossii-v-chastnykh-klinikakh-uzhe-vveden-zapret/a-67418676>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷³ Novaya Gazeta. (2023). *Gotov'yes'k nasiliuu* [Prepare for violence]. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/05/10/gotovytes-k-nasiliuu-media>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷⁴ Mediazona. (2024). *ChVK Wagnera zaverbovala v koloniiakh 48 tysiach zakliuchennykh...* [Wagner PMC recruited 48,000 prisoners...]. <https://zona.media/news/2024/06/10/project-k>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷⁵ Ivshina, O., Lotareva, A., Goryashko, S., & Platonova, A. (2023). *Uboinaia sila* [Killing force]. *BBC News Russian Service*. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-65459280>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷⁶ Fokht, E., Barabanov, I., & Ivshina, O. (2024). “*Vsë kak u kontraktnikov...*” [“Everything like contract soldiers...”]. *BBC News Russian Service*. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/clev58319pvo>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷⁷ Mediazona. (2024, June 10). “*ChVK Wagnera*” *zaverbovala v koloniiakh 48 tysiach zakliuchennykh, iz nikh vo vremia boev za Bakhmut pogibli ne menee 17 tysiach* [Wagner PMC recruited 48,000 prisoners from penal colonies; at least 17,000 died during the battles for Bakhmut]. <https://zona.media/news/2024/06/10/project-k>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

In September 2023, two key laws were signed to create a legal basis for the new reality. The first introduced amendments to the law “On Military Duty and Military Service.” The law now allows defendants whose cases are pending before courts of first instance or on appeal to sign military service contracts during mobilization or wartime. The second law amends the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code. Under these amendments, if a defendant is deployed to the front during mobilization or wartime, the criminal proceedings may be suspended, and the defendant may be released from criminal liability. Thus, the case is frozen for the duration of service, and if the defendant receives a state award or is discharged from military service, the defendant is fully released from punishment. However, there are several exceptions. This mechanism does not apply to crimes against the sexual inviolability of minors, and crimes involving terrorism, extremism, illegal handling of nuclear materials, or high treason.⁷⁸ Thus, these norms have effectively abolished the principle of the inevitability of punishment. While previously a conviction restricted access to certain activities and was accompanied by administrative supervision, under the new amendments, a single decision to grant a pardon or an award can remove all consequences.

The practice of suspending criminal prosecution and subsequently releasing war participants from criminal liability has simply trampled all the rights of crime victims. We cannot protect victims. Criminal cases go uninvestigated; circumstances remain unresolved... Essentially, proper mechanisms were lacking even before, and now, with the involvement of war participants, victims face complete defenselessness. (Interview with lawyer Mari Davtyan, September 2025)

At present, organizations working with women do not record a noticeable increase in the number of requests related to domestic violence. They see about as many complaints as they did before the war began.⁷⁹ According to data from the Algorithm of Light project, after a spike in 2020–2021 due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the level of domestic violence returned to pre-COVID levels in 2022–2023.⁸⁰ This discrepancy between forecasts and reality may have several explanations. First, despite the scale of mobilization and widespread participation in hostilities, a relatively small number of actual combatants have returned home so far. This means that the consequences of war (psychological, social, and familial) have not yet manifested. This trend will become noticeable over a longer time period. Second, even when a combat participant returns and commits violence against a woman, she might not necessarily seek help. One reason cited by human rights defenders is the fear of speaking openly about violence by returning veterans under the new laws - namely, the fear of facing charges under the article on “discrediting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation,” which provides for a fine of up to 5 million rubles or imprisonment for up to 15 years.⁸¹ In addition, family members of combat participants may not turn to independent funds or organizations helping women, either fearing the organizations’ problematic political status or because they have access to state funds supporting military families and prefer to ask for their help.⁸²

Third, women often understand that the system is unlikely to be on their side. In practice, violence by former servicemen is not punished as strictly, and courts and law enforcement bodies are often lenient toward combat participants.⁸³ In light of the changes to criminal and criminal-procedure legislation,

⁷⁸ Pletneva, S. (2024). *Putin razreshil podsudimym zakliuchat' kontrakt na voennuiu sluzhbu* [Putin allowed defendants to sign military service contracts]. *Forbes Russia*. <https://www.forbes.ru/society/522396-putin-razresil-podsudimym-zakluc-at-kontrakt-na-voennuu-sluzhbu>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁷⁹ Nasiliu.Net. (2024). *Glubinoe issledovanie raboty “Nasiliu.Net”* [An in-depth study of Nasiliu.Net’s work]. <https://nasiliu.net/pronasilie/glubinoe-issledovanie-raboty-nasiliyu-net-o-chem-govoryat-sotrudniczy-adresnoj-pomoshhi-v-2024-godu/>; Novaya Gazeta Europe. (2024). *Nasiliu.Net: vopreki ozhidaniyam...* [Contrary to expectations, reports of domestic violence did not increase]. <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2024/05/13/nasiliu-net-vopreki-ozhidaniyam-rostachisla-obrashchenii-iz-za-domashnego-nasiliia-za-2-goda-voiny-v-ukraine-ne-zafiksirovano-news>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁰ Algoritm Sveta. (2023). *Masshtaby domashnego nasiliia v Rossii za 2022–2023 gody* [The scale of domestic violence in Russia, 2022–2023]. <https://algoritmsveta.com/алгоритм-света-2022-2023/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸¹ Current Time TV. (2024). *“Voieval s Ukrainoi — mozhesh' spokojno ubivat' v Rossii”: Domashnee i partnerskoe nasilie na fone voiny* [“You fought in Ukraine — now you can kill freely in Russia”: Domestic and intimate partner violence amid the war]. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/domashnee-i-partnerskoe-nasilie-v-rossii-na-fone-voyny/32713623.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸² Nasiliu.Net. (2024). *Glubinoe issledovanie raboty “Nasiliu.Net”: O chem govoriat sotrudnitsy adresnoi pomoshchi v 2024 godu* [An in-depth study of Nasiliu.Net’s work: What frontline support workers report in 2024]. <https://nasiliu.net/pronasilie/glubinoe-issledovanie-raboty-nasiliyu-net-o-chem-govoryat-sotrudniczy-adresnoj-pomoshhi-v-2024-godu/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸³ Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Associations. (2025). *SVOennoe vremia: Kak v Rossii privilekaiut k otvetstvennosti za prestupleniia uchastnikov spetsoperatsii* [“Special operation” time: How Russia holds participants in the war accountable for crimes]. <https://wcons.net/novosti/svoennoe-vremja-kak-v-rossii-privlekajut-k-otvetstvennosti-za-prestu->

women and children become especially vulnerable.

According to the independent outlet “Verstka,” former inmates who returned from the war zone regularly attack civilians and more often kill women.⁸⁴ Since the start of the war in Ukraine, 378 people have died at the hands of former combat participants, and another 376 have sustained grievous bodily harm.⁸⁵ In one-third of cases, the victims were women.

In addition, over the past three years, there has been a sharp spike in cases of sexualized violence against minors - the number of such cases has increased sixfold.⁸⁶ An analysis of battery cases over the past 4.5 years showed that the victims were the wives, mothers, sisters, and children of former combat participants in 62–73% of cases.⁸⁷ In most cases, they ended up with minimal punishments, such as a 5,000-ruble fine, community service, or a suspended sentence.

Another trend that emerged after the start of the war is an opportunity to avoid criminal punishment for crimes committed against women by signing a military service contract.⁸⁸ The pardon of Vladislav Kanyus is illustrative in this regard. He had been sentenced to 17 years’ imprisonment for the brutal murder of his girlfriend, Vera Pekhteleva,⁸⁹ and spent less than six months in the colony, was pardoned, and sent to the front.

The practice of releasing defendants and convicted offenders upon signing a Ministry of Defense contract has effectively turned participation in armed combat into an instrument for evading justice. Similar cases have also been documented in the North Caucasus - for example, the case of Kristina Kokova, a 22-year-old resident of the Moscow Region killed in Chechnya in September 2024. This case received a fairly extensive media coverage.⁹⁰

After Kristina’s divorce from her husband, her daughter remained in Chechnya with her father, and Kristina often traveled there to visit her. During one such visit, she was brutally killed by her father-in-law, Ruslan Umaev. The latter had previously been convicted on drug charges. According to Kristina’s family, he repeatedly threatened to kill Kristina, claiming that he had connections that would allow him to avoid punishment. He justified the murder of his former daughter-in-law by saying that he was motivated by honor, because, in his words, she led an “immoral lifestyle.” Despite his confession and the evidence, Umaev was released from pre-trial detention in February 2025 and sent to an assault unit to fight in the war.⁹¹ This case demonstrates the convergence of such factors as the concept of honor used as a justification for murder and the war transformed into a mechanism for evading accountability. Taken

plenija-uchastnikov-specoperacii/. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁴ Verstka. (2025). *Bolee 750 zhertv: Kak vernuvshiesia v Rossiiu uchastniki voyny v Ukraine snova ubivaiut i kalechat* [More than 750 victims: How soldiers returning to Russia from the war in Ukraine kill and maim again]. <https://verstka.media/kak-vernuvshiesya-v-rossiyu-uchastniki-voyny-v-ukraine-snova-ubivayut-i-kalechat>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁵ Verstka. (2024). *Pochti 500 zhertv: Kak vernuvshiesia v Rossiiu uchastniki voyny v Ukraine snova ubivaiut i kalechat* [Nearly 500 victims: How soldiers returning to Russia from the war in Ukraine kill and maim again]. <https://verstka.media/veterany-svo-ubili-i-pokalechili-v-rossii-pochti-500-chelovek>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁶ Zheianov, I. (2024). *Iunye zhertvy “ukrainskogo sindroma”* [Young victims of the “Ukrainian syndrome”]. *Tochka*. <https://pointmedia.io/story/66431f5dd69aa0bc05e3532c>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁷ Verstka. (2024). *Bezzashchitnye pered zashchitnikami* [Defenceless before the defenders]. <https://verstka.media/nasilie-nad-zhenschinami-obhoditsia-uchastnikam-boevyh-deystviy-v-5-t-r-issledovanie>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁸ Nazarova, N. (2023). *“Koshchunstvo, nadrugatel’stvo nad vsemi nami”*: *Kak ubiits miluiut posle uchastiia v voine, a materi zhertv pytaiutsia s etim borot’sia* [“Blasphemy, an outrage against all of us”: How killers are pardoned after participating in the war, and how victims’ mothers resist]. *BBC News Russian Service*. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c0xvqw1wyy2o>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁸⁹ BBC News Russian Service. (2023). *Putin pomiloval ubiitsu kemerovskoi studentki Very Pekhtelevoy. Ee roditeli uznali ob etom spustia polgoda* [Putin pardoned the murderer of Kemerovo student Vera Pekhteleva; her parents learned about it six months later]. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cl5pd58nkqgo>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁹⁰ Baza. (2024). *Ona dumala, chto vse budet kak v turetskikh serialakh* [She thought everything would be like in Turkish TV dramas]. <https://kristina.baza.io/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

Daptar. (2024). *Ei ochen’ khotelos’ sem’iu: Kak Kristina iz Podmoskov’ia pogibla ot ruk svekra iz Chechni* [She desperately wanted a family: How Kristina from the Moscow region was killed by her Chechen father-in-law]. <https://daptar.ru/2024/12/03/ei-ochen-khotelos-semyu-kak-kristina-iz-podmoskovya-pogibla-ot-ruk-svekra-iz-chechni/>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁹¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2024). *Sovershivshhego “ubiistvo chesti” zhitelya Chechni otpustili na voynu* [A Chechen man who committed an “honor killing” was released to go to war]. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/sovershivshhego-ubiystvo-chesti-zhitelya-chechni-otputili-na-voynu/33313886.html>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

together, these factors increase risks for women in the North Caucasus region, where social control and the practice of violence are also supported at the level of family structures. The argument of protecting honor is often used by men who have murdered a woman to obtain a more lenient sentence.⁹² In some republics, such an argument finds resonance even among judges.⁹³

Conclusion

Violence against women and girls in Russia, especially in certain republics of the North Caucasus, is systemic in nature. Domestic violence, forced marriages, persecution for attempting to escape family control, and struggles over child custody occur not only due to state inaction but are often actively supported by state structures, leaving women extremely vulnerable. This dynamic is especially evident in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, where family control and patriarchal norms are not merely tolerated by the state but are deeply intertwined with it, transforming state institutions into tools of pressure wielded to serve the interests of families or private individuals.

These practices are so deeply entrenched that state intervention in matters related to domestic violence or women's escapes from their families is most often carried out not to protect, but to return a woman to the environment that endangers her life. Our study shows that the same mechanisms of pressure are used repeatedly with frightening regularity. Women are placed on wanted lists, face fabricated criminal charges, are detained anywhere in Russia - sometimes even in neighboring countries – and then handed over to their families, despite women's explicit statements about violence and threats to their lives. The police readily activate this system, especially when influential families or members of law enforcement stand behind the woman's relatives. Not a single case involving women fleeing domestic violence and examined in this study shows any evidence of an effective protection mechanism.

The impact of the war in Ukraine has created an additional level of threat. The courts are lenient toward returning combat veterans who have committed violence against women. Their prior crimes are ignored, and their participation in the hostilities becomes a mitigating circumstance. Against the backdrop of overall impunity, this creates an additional risk for women, because the threat of violence comes from people who have combat experience and enjoy state support. Once the war ends, this problem is likely to worsen.

The situation of human rights defenders warrants special attention. Lawyers, attorneys, shelter staff, and activists face threats, surveillance, and violence. They are pressured by women's relatives, security and law enforcement entities, and representatives of regional authorities. In these conditions, human rights work becomes a real threat to life and safety.

All our data supports the conclusion that women's safety is not a state priority. Moreover, the state system participates in patriarchal mechanisms of control, reinforcing and legitimizing violence. The systemic nature of violations of women's rights requires comprehensive solutions. First and foremost, the practice of forcibly returning women and girls to their families must end. Law enforcement agencies must not have the ability to hand adult women over to their relatives. Officials who participate in transferring a married or unmarried woman to relatives against her will or in her unlawful detention must face responsibility - specifically, internal service investigations with subsequent disciplinary liability up to and including dismissal and criminal liability under Article 286 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (misuse of official position). Uniform standards for registering reports of domestic violence and conducting proper investigations must be established. Protection of women's rights is impossible without the enforcement of court decisions in custody cases, including a ban on transferring enforcement proceedings to regions where there is a risk of pressure from relatives or the authorities. It is also necessary to establish a mechanism for transferring enforcement proceedings to a neutral region when such risks exist in the region of residence. In addition, interference by muftiates, religious bodies, and other informal structures in law enforcement must cease, especially in cases involving custody, marriage dissolution, and divorce, where references to "tradition" are often used to justify discrimination against women. Establishing a system of state shelters and/or providing support to non-state shelters with security guarantees would be another important step.

⁹² Sirazhudinova, S. (2023). *Domashnee nasilie na Severnom Kavkaze: Otchet po rezul'tatam monitoringa situatsii v regione i analiza sudebnoi praktiki* [Domestic violence in the North Caucasus: A report based on regional monitoring and analysis of court practice]. *Caucasian Knot*. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/395756>. Accessed: 27.11.2025

⁹³ CONT.

Russia needs a separate law on domestic violence. In addition, the state must fulfill its international obligations, including compliance with the ECHR judgments in cases filed before Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe. At the same time, drawing on the still-applicable framework of international standards, international bodies should strengthen the response to domestic violence, request explanations for each case in which women are forcibly returned to their families, and demand investigations into the disappearances and killings of women (including Seda Suleimanova, Selima Ismailova, Aishat Baimuradova, and others).

It is important to expand humanitarian programs for women fleeing violence in high-risk regions and to support human rights defenders by providing them with resources for both digital and physical security.

The existing situation not only fails to ensure women's protection but also often becomes a direct source of threats. The privatization of coercive resources, the ideology of traditional values, impunity for violence, and the disregard of international standards form an environment in which women lack access to effective protection mechanisms. For many women, the chance to escape comes not from domestic state mechanisms but from the possibility of leaving the country. Without recognizing the systemic nature of the problem and implementing appropriate measures to address it, the situation will only deteriorate.