

*Let snakes pierce my white breast
For breathing in a flaming earthly love.
Because the look in my eyes was full of passion,
Let them be covered with earth.*

Ankhlil Marin

Survival strategies of homosexual and bisexual women and transgender persons in the North Caucasus

Qualitative study findings

Queer Women of North Caucasus Support Group Initiative

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When you are not alone, things don't seem so scary.

Female respondent, the Republic of South Ossetia – the State of Alania

Survival strategies of homosexual and bisexual women and transgender persons in the North Caucasus

The report presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted by activists of the Queer Women of North Caucasus Support Group Initiative. The findings describe survival strategies for homosexual, bisexual women and transgender persons in a sexually repressive culture. The study required the observance of safety rules and confidentiality for both respondents and some of the. This study can be applied to the work of psychologists, social workers, and lawyers providing assistance and support to non-heterosexual women from the republics of the North Caucasus. Moreover, the study is an attempt to document the current situation regarding the rights and the status of homosexual, bisexual women and transgender persons.

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It's been more than three years since the stories of violence and lawlessness against (perceived) LGBT people in the North Caucasus, Russia, broke out of secret prisons and launched a powerful international mobilization for emergency assistance and the fight to restore justice.

This publication is of tremendous importance for everyone who continues this fight and seeks to rely on a complete and nuanced understanding of reality. It amplifies the voices of those who have not been heard enough: LBT women and transgender people in the North Caucasus. It makes visible what has remained behind the scenes for a long time: life scenarios of those who live and will stay in the North Caucasus republics of Russia. It documents stories without which our knowledge of the situation of LGBT people and women remains incomplete: experiences of LBT living in a repressive culture.

We are grateful to the respondents and activists of the Queer Women of North Caucasus Initiative Group for the study and its publication. It brings invaluable support to human rights, activist and supporting communities committed to protecting and advancing the rights of LBT women and transgender people in Russia.

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Terms and abbreviations

Adat is a term denoting the surviving norms of pre-Islamic legal systems and the legalities not reflected in Sharia law. Adat is the combination of customs and traditional folk laws in a wide range of areas of contractual relationships, family relationships and the like.

Aksakal is the head of the clan, the elder, a venerable elderly man.

Outing is the public disclosure of personal information regarding a person's sexual orientation or gender identity without his / her consent. It is not equivalent to coming out.

Ahir Zaman (Arabic) is the end time, the end of the world in Islam.

Biological sex is a set of biological characteristics, which serve as the basis for attributing the male or female sex to a person or defining them as an intersex person.

Bisexuality is the romantic and sexual attraction between individuals of the same or different sex or gender.

Blat rules (thieves' law, thieves' code) are unwritten rules and norms of behaviour among thieves during the times of the Soviet Union and in former Soviet countries. These were developed as a result of the isolation of criminals (thieves) as a social group amidst government opposition.

Butch lesbian is a lesbian who exhibits a masculine behaviour pattern.

Wali is a guardian, the oldest man on the father's side the family, who is responsible for the woman's behaviour.

Gender is a set of characteristics defined by society and culture, which determines the social behaviour of men and women, the relationship between them, certain psychological characteristics and roles in life.

Gender identity is an individual's self-awareness of their intrinsic characteristics of gender, which may or may not coincide with the gender assigned to them at birth. This includes the sensation of one's body and other forms of expression, such as clothing, speech, and behaviour. Two types of gender identity are distinguished: cisgender – when a person's biological sex matches their gender identity, and transgender – when a person's biological sex does not match their gender identity.

Gender norms are a set of rules of conduct and the requirements for people based on the gender assigned to them at birth.

Homosexuality is the romantic and sexual attraction to people with a certain gender identity.

Homophobia refers to uncontrolled negative emotions (fear, disgust, anger, etc.) in relation to lesbians and gays. In a broader sense it refers to any manifestations of a negative attitude (hatred, hostility, aggression) towards LGBTs.

Heteronormativity is a model of social structure in which marriage is possible exclusively in between a man and a woman. Other civic relations also take into account the gender normativity of subjects, and all gender nonconforming persons are denied certain civil rights; it is the mandatory heterosexual lifestyle prescribed by society and the state for all people.

Jamia / Jamaat are groups of Muslims formed with the aim of studying Islam together, performing religious rites, mutual assistance, regular fellowship, etc.

Life strategy is a form or method of consciously planning and constructing one's life in accordance with one's values and aims by means of shaping the future step by step and orientating towards the long term.

Iman is faith in the truthfulness of Islam; faith in Allah, angels, Scriptures, prophets, Judgement Day and retribution for good and evil.

Qadi is a Muslim judge who passes verdicts on the basis of the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Coming out is the process of revealing one's homosexuality, bisexuality or transgender identity to others. This process begins with self-acceptance and lasts a lifetime as one may come out to every new person they meet.

Queer (translated from English as “strange”, “odd” or “perverted”) is a term that denotes any model of behaviour and identity that does not conform to the traditional, patriarchal model (e.g. LGBT+, BDSM, child-free, feminist, pro-feminist and other egalitarian models).

Blood feud is a custom that developed in the times of the tribal system as a universal means of protecting the honour, dignity and property of the clan. It refers to the duty of the relatives of the victim to take revenge on the killer or their relatives¹.

Blood enemy is one on whom blood vengeance is or will be taken.

Kufr is the term used to denote the worst sin in Islam – unbelief. A person who has fallen into kufr is called *kafir*, that is, an infidel.

LGBT+ is an abbreviation for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons, queer persons, intersex persons, asexuals, pansexuals and persons of other gender identities.

Maddhab is a widespread Islamic term used in theological literature to denote a teaching, doctrine, school, or method of following the mystical path (in Sufism). It is most commonly used to denote a theological and legal school of thought.

Madrasa is a Muslim religious and educational institution.

Martskhoy (translated from Chechen) are the relatives of the husband.

Mahram in Islamic law is a close relative whom a woman has no right to marry; however, the woman may be alone and travel with this relative.

Muftiate is a self-governing centralised religious organisation that operates on a voluntary basis and unites Muslim religious institutions (religious and educational institutions), as well as the residents of a certain territory, for the purpose of practising and disseminating Islam. It is headed by a mufti.

Namus is a set of moral principles regarding honour and shame.

Straight is a slang word that denotes heterosexual persons.

Nikah is the marriage between a man and a woman in Islamic family law.

Sex assigned at birth is the sex that was identified by the obstetrician and/or legally documented.

Salafism is a movement in Sunni Islam that unites Muslim religious leaders who, at different times in the history of Islam, have called for orientating towards the lifestyle and faith of the early Muslim community and of their righteous ancestors. The central concept of Salafi Islam is faith in the unequivocal oneness of God (Tawhid). Salafis believe that their primary goal is to purify Islam of anything they consider to be alien or an impurity. This is based on the cultural, ethnic or other features of certain Muslim nations. They reject what they consider innovations in Islam (*bid'ah*). Salafis reject the possibility of ‘mediation’ between Allah and man.

Matchmaking refers to the arrangement made by the parents of the bride and groom regarding their marriage or the introduction of a bridegroom of the parents' choice to a woman.

Sexual orientation is a component of a person's sexuality, which is defined as a relatively stable emotional, romantic, sexual or erotic (sensual) attraction of an individual towards individuals of a certain sex or both sexes. The World Health Organisation identifies three types of sexual orientation that are recognised as normative: a) homosexuality – attraction towards persons of the same sex, b) bisexuality – attraction towards persons of one's own and the other sex; c) heterosexuality – attraction towards persons of a different sex.

Sexuality is one of the central aspects of a person's being throughout their life. It includes gender, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, sexual instinct, pleasure, eroticism, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is manifested and expressed in a person's

¹ <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/296137/>; Blood feuds // The Big Dictionary of Legal Terms edited by A.Y. Sukhareva, V.E. Krutskikh. M., 2003; Grathoff S. Fehde // Institut für Geschichtliche Landeskunde an der Universität Mainz.

thoughts, desires, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, actions, behaviour, gender roles and relationships. Despite the fact that sexuality can include all these aspects, some might not be experienced or manifested. Sexuality is influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.

Sexually repressive cultures are cultures in which sexuality is suppressed in various ways. Similar cultures exist in all corners of the world. Sexual repression is usually justified by religious and moral principles. Sexuality is justified solely for the purpose of reproduction. Any conversations about sexuality are forbidden; nudity and physiology are not discussed. Marriage is usually regulated by the older generation.

Survival strategies are a model of consciously planning and constructing one's own life in light of significant limitations (threats to one's freedom, health and life) and its implementation on the basis of one's system of values and goals by shaping the future step by step.

Sunni Muslims are the followers of a major branch of Islam, where the first four caliphs are recognised as the legitimate successors of Muhammad and are revered along with the Qur'an and the Sunnah – numerous records about the life of the Prophet Muhammad

Sufism or Taşawwuf is an ascetic mystical form of Islam, including both teaching and spiritual practices aimed at spiritual development and combatting hidden spiritual vices; Muslim asceticism; the lifestyle of the followers of Sufism and their association; one of the main branches of classical Muslim philosophy. The followers of Sufism are called Sufis.

Takfirism is a radical Islamist ideology of Egyptian origin, the basis of which is accusing Muslims of unbelief (kufr).

Talaq is divorce in Islam. According to Islam, a husband or a Sharia judge on behalf of the wife, has the right to declare a divorce. All madhhabs postulate that one should not give a divorce to a wife during menstruation or postpartum haemorrhage. A wife can ask for a divorce if there is a substantial reason: if her husband has gone missing; if he does not provide for his wife financially; if he does not fulfil his marital duties; if she discovered some defects in her husband that he had concealed or if he had concealed a disease he had.

Tariqat is a method of spiritual development and study of religion in Islam, practiced by representatives of Islamic movements such as Sufism.

Teip is a historically formed association of people according to kinship among Vainakh Chechens; a clan.

Theme (tema) is a Russian slang word that denotes LGBT+ persons (hereinafter – LGBTs)

Transgender means having a mismatch between the gender identity or gender expression of a person and the sex assigned to them at birth.

Transphobia is a term that refers to various types of aversion, hatred, or rejection of transgender persons.

Tukhum is the “big family”, a clan, a wide circle of relatives, or a union of teips.

Honour killing / gender-related killing is the killing of a family member, usually a woman, for putting the family to shame (usually for sexual actions that are forbidden in a given society and culture). Committed by relatives.

Femme is a lesbian with a feminine model of behaviour.

Hijama is a special technique of bloodletting, an Islamic medical practice.

Sharia is a complex of beliefs and religious legal norms that a Muslim is expected to follow. Sharia norms encompass a person's relationship with God, their relationship with other people and the community. It regulates almost all areas of everyday life.

Introduction

Not only is this study an attempt to broaden the knowledge and understanding of specialists of the helping professions, activists, human rights activists and decision makers at the state level about the situation of queer women in the region. It is also an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the conditions in which lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons in different republics of the North Caucasus live, to step back from a colonial approach in human rights work and to document the current situation in an accessible form. We are convinced that only a deep understanding of the problem and respect for women's experiences will help unite efforts and reduce risks for queer women in the North Caucasus.

Member of the Queer Women of North Caucasus Support Group Initiative

In 2018 the Queer Women of North Caucasus published its first report, “Violence against queer women in the North Caucasus”. For the first time interviews and stories of the violence experienced by non-heterosexual women became available. This study has allowed us to systematise the unique experiences of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons in that region. The study attracted the attention of human rights organisations, but there was next to no reaction from decision-makers at the state level.

From December 2018 to February 2020 members of the Queer Women of North Caucasus initiative kept receiving requests from non-heterosexual women for legal and psychological support in situations of vulnerability to violence based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression.

The attention of human rights activists around the world was attracted by a publication in Novaya Gazeta² about the persecution, killings and violence against gays in the Chechen Republic in April 2017. Since then, the Chechen Republic has remained a region in which crimes against homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons are not investigated and ignored at the republican and national levels. At the same time, lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons who live not only in Chechnya, but also in other republics of the North Caucasus, remain nearly invisible.

This study aims to examine survival strategies of queer women in the North Caucasus. A premise of our work is the idea that non-heterosexual women and transgender men live in conditions of intersecting social stigma. It is impossible to separate the influence of being socialised as a woman (according to the sex attributed at birth) and being a non-heterosexual woman or transgender person. Restrictions, requirements, prohibitions, vulnerabilities and penal systems intertwine and exacerbate risks for lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons living in sexually repressive cultures.

The key concept of the study is “survival strategy”. Related categories are “life strategies”, “life path”, “life techniques”, “subjective image of one’s life path”, “meaning of life”, “life scenario”, “lifestyle”, “lifestyle choices”, “temporary prospects”, “life prospects”, “life orientation”, “life objective”, “life programmes”, “attitude towards life” and others.

H. Tome uses the term “life techniques” and defines them as a person’s consciously planned, intentional action that makes up a small part of their responses to the hardships of life. According to H. Tome’s notion, a person is in constant interaction with society and their behaviour is determined by the way a situation perceived (understood, interpreted) rather than by the objective reality of a situation. For our study, this position is important, as the situations described below are perceived, understood and interpreted differently by non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus and beyond.

² Honour killing. How the ambitions of a well-known LGBT activist prompted the return of a dreadful ancient tradition in Chechnya / Novaya Gazeta, №34 – 2017. <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti>

In her monograph titled “Life Strategy”³, K.A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya notes that a life strategy is a constant adjustment of one’s personality and way of life; building one’s life on the basis of one’s individual capabilities and potential and afterwards on the capabilities and potential acquired later in life. A life strategy consists of methods of changing and transforming one’s conditions and life situation in accordance with one’s values; in making a stand for what matters through compromise in things that matter less, in overcoming one’s fear of loss and in finding oneself.

The main question of our study is how non-heterosexual women living in conditions of strict patriarchy, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, xenophobia, a supported system of oppression of women through physical, sexualised, psychological violence and with extremely limited opportunities, are able to change and transform their life conditions in accordance with their values? How can this happen when an important part of one’s personality — one’s identity — is essentially banned and when one has no right to choose their sexual and gender identity?

In academic literature, some definitions are given for related categories:

- A certain (more or less conscious) way of constructing a person’s own life in accordance with their inherent system of values, goals; a regulator of social behaviour. Life strategy enables the integrity of life, determines one’s way of being and is the most important criterion of one’s maturity and psychological well-being (A.E. Sozontov)⁴;
- The structure of one’s life goals, unfolded in the temporal perspective of the psychological future (M.O. Mdivani, P. B. Kodess)⁵;
- A way of consciously planning and constructing one’s own life through shaping the future step by step (V. A. Berkovsky, M. A. Belugina)⁶;
- A socially determined system for orienting a person (in the private and public spheres) to the long-term perspective (D.Yu. Chebotareva)⁷;
- The existing (stable, typical) shapes and forms of human life, aimed at meeting one’s needs, achieving one’s goals and making meaning in life (O.V. Rudakova)⁸;
- An individual way of constructing and implementing one’s life goals in the temporal perspective and matching them with one’s own values, needs, personal qualities and life meaning (O.A. Voronina)⁹;
- The system of a person’s notions about their future life, which orients and directs their day-to-day behaviour for a sufficiently long time, a way of conscious planning and constructing one’s own own life. One’s life strategy characterises the person’s way of life, their orientation in terms of aspirations and development, their ways of changing and transforming their conditions in accordance with their values, meaning and goals (L.G. Buzunova, M.R. Plotnitskaya, N.L. Shaposhnikov)¹⁰.

3 Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, K.A. Life strategy. M: Mysl’, 1991.

4 Sozontov, A.E. Life strategies of modern students in the big city / Practical Psychology Journal, №5 – 2007 – pp. 129 -146.

5 Mdivani, M.O. Methodology of studying life strategies / M.O. Mdivani, P.B. Kodess / Psychological Matters, №4 – 2006 – pp. 146 -150.

6 Belugina, M.A. Life strategies of modern students: a psychological study / M.A. Belugina / Psychology in the higher education institution, №6 – 2008 – pp. 93 – 103.

7 Chebotareva D.Yu. Life strategies of students of the south of Russia, D.Yu. Chebotareva: extended abstract of Candidate of Sociological Sciences dissertation – Rostov-on-Don, 2006, 26 p.

8 Rudakova, O.V. Life strategies of modern Russian students / O.V. Rudakova: Candidate of Sociological Sciences dissertation – M. – 2004 – 178 p.

9 Voronina, O.A. Life strategies as a factor in the attitude of students to educational activities / O.A. Voronina: extended abstract of Candidate of Psychological Sciences dissertation – Kursk, 2008.

10 Buzunova, L.G. Life strategies of women in provincial Russia / L.G. Buzunova / Psychological science and education, №3 – 2007 – pp. 47 – 59.

Thus, most authors define life strategy as a form or way of consciously planning and constructing one's life in accordance with one's values, meaning and aims by way of shaping the future step by step and orientating towards a long-term perspective¹¹.

Based on this, we define "survival strategies" as a model of conscious planning and constructing of one's life in the face of significant restrictions to its implementation (threats to one's freedom, health and life) in accordance to one's system of values, meaning and goals by shaping the future step by step.

The following ethical principles served as the basis for the research process: participation was voluntary, anonymous, confidential, respectful towards human rights and preserving human dignity and respect. Since the information in the interview could contain facts that potentially reveal the identity of the participants, we did not indicate the names of their settlements, their names or exact age. One of the methods used for ensuring confidentiality is the coding system used to collect and process data about the respondents.

The study was conducted from July 2019 to March 2020 in the Russian Federation.

The main research methods were: free-form interviews, anonymous surveys, focus groups, focused social media monitoring.

During this period, interviews were conducted with experts, lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons; surveys were conducted in thematic groups on social media. Six experts took part in the interviews. We were obliged to hide some of their names because of the high risk of persecution. The respondents were 37 homosexual, bisexual women and transgender people (35 lesbian/bisexual women, 1 transgender woman and 1 transgender man). The high risk factor and fear of disclosure, threats to respondents and their loved ones largely limited our ability to expand the sample of the study. Additionally, we collected and recorded information at round table discussions and analysed journalistic publications, investigations and available reports on the situation.

All respondents who participated in the study were anonymised and labelled by essential characteristics: place of birth and residence, age and marital status. The "under 30" age group included respondents between 17 and 29 years of age, and the "over 30" group included non-heterosexual women and a transgender man between 30 and 46 years of age. This division is down to the fact that a woman's 30th birthday marks an important boundary that determines her social status and opens up access to minimal privileges. The "married" label means that the respondent is in a religious or secular marriage, and the "unmarried" label means that the respondent was previously in a religious or secular marriage, or is divorced.

At the same time, we understand that at the present stage it is impossible to reach some of the more vulnerable groups to the extent we would have liked to. These include older queer women living in stable long-term relationships, transgender women and men, queer women living in sparsely populated towns of the North Caucasus. The practical impossibility of obtaining a representative sample remains a significant limitation.

The geography of the study:

In the study, we focused on 5 republics of the region: the Republic of Dagestan, the Republic of Ingushetia, the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Republic of North Ossetia – State of Alania and the Chechen Republic. Despite the fact that historical analysis is not the purpose of our study, it is important to note that the resistance to the expansion of the Russian Empire, the Soviet state, the deportation of Karachays in 1943, Vainakhs (about 500,000 people) and Balkars in 1944, the first and second Chechen wars on at the turn of the 20th-21st centuries, terrorist acts in the territory of the republics of the North Caucasus and the Ossetian-Ingush conflict remain crucial for understanding the current situation. The interplay of Islam and Christianity with echoes of polytheism largely determines the religious diversity of the region and the popularity of some near-shamanistic practices, beliefs in magic and witchcraft. Moreover, the political situation and law enforcement practice are of particular importance.

11 Liakhova, M.A. Psychological components of an individual's life strategy / Vestnik KemSU, №3 (43) – 2010.

Thus, appeals from respondents from the Chechen Republic raise the most concern, as the Chechen Republic has no legal mechanisms for protecting lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons against violence.

The value of this report based on the results of a qualitative study is that it is a unique opportunity to document the current situation of non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus, their possibilities and restrictions on their survival.

Since 2018, several reports have been published in Russia regarding the situation of women in the North Caucasus:

- “Killed by gossip.” Honour killings of women in the North Caucasus. Report on the results of a qualitative sociological study in the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya (Russian Federation). Yu.A. Antonova, Senior Associate of the Legal Initiative Project. S.V. Sirazhudinova, Cand. Political Sciences, President of the Centre for Research on Present-Day Global Issues and Regional Problems “Caucasus. World. Development”.

- “Killed by gossip – 2. Analysis of court sentences in criminal cases involving honour killings in the republics of the North Caucasus / Yulia Antonova, Saida Sirazhudinova / 2020. - 54 p.

- Mutilating practices in the republics of the North Caucasus: coping strategies. Yu.A. Antonova, a lawyer collaborating with the Legal Initiative Project. S.V. Sirazhudinova Cand. Political Sciences, President of the Centre for Research on Present-Day Global Issues and Regional Problems “Caucasus. World. Development”.

- Memorial Human Rights Centre. Bulletin of the "Memorial" Human Rights Centre. The situation in the conflict zone in the North Caucasus: an assessment of human rights defenders. Fall 2019.

- Memorial Human Rights Centre. Bulletin of the “Memorial” Human Rights Centre. The situation in the conflict zone in the North Caucasus: an assessment of human rights defenders. Summer 2019.

- Memorial Human Rights Centre. Bulletin of the Human Rights Centre "Memorial". The situation in the conflict zone in the North Caucasus: an assessment of human rights defenders. Spring 2019

- Memorial Human Rights Centre. Bulletin of the "Memorial" Human Rights Centre. The situation in the conflict zone in the North Caucasus: an assessment of human rights defenders. Winter 2018 – 2019

- Memorial Human Rights Centre. Bulletin of the "Memorial" Human Rights Centre. The situation in the conflict zone in the North Caucasus: an assessment of human rights defenders. Fall 2018.

Media sources from 2018 to 2020 published journalist investigations and separate articles on the situation of women in the North Caucasus: <https://daptar.ru>, <https://www.kavkazr.com>, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu>, https://t.me/kavkaz_gender, <https://novayagazeta.ru>

1. General factors determining the status of women in the republics of the North Caucasus

The North Caucasus Federal District became a separate federal district on January 19, 2010 by a presidential decree, which identified seven Russian regions: the Republic of Dagestan (capital: Makhachkala), the Republic of Ingushetia (capital: Magas), the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic (capital: Nalchik), and Karachaevo Circassian Republic (capital: Cherkessk), Republic of North Ossetia – State of Alania (capital: Vladikavkaz), Stavropol Territory (capital: Stavropol), Chechen Republic (capital: Grozny). According to the Federal State Statistics Service, the population of the district is 9,928,721 people (2020). The urban population in the North Caucasus Federal District comprises 49.28%. The district has been characterised by population growth as of 2010. The North Caucasus Federal District is characterised by ethnic diversity: for instance, according to the 2010 census, the population of the district was made up of around 30% Russians, 14% Chechens, 9% Avars, 5% Dargins, 5% Kabardins, 5% Ossetians, 5% Kumyks, 4% Ingush, 4% Lezgins, 2% Karachays, 2% Armenians, 2% Laks and about 1% or less Azerbaijanis, Tabasarans, Balkans, Nogays, Circassians, Ukrainians, Abazins, Greeks, Gypsies, Turks, Aguls, Rutulis, Tatars, Georgians, Turkmen, Koreans, Tsakhurs, Belarusians and others. The North Caucasus is undoubtedly a unique region of the Russian Federation with strong traditions and a rich, heterogeneous history. In the history of the republics of the North Caucasus, there have been many wars, armed conflicts and repressions that have influenced the worldview and life of the population. These events also influenced the status of women in general, law enforcement practice, women's activity in the struggle for their rights and their roles in the family.



picture 1

Map of the North Caucasus Federal District
North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD)

- Stavropol region
- Republic of Dagestan
- Republic of Ingushetia
- Chechen Republic

- Kabardino-Balkarian Republic
- Karachay-Cherkess Republic
- Republic of North Ossetia – the State of Alania

According to public opinion, all evil comes from women.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

Public life in the North Caucasus is regulated through several institutions. All of them, to varying degrees, affect the daily life of homosexual, bisexual women and transgender persons.

Adat is one of the most important institutions in the North Caucasus – it refers to the norms and practices of customary law. Adats govern the whole life of a person and the community. Adat includes blood vengeance, the ransom paid by the groom's family to his bride's relatives, and much more. Non-legal customs in the Caucasus include the veneration of elders, hospitality, the custom of placing children from families of a higher rank into the care of families of a lower rank in order to establish relations of kinship between the families. Adat recognises collective responsibility for offenses. Thus, according to adat, not only is a killer considered a blood enemy¹², but also his immediate family, with whom the killer could be banished from the community for a certain term or forever¹³.

Adat is often represented solely as unwritten custom. Indeed, adat trials would take place orally in one of the spoken local languages and did not have a developed written record-keeping system until the beginning of the 20th century. However, the most important decisions on the adat were recorded on the margins or special inserts of handwritten copies of the Qur'an, and sometimes they were inscribed on the walls of mosques and subsequently served as the basis for delivering a verdict in similar cases¹⁴. Adat regulates all spheres of life, but the main difficulty in its application lies precisely in the fact that customary law is not fixed in writing and does not reflect all type of relations in modern society.

Chechnya is ruled by traditional law – adats. Some say it is written out, some say it isn't, but I've never seen them myself. Some makes records of the memories of the older generations. There are no written rules. I asked my father: "Where does it say that I can't ride a bike?" To which my father replied: "We just know". I would add: "We just remember". It's something that is passed on and spread through conversations with aunts and uncles; you hear something here and there and realise what you can and can't do, what's OK and what isn't.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Now it's hard to say how different the adats of different ethnic groups in Dagestan are, because they are changing, they were changing and they were not recorded. It's a kind of oral law. It might have been something written on the margins of the Qur'an by some qadi. The only period we have some idea about is the middle of the 19th century during the Caucasian war, when a bunch of not only the military men, but also ethnographers

¹² A blood enemy is a person who is in a blood feud with another (a custom that requires relatives to take revenge on the killer or his relatives).

¹³ Vladimir Bobrovnikov, Caucasian adat: <https://postnauka.ru/faq/40740>

¹⁴ Vladimir Bobrovnikov, Caucasian adat: <https://postnauka.ru/faq/40740>

came here. Information about the Caucasian highlanders¹⁵ – that's where you can find all the documents and criminal news. Then there are local historians, they simply write down clear speech, and that reveals some incredible layers. There are villages where animals live underneath houses and warm them and there are villages where animals are not allowed. Differences exist even at such a level. But for the most part they are similar. Some people have a custom where they fire a rifle after the first wedding night as a symbol of the girl's chastity, while in another village this means that the girl was not a virgin when she married. The details are different, but it's the same pattern.

By now people have forgotten what adats are. How do people greet each other? It's not uncommon to see a child in Makhachkala accompanied by his father or some men to walk up to a group of adults and reach out his hand to greet them. In the Dagestan that everyone is pining for he would have only been allowed to greet them at a distance. Only an older person could extend his hand as a sign of trust, in advance of the future.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

There were adats during the Soviet era, too, everything was written down. Now more and more new things are presented as adats, but they were never part of our adats. Even when it comes to weddings and funerals. It's too ostentatious and things weren't like this before – I remember my childhood. Adats are military regulations. Everything is based on minimisation. Even weddings were alcohol-free, no frills. If you want to dance – be my guest. No one would prepare a special meal for the bride and groom. There would be a circle, everyone danced, but they didn't eat because a place for eating is meant for eating and a place for dancing is meant for dancing. We didn't have banquets. Nowadays they have banquets and pretend it's an adat, like this has always been the custom. The bride's father isn't allowed to attend – that's how it was. That's how it is, historically. I can't explain it rationally or irrationally. By the way, the groom doesn't attend that either. Only the bride. The groom and his friends aren't allowed to be seen in public. At the wedding there are the bride, the groom's relatives and the women on the bride's side of the family, but not the men. In Dagestan, however, the bride and the groom appear together at the wedding. There are so many differences. Chechens forbid marriage between close relatives, while in Dagestan you can marry your cousin – you can't do that in Chechnya.

Human rights defender, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Sharia law is a complex of beliefs and religious and legal norms that a Muslim should follow. Sharia norms encompass a person's relationship with God and his relations with other people and the community, regulating almost all areas of everyday life. In the North Caucasus, Muslims are mostly Sunnis. Sufism is supported by the state and strengthens the muftiat in the republics of the North Caucasus. Sufism is an ascetic-mystical trend in Islam, including both teaching and spiritual practices aimed at spiritual development and combatting one's hidden spiritual vices.

I talked with many Sufis, they don't read the Qur'an – they listen to the imam, both in Chechnya and in Ingushetia. They are guided by what a "knowledgeable person" tells them. For example, that hell will consist of 70% of women. However, he does not know on what grounds a woman goes to hell. If she does namaz, does Hajj, fasts and her husband is happy with her, then she automatically goes to heaven. So, where do the 70% of women in hell come from? Men need to make more of an effort [to get into heaven]. They listen to the interpretation given by the muftiate. It is given by the muftiate, then it spreads, it is transformed in the process, and you can imagine what kind of interpretation

15 A collection of data about the Caucasus highlanders. Issue 1, 2 M.: MNTPO "Adir", 1992.

it becomes by the time it reaches your doorstep. Many people don't even know that the penalty for leaving Islam is death.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

Sharia law plays a key role, along with adat, in regulating social relations in the North Caucasus. Although Sharia courts are not officially recognised in Russia, their verdicts are well trusted.

How do I put it... officially, Sharia courts in Dagestan and Chechnya don't exist. They currently act as mediative courts and their verdicts are not obligatory to follow. They are advisory in nature, since there are no coercive mechanisms as we live in a secular country. If we were abroad, where Sharia law and Islamic law are officially instated, they would use coercive mechanisms like the ones used by a secular government. The court would deliver a verdict. At present we have a law on mediation. How does a Sharia court case proceed? We choose whom to go to, a person both of us trust. The first question they will ask is: "Will you follow through with our verdict? Do you trust us?" If you say that it depends on the verdict, no one is going to proceed with your case. It will only happen if I agree to the verdict of the Sharia court.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Adat and Sharia law can contradict each other or coincide when it comes to rules and prohibitions. The difficulty is that in the past people had to find ways of reconciling the contradictions between these two important institutions.

In some villages the mother could transfer her allotment of land to her daughter according to the adats. In the mountains, money was not valued so much as land. When a girl married someone from another village, they did not approve of this, since they would be losing land. Also, according to Sharia law, daughters receive one third of the share that sons get, I believe. I don't think a mother could have land of her own and pass it on to her daughter. In some ways, Sharia law was progressive when it came to women, while in others, with regard to finance, it was repressive. According to Sharia law, a woman was supposed to stay home and not leave the house without a mahram¹⁶. A nephew or uncle had to accompany her. But if the Dagestani women stay at home, life will collapse. Therefore, you need to be flexible. They did not stay home, because they needed to work: to go to the field, to carry hay, to do a lot of things – and they could not live according to Sharia law in this regard. But in some matters Sharia law was softer, since honour killings were not allowed in the same way they exist here. According to the Adat, on the other hand, such a killing might be carried out on the basis of mere suspicion or gossip

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

At present, the institution of elders has a high authority among the population, but at the political level, their decisions often remain insignificant.

The institute of elders: they are still high-profile and they still play a role within their family. However, on a national level, they don't play a fundamental role anywhere, neither in Dagestan, nor in Chechnya.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

¹⁶ Mahram – in Islamic law is a close relative, whom a woman is forbidden to marry because of family ties and whom she can be alone with and travel with.

Laws of the Russian Federation. Even Russian citizens often have a strong opinion that the North Caucasus is “not Russia”, but rather a special territory, with its own laws based on “traditions”. The current state of affairs in the North Caucasus supports this fallacy. Formally, the laws of the Russian Federation are in force or should be in force throughout the North Caucasus, including Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. But law enforcement practice shows that national laws lack authority in the republics of the North Caucasus.

However, it would not be right to present all three institutions as unrelated and independently functioning. Historically, adat absorbed much of the Islamic way of life and influenced Sharia practices, although many contradictions remained. For a long time, the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation fought against Sharia courts and some customary rules. At present, adat, Sharia and Russian state law constitute a mosaic and hybrid system of community law¹⁷.

Everyone who lives according to “our traditions” forget that Sharia law and traditions are two different things. They coincide in some ways and largely diverge. Imam Shamil was not only against Russia, but also against those who are not religious enough and against traditions too. But few people remember that. Everyone has their own ideas about traditions. When they begin to hate on women, they forget that they are not entitled to say a word to a stranger’s granddaughter, wife, mother or niece. He would have to go to the men in her family and bring the issue to them. And if they rip his head off, he has no right to complain because he had no business meddling... Basically, he has no right to talk with a woman he does not know, unless he is an aksakal. Anything else is a violation of the adats and Sharia law. All this vice policing is an attempt to take the prophet’s law and fit it into the mould of state law.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

In addition to adat, Sharia and state law, the **political regime** plays a big role, and the Chechen Republic is the most striking example of this, which greatly concerns the human rights community. The word of the Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, and his decisions may contradict the laws of the Russian Federation, the adat, and Sharia law, but despite this, they will be executed.

The Kadyrov regime is a whole other story. If only it were any other kind of regime – but this is pure despotism. What are people afraid of? What’s the most terrible kind of person? A hypocrite. If you watch state-sponsored TV, you will see all of them looking like perfect saints and believers – goody-goodies. In reality, however, something unimaginable and terrible is happening – it’s despotism. On the other hand, can a different kind of regime handle this pack of bandits? Since the days of Stalin, we have been living with Stockholm syndrome. We start loving those who terrorise us and trying to justify them.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

In their interviews, the experts pointed to criminal concepts (blat rules) as a factor determining life in the North Caucasus as a whole and the situation of women in particular. Formally, these criminal concepts impose a ban on sexual violence against women, but the rules of the criminal world are changing and, on the whole, the purpose of women is considered to be to satisfy a man’s needs.

¹⁷ Vladimir Bobrovnikov, Caucasian adat: <https://postnauka.ru/faq/40740>

Now life is governed by the complex interweaving of adats, Sharia law and criminal concepts. In the small town of Makhachkala there were eight penitentiaries. When my father came here to work in the police, in the 50ies of the 20th century, he said that there were either four, or five “thieves in law”. I can’t say it was a criminal town, but the fact there were 8 prisons within the town – and the town was a lot smaller back then – had an impact. I believe it was in the sixties that the prisons started to close. It’s a young city.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

Criminal concepts appeared because there were a lot of convicts – that’s the first reason. But we, Chechnya and Dagestan, every Caucasian republic in the nineties all took part in conflicts and showdowns. That’s where these criminal concepts came from – from the convicts. “He’s a thief in law” is said almost with admiration. It’s a disease that has affected all of Russia as a result of the nineties, and we have added our own flavour to it.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

At the moment, the criminal class and culture are still spreading not only in the North Caucasus, but throughout Russia. In combination with economic factors and the political regime, the authority of the Adat and Sharia law, the situation becomes a direct threat to the freedom and position of women.

It is a regime that requires absolute submission from a woman. They need depressed women, not performance artists, because it’s an audition for the boss’ bed. Everyone wants to have the same crazy money as they do. For some reason they decided that the coolest person was the one who throws away money and has a cool car, that’s why you’ll find many of them scattered around Russia. They mostly deal in robberies, assault and fraud. They’ll go to any length to get money. In the past, Chechens would go to Russia to earn money, but that isn’t the case today. Of course we don’t like it when people talk about “ethnic crime”, but it is happening. I’m not saying there’s a bigger percentage of criminals among our people, but we have such a large population and only ten percent of them work. What are the others doing?

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Public opinion. For the whole family or teip, the opinion of neighbours, acquaintances, relatives and society in the broad sense is important.

This is the very premise of our culture – not only that, but our whole lifestyle is built on this. We have an expression – nah hu er du – which means “What will people say?” This means we, and especially the older generation, really care about the opinions of others. It’s a really important thing. We, the younger generation, think about the value of a wedding and the value of its scale. In reality, a fully fledged wedding is an event for everyone except the bride and groom. The groom can’t attend and when you ask the bride about the wedding afterwards, she doesn’t remember half of it because she is shocked about everything that is happening. And so a question arises: does it make sense to spend so much money on it? Also, we can’t even say that we don’t want a wedding like that, because it’s not up to us to decide. If a wedding is held, it is a traditional wedding. If I told my mother that I didn’t want to do it that way, she would say: “I didn’t find you in the street to send you off without a proper ceremony”. It even matters to the mother – nah hu er du – What will people say if I do this? I have a friend whose mother is Russian and whose father is Chechen and even that Russian mother wouldn’t allow her daughter not to have a traditional wedding because she knows she will get grief for it. People will say: “It’s because she’s Russian”.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

A separate but important factor is the **economic situation** in the North Caucasus. In March 2020, official statistics showed that the the North Caucasus was the region with the highest rate of unemployment¹⁸. Given the tough patriarchy enshrined in both Adats and Sharia law, women are more vulnerable to economic violence and have limited access to high-income jobs.

All these factors reinforce each other, intertwine and directly affect the position of women in general, and especially make non-heterosexual women, who live in conditions of intersecting stigma, vulnerable. It is impossible to study the survival strategies of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons in the North Caucasus, taking into account only the high level of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and the persecution of LGBT+ people: it is also necessary to take into account the general situation of women and the violations of women's rights in different republics of the North Caucasus.

¹⁸ Regions with the highest unemployment rate named, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, <https://rg.ru/2020/03/16/reg-skfo/nazvany-regiony-s-samym-vysokim-urovnem-bezraboticy.html>

2. Historical changes in the social status of women in the North Caucasus

Danger was imminent when the defenders of Hunzakh hesitated. Khan Paku-bike appeared among the Hunzakh Abreks. With a naked saber in her hand, with a crimson blush on her face, with a blazing gaze, majestic and terrible in her anger, the Khan shamed them, noting the hesitation: “Avarians! You are not worthy to carry weapons! If you are cowards, give it to us women, and cover yourself with our veils!”

From the Legend of Pahu Bike, the Khan

The situation of women has changed in the North Caucasus over the past century, mainly under the influence of external factors. Experts note that during the period of the Soviet Union, women had more opportunities. Of course, the Adats were in force, but state law somehow fought against such common law practices as blood feuds, honour killings and polygamy.

In Soviet times there were state farms and collective farms and no matter how much we grumble about them, but women worked there, and men went to Russia to find work. Almost 80% of the adult male population left for the so-called “shabashki” (side jobs) – they built ferries and roads in Russia. They could end up in the Arkhangelsk region or in Siberia. They earned money there, while the wife stayed home. If you open the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, you will see that back then Chechnya produced 47% of the tobacco in the Soviet Union – this was all female labour. This tobacco was grown there. Also...And I don’t claim to have the absolute truth... but I think that freedom is only possible when there is at least nominal economic independence. When the wife is not forced to ask her husband for tights, for makeup and lipstick. If she is forced to ask for it, then she is pretty much enslaved. Because it then depends on her husband’s character. If she had at least some kind of economic independence, she would be freer.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

The situation of girls in the Chechen Republic can be described as traditional. They had a traditional upbringing, but they also had many opportunities. They went to school. Of course, it differed from person to person and depended on the family. In each family, a girl was required to get at least finish middle and high school or get vocational training. Chechen women were educated. Back then the area was multinational: there were Armenians, Jews, Russians, Greeks, Ingushs, Chechens – a lot of people lived there. I feel that they sought to give their children an education precisely because they say how the Russian-speaking population were being educated. It was normal for a girl to go to school, especially in Ingush families. For the Ingush people living in Chechnya, this was generally considered the norm, and girls married late. Everyone knew that Ingush women got married late because they had to finish school first. The Ingush, they were more conservative: if you get married, then that's it forever. You had little chance of building a new family, while the Chechens could get divorced and they got married early. They had a neutral attitude towards divorce, by the way, and if they got divorced, then they could easily start a new family. Children had to be left in the father's family, that's all. And yet, the Ingush did not have this right, while Chechen women did.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Our generation accepts second wives more. The older generation would accept infidelity, but they would never accept a second wife. In the past, men very rarely married a second

time¹⁹. I'm talking about my father's generation, they are 50-60 years old. It was something else. But now it's a lot more common to see young people getting married a second time. I can't quite explain. They give religious explanations, but religion has many different things to say about polygamy. It's not a very simple step – the Almighty doesn't come down and tell you to do it, it even says that this is not for everyone. If you marry [a second woman], you have to provide equal opportunities. But our men gloss over that. They only see that it is allowed. But they miss the important details. When you start digging deeper into what's permitted and forbidden, you find that you need to study everything and understand the origins. They are ignorant in this regard.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

In Soviet times, secular law had influence. For instance, marrying a Russian girl was considered to be prestigious and helped the man get ahead in his career. The Russians found many things very surprising, but many Russian women were very patriarchal, too. In the Soviet years, young girls who had just graduated from teaching college were sent here. They were sent to teach in the mountain areas. There were many sad stories – some were raped because they were strangers in the village, women without a man, belonging to nobody, with no guardian or family. The situation in the villages had also changed because women needed to be promoted. Say, in Soviet times it was considered cool for a woman to be in charge of a collective farm. The women of Dagestan are not used to being silent, so they had every opportunity to climb the career ladder – the Soviet government supported that. It also punished honour killings, which is not the case today. It's no longer an aggravating circumstance and the government keeps saying: "It's part of their way of thinking". The Soviet government fought against honour killings. It's difficult to assess how successful this fight was, but in the 90ies when the region started searching for its identity, honour killings were on the climb".

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

Unfortunately, attitudes towards women are changing now and they were very different in the Soviet era. This really was a virtue of the Soviet regime – I know we always complain about it and I have no warm feelings towards it, but the fact is that in the Soviet era women truly became equal to men. There were many women's problems. There were challenges with kindergartens, with husbands not earning enough, with women having to work both at home and work, and yet women's social status became much higher than it had been previously. This happened in Central Asia, in our Caucasian republics and all around.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

In the 90ies of the XX century, the situation in the North Caucasus changed dramatically. What emerged was a search for identity, a crisis in economics, politics and values in the post-Soviet space and military conflict. The Chechen wars affected every person in the Chechen Republic and beyond, there were strong changes in all spheres of life, including family relations and gender role models of behaviour in society.

The war contributed to a strengthening of human relationships and mutual assistance. It's what matters. Of course, they do not pride themselves in the fact that the war made them share a piece of bread with their neighbours. We lived by this rule: "All Chechens are brothers, the federal troops are the ones attacking and killing us, they are our common enemy; we are all brothers and sisters; we are not divided into rich and poor, we are close in spirit and social position". During the war, women were more powerful

19 Marrying a second woman without divorcing the first, polygamy.

because they went to buy goods, they would sell and re-sell them. They were the ones earning money and providing for the family, which means that the tables had turned. And now the tables have turned again. The man will say: "I'm the one who feeds you, I'm in charge, I'm the "tsijn da". The system that's in place in Chechnya right now where women are under pressure is plain wrong. I can't speak for all men, but the only reason over half of the men didn't starve to death was because of the women. Women who carried chequered bags on their backs, rushing towards checkpoints and soldiers to feed them. If she fed them, she has to have a say. She deserved this right with her life.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Then was happened and everything changed. Back then the family had a hierarchy and a structure. People like to talk about customs and traditions and I would say that back in the day women were protected. Women didn't feel that the restrictions imposed on her really were restrictions. They felt that it was a form of care. They grew up with this and it was normal for them. After the war the roles reversed completely. Women became more independent and took on men's responsibilities – because in our traditional society all responsibilities were either women's or men's.

After the first war the responsibilities became conflated because men were protected more. There were cleansing operations where men were taken from their homes – they could just arrive and take them away. The woman was forced not only to become the breadwinner who went to work – it was considered a safer option for women – but she also had to take on other responsibilities. Some, but not all men agreed that women had become the breadwinners. But the structure changed and everything started falling apart. Don't forget that the older generation lived in these homes and they were used to a different culture and different behaviour. That's when judgement and condemnation started because that's what the model is like: the older generation don't know any better, they're used to living the way they do. They raised their children differently, but their children were forced to change that structure because of the war. This didn't fit in with their worldview. They had their own idea of how life should be and these novelties didn't fit into that. The younger generation were forced to adapt so they didn't infringe on the older generation's rights, and at the same time they had to find an outlet for all of that tension. That's when the third group of witnesses comes in – the children, the grandchildren of the older folks. They are witnesses of all that is happening.

In this situation a trend for violence started. This started before the war, but it showed up more at this time because the very system of life was crumbling down. When something goes wrong, it's easier to do evil because you have something to blame it on – on the war, on your nerves, on not having a job, on unemployment, whatever. And I think that society hasn't stabilised yet. It can't find itself. If you told me to look down and say what is happening within the community, I would say that there is no structure, and that's why everyone is talking about the Soviet era. The timeline is split in two by the war. That's when things were clear, roles were well-defined and everybody knew what everybody was supposed to do. Now it's all mixed together and everyone chooses their own survival style and whatever suits them. Poor women – on the one hand, they are always guilty of something, but on the other hand they are loved and respected and we still revere the mother figure. On the one hand they have status, not as women, but as mothers, and on the other hand they are vulnerable.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

I feel like when I was young there were more educated people. I guess they were from Kazakhstan, exiled. Things weren't great in terms of education there, they only did 5 grades, but they were more empathetic and sensitive. Perhaps it's because they'd experienced much grief. There was kindness and a desire to learn, to observe, to pass it

on to their children. There was more of this then. Now it's more materialistic. We could also say that it's a result of trauma. People lost everything, they really did. All was lost and that meant they had to buy something instead. They bought it and it was taken away from them again. We were rich and everything was taken away from us again. There's so much anger, especially in women, because a man could take up arms and run, but a woman had to stay. She lost her man, her son, her daughter – that's where the aggression comes from. The children that remained grew up, gave her grandchildren, and then she was left alone. There's a lot of angry energy that an entire generation grew up in. That generation is grown up and they want to live. They are tired of this narrative, of the war, of the anger – they want to live. While the older generation wants them to remember all of this, lest they forget.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

At present, the level of authority of secular laws in the republics of the North Caucasus varies. In some republics, the laws of the Russian Federation are practically ignored, and “honour” killings are incredibly difficult to investigate. Adat, Sharia law and public opinion play an important role. Under these circumstances, phenomena such as gender-motivated killings, polygamy, religious and mystical practices are becoming more widespread. They are justified by adats, Sharia law or explanations of the muftiate. It is women who are most vulnerable to the application of these practices, as their social status is much lower than that of men.

Of course, the role of women has changed. Now men have no jobs. Women are economically enslaved. A woman would not join the police or work for the Russian Guard or the armed forces. All that are left are teachers and doctors. That's all, nothing else. Or they dig around in their gardens.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Society expects a woman to clean her house, take care of the household chores and her appearance, have a good relationship with her husband's relatives and take care of the children. When it comes to work, it varies: some are for it, while others think she should stay home 24 hours a day. A friend of mine had to get her husband's relatives to bed and clean for them – the martskhoy²⁰.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

For women, the only chance to gain opportunities and at least some rights is through protection from family members, but this opportunity is limited to various degrees by representatives of the authorities in the Chechen Republic, the Republic of Dagestan, and Ingushetia.

A woman can make decisions only after she becomes a mother. That's when she can make decisions. In reality, in many families the woman is the head of the family. Let's face it. Our women are domineering. And even when she makes the man out to be on top, everyone knows that it could be done for show and that in reality she is the one who decides. She's a mother who has earned money, who has given birth to sons. They are her wings and her support – they will support their mother. But not the daughter. I know quite a few families where the girls have rather extensive rights.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

²⁰ Martskhoy (Chechen) – the husband's relatives.

When a woman gets married, her status rises. When a woman gives birth to a son, her status rises. And when she becomes a mother-in-law, she becomes the head of the family – ‘godfather to the king’. She has a daughter-in-law who submits to her. This is when terrible humiliation for the young woman starts because it’s no different to hazing in the army, with old-timers and newbies.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

So, one of them says that his sister was coming back from a family where she was beaten and the reason she came back was because “there wasn’t a man who would take her by the collar and order her to go back to his house”. My family is different: if my dad found out that someone hit me, he wouldn’t dream of leaving any of us there. Although they are the same age and my dad is quite conservative.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

If the family does not control the girl, then people from government agencies can bring the girl home and reprimand her parents. And if she is seen with an alcoholic drink, it will be made publicly known, which is the worst thing, she will be disgraced. Being the subject of discussion, to be disgraced and discussed on television is very scary.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Of course, the degree of freedom of women is somewhat different in different republics of the North Caucasus. For instance, in the Chechen Republic, experts note the high pressure of society and the state on women.

Now the biggest problem of the Chechen girl is that she is not free. She is not free from the very beginning. In the past she could participate and express herself – in the very least, she could stand her ground in a divorce case. Now I don’t see any of this. They are a lot more susceptible to public opinion, they are sensitive and responsive to the pressures of society. They don’t see any freedom or prospects of getting out. That’s why they start accepting the situation and suppressing their desires. We had an event and about 70% of the women there had nervous tics. They are so aggressively guarding their lack of freedom and imposing it on others. They don’t want to accept those who are even a little bit free. They don’t want to hear them and shut them up. It’s like they are afraid to hear something that would make them realise that another way of being is possible.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

When the Soviet Union collapsed, we began to return to our traditions, both to the good and the bad ones too. All of the things that happened here and there, like honour killings, that were never openly declared were suddenly being openly expressed: “This is the position of women here. It’s traditional and right and we are fighting for morality”. Then they use this idea of morality – for some reason, it is applied exclusively to women and nobody talks about morality for men. Men are required to follow certain rituals, but we never hear about morality for men. The fighting started... things like this did happen in the Soviet Union as well. If it had disappeared completely, it wouldn’t have been revived. But once they started stating this openly, the situation of women changed. The most striking example is Chechnya, whose leader says that women are property and men are owners. What else do we need? “Women are born to love us”. Earn this love first, learn to love and only then expect someone to love you. It’s considered her duty, nobody asks her about her real feelings.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

In modern North Caucasus, the position and opportunities of women as well as the degree of their freedom are determined not only by the rules in the republic, but also by the remoteness of their place of residence from the capital. Life in Makhachkala, for example, will differ in many respects from life in a remote village of Dagestan. In a small village everyone knows each other and everyone is in plain sight of each other. In addition, villages can have their own traditions and their own way of life, which was shaped in the course of history.

Attitudes towards women depend on how far the village is and what the villagers do. For instance, in the villages of the Laks women had a lot of authority, because the men left and were engaged in seasonal work, they were tinkers and potters. When the men went to earn money, women took care of the farmstead.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

3. The concept of “shame” and punishment for the violation of gender norms

Two important concepts in the North Caucasus are “honour” and “shame”. Shame is a consequence of a violation of accepted standards or prohibitions, which are enshrined in the Adats, Sharia law, or simply public opinion. Shame is associated with public condemnation and discussion of the whole family, not just the wrongdoer. Women become most vulnerable, as the requirements for their behaviour are much higher, and there are more prohibitions.

The Adats took shape when people lived in a patriarchal society in the villages and this was a prerequisite for the survival of the whole family. The Chechens have an interesting proverb: “if a man acts dishonourably, the teip loses its honour, but if a woman acts dishonourably, the entire clan is lost,” that is, the woman’s immorality was perceived as a more serious offense than male immorality. She is the keeper of the hearth and a mother.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Shame is closely associated with the concept of honour in the North Caucasus. The concept of “honour” has several meanings: 1. The moral qualities of a person that are worthy of respect and pride; its principles. 2. A good, unsullied reputation, a good name. 3. Chastity, innocence. 4. Honour, respect.²¹ However, in the North Caucasus, the concept of honour is not attributed to an individual person, but to the whole family, the entire teip or the entire clan. To a greater or lesser extent, but collective responsibility for the preservation of honour becomes an important factor in the strict system of punishment for violation of societal norms. In this regard, shame is not only an assessment of the actions and deeds of one individual person, but also of the whole family or clan. Shame is disgrace, a shameful, humiliating situation, causing contempt²², shame, reproach, vilification, dishonour and disgrace, it’s a shameful spectacle²³. The act or action of one person is evaluated as the act or action of the whole family.

We have always had our own community. Anything that goes beyond traditional or social norms is shameful. These norms are unwritten. If you engage in sexual intercourse with a man before you get married, you will be shamed.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Reputation and appearance play an important role because they determine the attitude towards women in society.

When they wear a hijab, they get more freedom, because men have a stereotype. And girls quickly realised that this was at least some kind of freedom and began to wear it. Others started taking it off. One of them became angry with the way the men reacted. She believes that she hasn’t changed. Her brother was very cross. She told him: “If you want it, wear it yourself”.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Respondents themselves consider homosexuality and same-sex relationships shameful. They are confident that the disclosure of their sexual orientation and gender identity will cause public condemnation that will affect their entire family.

²¹ Ozhegov S.I., Shvedova N.Yu., Dictionary of the Russian language

²² Ozhegov S.I., Shvedova N.Yu., Dictionary of the Russian language

²³ Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language: 4 volumes // by V.I. Dahl. Volume 3, - M.: Terra – 1995

It's shameful. I do not want to upset my parents and sisters. It would be a stain on us, on our parents.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Shame. They would mock me, reproach me, say I'm sick and abnormal. All the people at work are women and I never show it, not with a single glance. I would be terrified, I'm ashamed of being a lesbian.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

If any of them find out, they will shout: "lesbian, lesbian". They won't think it's something I will grow out of. All they will feel is disgust. They will turn away from me because I live an abnormal life. I don't know what's going on inside their head. They don't understand. My parents wouldn't be able to do anything, they are over 80 years old.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I don't want to upset my parents. It will be a shame for us. Nothing [terrible] will happen, but it will be a stain and they will turn away from me. They won't scold me. My parents are old. They keep asking: "Why aren't you getting married? You could at least get married, get a divorce 3 months later and have a child". In the past they would tell me that I could get married and then get divorced if I didn't like it, and that I could have a child of my own.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

What is shame? They will mock me for nothing. You do your work and at the very first opportunity, as soon as a little disagreement comes up, they are going to reproach you saying that you're "sick, abnormal, strange", that kind of thing. Especially at my job. I have never showed it, not even with a glance. I would be scared to look people in the eye if I told them the truth. I'm strong because I keep it all in.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

It's considered abnormal and shameful. People see it as vulgar or dirty. Not even as a sin – they don't judge it from a religious point of view. It's a kind of perversion. Like we're not human beings. I'm well respected at my job. Society would turn away from me, but I will stay the same. I would become an outcast.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia – State of Alania, over 30, unmarried

The most cruel punishment that is applied (but by no means in all cases) are honour killings. An "honour" killing is a gender-motivated murder of a family member, usually a woman, committed by relatives for shaming the family. Such gender-motivated killings in the North Caucasus are governed by Sharia law and the Adats. These rules contradict each other in terms of proof of guilt.

In terms of adats, honour killings, of course, do occur. According to Sharia law, a woman should be stoned in case of adultery. The most honest and pure citizens would gather and start stoning her. However, the wording in the Sharia law is very curious: there have to be 4 living witnesses of the fact that "the key went into the lock". I believe that this prohibition was put in place because no one in their right mind would do such a thing in front of four witnesses. It's practically... well, it might happen... who knows what immorality can take place. Because we cannot fulfil the requirement of the Sharia law, we start referring to the adats. It's sufficient for someone to come and say: "You know, your daughter... your wife... your sister... they have to be destroyed". In that sense, it's

more convenient to use the evidence base proposed by the adats when you need to commit a so-called honour killing.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

There is the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. According to the letter of the law, she shouldn't be killed for having intercourse, she should be whipped – around seventy lashes, I believe. If she is married, this means she has wrongly used her husband's property and should definitely be put to death. If she is unmarried, it means she lost her honour and should be whipped. But all people hear is that women are to be killed for this – and they don't care about the circumstances and what Sharia law says about it. They don't need a qadi to pronounce judgment, they just kill her. The spirit of the law says that one should be put to death for this.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

According to the adat, it is the family members who must kill the woman in order to remove the shame from their family. A family living in disgrace will be excluded from society, its social status will drop and all members of the family will lose the opportunity to fully exist. Children, brothers and sisters will not be able to start their own families, for example.

In honour killings and in blood feuds the killing should be done by the one responsible for the woman, meaning that it is her father's responsibility. If the father is unable to do it, then his son – her brother – does it if the father is unable to do it for physical or emotional reasons... man is weak. It's his responsibility. If she has no father or brothers, it becomes the responsibility of her closest blood relative – her cousin on her father's side. Relatives on the mother's side do not have this right.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

It's always a relative who does the killing, that's why a woman shouldn't be scolded – you go talk to her relatives. It is believed that the father, brother and uncle realise that a killing is a blow to their clan. That's why they will be careful, they will suffer and experience great torment as they carry out the killing. Nadyr Khachilaev wrote a story about a brother going mad after killing his sister. I was told about how a brother was sent out three times to carry out the killing and his sister kept telling him that she was innocent but that he should do what he must, and he killed her the third time. I don't know why they can't refuse to marry someone they don't want or kill someone they don't want to kill... it's part of their system. And no one from the outside can intervene. Sometimes it happens that the father will let his daughter escape – he pretends to take her away to kill her, but he really gives her some money, puts her on a train, hands a letter to an old army buddy and tells her – go. Mothers are either powerless or bloodthirsty. They realise that they have other children, that they need to protect them and their honour and that their sister's "shame" will stain the other children. It's an ant colony. There's the good of the ant and the good of the ant colony. It's OK to sacrifice an ant, even if you feel bad about it – this is the jamia's²⁴ way of thinking – the way the rural community sees it.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

An honour killing washes away shame. You can't get married, no one will have you. What's interesting is that the fact is revealed. Say, there was a lesbian in your family and you kill her, but the fact remains – she was in your family. As a mother, I could still

²⁴ Jamia / Jamaat are groups of Muslims formed with the aim of studying Islam together, performing religious rites, mutual assistance, regular fellowship, etc

refuse to give my consent – your sister is a lesbian, who cares if you killed her. Whether or not you killed her, the fact remains in your family.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Of the 46 cases, the “honour” killing was most often committed by a close relative (41 people) of the victims, who were suspected of “indecent” and “inappropriate” behaviour.

Antonova, Yu., Sirazhudinova, S. Killed by gossip - 2. 2020.

The Legal Initiative project has published two studies on honour killings in the North Caucasus. The second study analysed 43 sentences in criminal cases from 2005 to 2018, although most killings do not reach the stage of investigation and court hearings. According to the study, “all those accused of honour killings believed that the killed women (victims) insulted them personally, their relatives/acquaintances, their family, clan and the honour of the family and clan by their actions (“immoral behaviour”, “licentiousness”). This happened regardless of how reliable and verified the information which they had about the behaviour of the victims was”.²⁵

The reasons for an “honour” killing are not only extramarital sexual relations, they can be any violation of the prohibitions that discredit the honour of the family, leading to rumours or even some economic gain.

I don't know, from the point of view of Sharia law it's hard for me to understand women who drink one glass of vodka after the other. This happens all around Dagestan. It's unpleasant. I'm no hypocrite, but it's not very decent even for a man to drink several glasses of vodka. From that point of view, yes, they are killed. This is what drinking alcohol can lead to. The way people around here think about honour killings, they usually think it's because a woman started acting immorally. They might kill her not because she slept with someone. But because she leads an immoral life, she drinks and goes to night clubs. You know what their thinking is? If a woman is smiling, it means she doesn't mind sleeping with them. For some reason most men believe that if – God forbid – a woman smiles at them, that's it, she gave him a reason. And then he'll say: “It's her own fault, she shouldn't have smiled”. Even when it comes to rape. A woman doesn't necessarily have to be sexually immoral, it could be any kind of immoral behaviour. No one is going to look for solid evidence if they follow the adats. If she drinks, she must lead an immoral life.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Honour killings are not necessarily related to a wife's or a woman's unfaithfulness. It could be a cover-up even for some mercenary interests. Say, if my sister and I were heirs to some kind of fortune, this would be the perfect way to get rid of my joint-heir and rival. I could say: “My sister leads an immoral life”. This is one side of honour killings.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

As a result, the impunity of perpetrators of murder of women only exacerbates the consequences of violence as a control mechanism. When the state is not able to bring the perpetrators of the crime to justice under the applicable criminal law, and to impose penalties commensurate with the severity of the crimes committed, impunity will not only

²⁵ Antonova Yu., Sirazhudinova S., "Killed by gossip": "Honour" motivated killings of women in the North Caucasus — 2 . 2020. — 54 pp.

aggravate the subordinate position and helplessness of the objects of violence, but also send a message to society that male violence against women is acceptable and inevitable. As a result, the pattern of violent behaviour becomes the norm.

Antonova, Yu., Sirazhudinova, S. Killed by gossip – 2. 2020.

Of course, “honour” killings are not the only and not a mandatory response to rumours that come from family members. In the North Caucasus, various mechanisms for protecting the honour of women and families were provided. These mechanisms cease to be effective in the event that there is additional pressure from the government or informal radical groups.

It's not like someone comes and says something and then he goes and kills you. Those are the most tragic stories. The first reaction of any family is to deny it. No, our daughter or our sister isn't like that. And if there's a decent man around, he'll say: "Bring me the evidence, or we'll kill you". They can refute the claims. It's not like: "Someone said something against you, so go and prepare your noose". They can fight for their honour.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

An “honour” killing not only removes shame from the family, but also burdens the whole family. Such stories are kept secret, but they are not forgotten and have an impact on all family members and on family relationships. Decisions on gender-based killings can be emotional decisions or decisions made under pressure from society.

I had one terrible case when the mother herself poisoned her daughter. She was bringing her over from Kazakhstan and she knew she would be killed. She was sentenced to an honour killing. On the wedding night he said she wasn't a virgin. He came across some threads – they didn't do a good job with her reconstruction surgery – and he saw everything. Both families were wealthy. He sent her away the same night with the evidence and both families decided that she had to be taken back to Chechnya and everything would be done there. The mother asked to take her there by train so she could say goodbye. On the train, the mother said she wouldn't give her daughter to them, that they would get to Nazran and run away. As they were approaching the station, the mother added some poison to her daughter's juice, and she died. No one was punished, the mother and the sister are still living. Muslims don't conduct autopsies – she had a fit and died. They were supposed to kill her. How would they have done it? They would have shot her... she eased her death. She said: my daughter doesn't deserve to be strangled, shot and buried alive. She didn't see any other possibilities. To her, men were all-powerful and she couldn't even imagine that she could have changed anything.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

After her death²⁶, dad would constantly come home drunk, and sometimes he would be sober. We had some daggers at home. Dad would tell me to come up to him and he would say that if I did something bad and he found out, he would kill me. "I'm going to kill you". And he held the dagger up to my throat. I would start crying. I didn't know what "bad" was and what I could do. Mum reprimanded him. She said I was too little... Dad started drinking more. My uncles often drinks. His soul does not rest. He drinks every other day, like a drunk.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

²⁶ An “honour” killing of her sister.

This guy who lived on our street killed his sister and then he wanted to get married. He strangled his sister. My mother told me: you see, he strangled his sister because she misbehaved. But nobody said what “misbehaving” means. I was scared because we didn’t talk about sexuality. Misbehaving... I’m a child and I often misbehave. When he decided to get married, the other family refused. He went to one family, they refused, then to the next. Behind his back they said: “Yeah, right, he’s going to come and strangle her. He strangled his own sister, why wouldn’t he strangle my daughter”. They wouldn’t let their daughters marry him. That’s the way it is.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Men are assigned to keep an eye on the woman. Sisters are under supervision. You don’t have a life and you have to constantly keep track of your sister because you will be the one they ask: “What kind of man are you if your sister put on a short skirt and is talking to a guy?” His “manhood” is in performing the functions of warden and intimidator if his sister doesn’t obey. His energy and nerves go towards keeping track of her. When will he have time to live his own life? His sister’s mistake is a stain on his reputation. When a girl is considered shameful, everyone goes out to kill her out of righteous indignation.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

The struggle against honour killings is complicated not only by the rooted traditions, radicalisation and division of society, economic disadvantage, but also by the inability of law enforcement agencies to exclusively follow the principles of secular laws when they investigate and consider such cases.

Cases²⁷ regarding honour killings usually take place behind closed doors. If the villagers don’t know, it’s all hushed up. The prison sentence isn’t too big.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

There have always been honour killings. Back then it was hushed up and now more people are talking about it. But I think there was less of that. Now they’re also being hushed up, but there’s more discussion around it. Back then everything was hidden and nobody said anything.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Among practices that are gaining popularity in the North Caucasus are the religious rituals of casting out genies and the purification of blood, which can be done without the consent of the woman. Both rituals aim to reform her. Many people believe in the effectiveness of such practices, and the practices themselves are approved and supported by the muftiates.

*Jinns live in a parallel world to us, people. From an Islamic point of view, there is the realm of angels who were created from light to be humble servants of God. They never sin. Then there is the realm of jinns, they are made of fire. And the realm of humans, humans are made of earth and clay. People and jinns are burdened with duties and worship. People are like jinns and jinns are like people. They have certain duties, such as *namaz*, prayer, etc. Angels only do God’s will, they have no instincts, no desires and they always submit to God. Jinns and people, on the other hand, have a positive and a negative side, according to Islamic belief. They have a good and a bad side, they have instincts, dignity, passions. There is a version that was brought to us by Imam At-Tabari²⁸, he was an Islamic historian who lived 1300 years ago. He put forward a theory*

²⁷ Court cases.

²⁸ Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari

that jinns inhabited the earth before humans did. They included a clan of shaitans, whose aim was to lead people astray and incite them to sin. Jinns can be Muslim, Christian, Jewish, righteous and unrighteous, atheists and regular rogues.

There are two ways one can be possessed by a jinn. There are jinns that possess human beings of their own accord. A male genie might fall in love with a woman or vice versa. Or if you wronged it. Or it's just making trouble. Or if there's a jinn who is a Muslim and he sees that the person it is attached to sins a lot, it can possess the person and create a disease. Usually, a jinn that possesses a human stays inside three main body organs: in the brain, where it creates mental illness, or the spine, where it makes the person paralysed, or the bladder where it creates sexual weaknesses and makes women infertile. The other type of jinn possesses a person because it serves a sorcerer or wizard. It's evil eye, magic, love spells and reverse love spells. All sorcerers work together with jinns and all the harm done to the human being is an arrangement between the jinn and the sorcerer.

It's easy to determine whether a person is possessed by a jinn or tell whether the jinn is part of some witchcraft. Both types can generally be determined by the dreams the person sees. I always ask: "What do you see in your dreams?" Dreams are the first indicator. If a person suspects that they might be possessed by a jinn, they will have dreams about strange people – dwarves or some kinds of freaks. Or unpleasant animals – rats, mice, snakes, cats, dogs, black cats and dogs. These are dreams he sees regularly and he sees a certain number of these animals or people. It's something he regularly experiences night after night for a long period of time.

Imam, Stavropol Territory

Theories about jinns and the interpretation of these beliefs are not always the same among different religious figures and much depends on the views of the mullah. Views can diverge both in the matter of the possibility of being possessed by a jinn, and in the methods by which they can be cast out. These practices can be violent and applied without the consent of the woman who has been the subject of such "treatment".

With the advent of Islam in Chechnya, this practice started, but not as en masse as now. There were several theologians and mullahs who had mastered this art. I knew a mullah, now deceased, who lived in Grozny. He believed that a jinn could not possess a human being and he based that on Islamic teachings. One body cannot contain two souls. Moreover, a jinn is a creature of fire, while man is a creature of water. Both creatures cannot coexist in the same body. He admitted that a jinn could somehow influence a person, but it cannot possess a human. I studied this issue. It's hard to deny the existence of other life forms from the standpoint of science, too. To me, the practice of casting out jinns is difficult to comprehend. Does it get rid of the jinn? Casting out a jinn by means of beating the body is a peculiar method. The beating is quite merciless, too... although there have been cases where the person was healed, but we can't discount the fact that it might be self-persuasion.

This became a popular "tariqa"²⁹ – an Islamic, hibiri, sufi tariqa. Sufism and Tariqism are mystical teachings. We have to believe. To be honest, many people, especially in Chechnya, are convinced of it and I would be afraid to express my doubt because of how fanatical people are. Before the war it wasn't common for someone to go and do it. Two wars have led to mental illness and rather than build rehabilitation centres and clinics, it was a lot easier to say that the person was possessed by a jinn, to spend no money and

²⁹ Tariqa is a means of spiritual development and religious cognition in Islam, which is practised by representatives of Islamic movements such as Sufism.

just beat them with a stick. If you witness your little child taken by the legs and thrown against a wall, it's just... And then something happens to you and they say that you are possessed by a jinn.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

One of the most well-known practices is hijama. Hijama is a practice of bloodletting, which aims to cleanse a person's blood.

Bloodletting is a purely Islamic practice. It has helped many people, but I have not tried it. Some cite the fact that there are reliable hadiths that recommended to do hijama. I recently heard a statement from an Arab cardiologist. He says these hadiths are false and their requirements are false. It helps some people. I'm afraid of going there and getting cut. I don't really believe that my body has some kind of bad blood... because it is constantly in motion and it's not possible to get it out through a simple cut. How do we know that the blood that's going to come out is bad blood? Otherwise it's considered to be Islamic medicine. It's popular and we have centres for women and for men.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

The situation described above characterises a stable sexually repressive culture in the North Caucasus, which is legitimised through the system of Adat, Sharia law and the laws of the Russian Federation and is supported by public opinion in the republics.

4. Threats to homosexual and bisexual women in the North Caucasus

Never in my life will I leave, no matter how hard it may be. If the situation got worse, I would still prove that I am strong, that I can live here. I'd rather kill them myself and go to jail. It's possible to keep living here. If I breach the criminal code, I'll go to jail, why would I run from my problems? My sisters would take my place, they would protect me. If anyone finds out, they will wreak havoc.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

From the reports of LGBT + initiative groups in Russia in recent years, it is obvious that there are high risks to the lives of LGBT + people in the North Caucasus³⁰. The data obtained from monitoring reports and reports is rather varied and does not allow us to evaluate the combination of factors leading to critical risks. Moreover, one can find various relatively successful life stories of non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus on social media and specialised forums.

In 2019, at a meeting of supporters of the Queer Women of the North Caucasus initiative (22 participants working in the North Caucasus in the field of women's rights) conducted a group expert risk assessment for non-heterosexual women from three republics of the North Caucasus.

Group risk assessment for non-heterosexual women of the North Caucasus

Risks	Republic of Chechnya	Republic of Dagestan	Republic of Ingushetia
Physical and psychological abuse in the family	high	high	high
Forced marriage	high	high	high
Blackmail, slavery	high	high	high
Bullying, shaming	high	high	high
Pressure on the family from the authorities	high	high	high
Criminal prosecution (falsification of criminal cases)	high	low	low
Suicide / Incitement to suicide	high	high	high
Beatings	high	high	high
Corrective sexualised violence	low	high	low
"Green Microphone" (compulsory television coverage with the disclosure of personal information)	high	low	low
Physical and social isolation	high	high	high
Parting with a partner	high	high	high
Forced ritual religious practices	high	high	high
Torture by law enforcement agencies	high	low	low
Torture by the family	high	high	high
Unprofessional assistance with further disclosure of personal information from people in the helping professions	high	high	high
Confiscation of documents	high	high	high
Economic violence	high	high	high
Dismissal from work, expulsion from an educational institution	high	medium	medium

³⁰ "They told me that I am not a human being, but a nobody, that it's better to be a terrorist than a faggot". Report on the facts of persecution of LGBT people in the North Caucasus region. Prepared by the Russian LGBT Network in cooperation with Elena Milashina, a special correspondent for Novaya Gazeta. 2017.

Gender motivated murder	high	high	high
"Wiretapping", surveillance by representatives of law enforcement agencies	high	high	high
Difficulties with integration into society	high	high	high
Sex slavery	medium	medium	medium
Separation from children	low	medium	low
Extortion	medium	medium	medium

This expert risk assessment was carried out for the first time, and it provides an opportunity not only to supplement the picture of threats to lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons, but also illustrates how different the living conditions of queer women are in the North Caucasus region. Based on the expert assessment, the Chechen Republic is the most dangerous region, which is largely due to the political regime and the overt persecution of LGBT + people.

The issue of women's sexual attraction is complicated in that female sexuality is not perceived as something natural, and rather, a woman is considered to have no right to sexuality or sexual attraction at all. Female sexuality comes down exclusively to the reproductive function and sexual contact with the husband to meet his needs.

She must keep her virginity. Even when she gets married, she does not always get married for love. Where then is the right to sexuality? No, no. Maybe she likes someone completely different, but she cannot make that choice because her relatives and friends believe that he, for example, is an unworthy candidate, and then she marries the one they approve of. And then she is happy at least with the fact that they have approved the person she chose. And she gets married.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

Female sexuality is treated as something sinful, something dirty. There have been cases of female circumcision. There aren't many, but they have started happening in Dagestan, as far as I understand. Interestingly, male circumcision doesn't affect his sexuality, at least not negatively. It may have a positive effect, I don't know. But female circumcision is performed so that the woman doesn't feel satisfied in her sexual relations.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

A woman has no right to sexuality at all. The only sex that is possible is with her husband. At the same time, enjoying sex with her husband is not prohibited. So, the removal of the head of the clitoris is done so that she doesn't go sleeping around. So she could "enjoy herself with her husband and could more easily wait for him when he is away," said an imam in an episode of Irina Shikhman's TV show that was titled "Beating means beating". By the same token, there are women who marry thirteen times. On the one hand, a girl is expected to be modest and courteous, but when a woman gives birth to a child, when she has a grandson, she changes her clothes, she wears black and she has more rights.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

“If it were applied to all women, that would be very good,” – Interfax quotes the approving comments of I. Berdiyev on female circumcision. “God created woman for her to give birth to children and bring them up. This [circumcision] has nothing to do with it. Women don’t stop giving birth because of it. But there would be less immorality”.³¹

*Chairman of the North Caucasus Muslim Coordination Centre
Ismail Berdiev*

A woman is restrained so that she does not get pleasure. They think that otherwise she will go all out.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

If one has no right to sexuality in the broad sense, the issue of sexual orientation becomes a novelty and causes confusion; the absence of previously established norms and rules leads to a free interpretation of punishments for lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender men. There are no provisions in the adats that would allow one to establish a [proper] response on the part of family members and society.

It’s something new to us and it’s not in the adats. There aren’t any adats that would regulate punishment for lesbians. It’s true. Lesbians and gays – they are rightly called sexual minorities – there aren’t that many of them. I haven’t come across this yet. There haven’t been any such cases in my practice. I’ve heard of gays, but not lesbians. If she sleeps with a man, she should be put to death. What about if she sleeps with a woman, what is to be done then? To us, it’ll be like all this new cybercrime. I think the women are going to make a decision, because it’s not clear what to do. She will probably be exorcised to cast out the jinns. There’s no mention of this in the adats. Anything we can’t explain is a jinn.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

The Qur’an also lacks clear and direct instructions on same-sex relationships between women, on how to treat homosexual contacts between women and whether there are any prohibitions on these contacts.

In Islam, there are restrictions on removing your clothes both in front of people of different faiths and of the same faiths. It is generally considered undesirable, and women’s bathhouses are not encouraged. This is odd: men can go to a bathhouse together, but women can’t. Moreover, the Qur’an says nothing about female homosexuality. It only mentions male homosexuality. Although it depends on which maddhab³² you read; don’t forget that there are millions of them. The “Wahhabi” maddhab contains a passage that says that if a person is a homosexual and if he doesn’t tell anyone that his religion allows it, if he doesn’t tempt anyone and is not caught in the act, you should treat him as a brother and invite him to funerals and weddings. He’s doing well, he has humbled himself, he’s cool. But these are the details few people get to.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

³¹ "Calm the horny": Words of the Mufti about female circumcision split society / BBC News - 17.08.2016 // <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-37111092>

³² Maddhab is a common Islamic term that is used in theology to denote a teaching, doctrine, school of thought or mystical path (in Sufism). The best-established meaning of the word is “school of law and theology”.

Society's attitude towards homosexual contacts is extremely negative, they are equated to perversion. Male homosexual relationships are more visible for various reasons, including for the reason that a man has the right to sexuality, to sexual desire, and even to sexual life. Attitudes towards lesbians and bisexual women are informed by the fact that this topic is absolutely invisible and taboo.

It's total, all-around rejection. It's not something that will be discussed – it will be hushed up because it's considered to be something terrifying. They will reject the very possibility. Just as it was in Chechnya, when a discussion around homosexuality started, the Chechens were unanimously discussing how something like that was not possible there, that we had none of this. It's a total denial of the very existence of such relationships and their possibility in that context.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

When it comes to gay men or those who transition, the attitude is clear. Our people don't know what transgender men and women are, but they hate them just in case. We only had one situation when Raina³³ transitioned and came to her hometown of Khasavyurt to change her passport. The workers of the registry office – by the way, they could be sued – spread the word. Another situation we had was when a trans woman had surgery and her relatives tried cutting her breasts off. I don't know any transgender men, but how would they stay here? They leave.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

Since the responsibility for the woman lies with her family, or rather the men in the family, the future life of the woman depends on their decisions if her sexual orientation or homosexual relationships are revealed.

I do not know of cases where the woman would remain both a Chechen and a lesbian. If anyone finds out, the consequences will be very dire... it'll be awful. She can be disowned, there may be physical violence, but that clearly doesn't change anything. I can't say, I don't know. But she will be miserable in a traditional Chechen family, she might even be killed – it depends on how conservative her family is. There are men who can do this. We have neighbours who killed their daughter simply because someone said she was sleeping around. It's an example of how these things work around here. The consequences for a lesbian are very harsh.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

In one family they'll nag her, saying "What have you got into your head?" or they'll marry her off. In any case, they will try to marry her off to a man. They'll say that it's all in her head and it's wrong. Another family would kill her.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

How a family will act depends on many factors, such as the status of the family, their religious beliefs, character traits, the place where the family lives, the makeup of the family, their level of education, etc.

It depends on how vulnerable the family is in this community and how much effort it puts into saving face. They can be uneducated and kill her for that reason, to avoid staining their reputation. Others might not be educated either, but they'll take her away and say: live however you want, we have forgotten you, don't come back. Because... I'm glad that

in recent years more families have started getting rid of them like that rather than killing them.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

If you look at it and analyse the vertical dynamics, the suppression comes from the top. Most people are used to fear being the norm. Say, you're at home and you switch on the TV and they're showing a group of people who were brought somewhere. A bunch of adults standing in front of a young guy and making excuses. He roughly punishes them, calls them dirty names. As someone who grew up in a traditional culture, you see that on the one hand, the young guy is acting the way he is, although we are expected to honour and respect our elders. You see that all the rules that exist only supposedly work. They can be broken – by those who have power. And then you realise that you don't have that kind of power and you could end up among those people who are standing there with drooping heads, humiliated. Whoever tries to resist is beaten up. You realise that a lot of power is at play and that you don't have any. So you defend yourself against ending up like that by exercising your power in your family. The mother starts to dominate so that - God forbid – her daughter doesn't do anything wrong. The father starts domineering over his wife and saying that if anything goes wrong, it will be her fault. It will be your fault, woman, because you spend more time with them, you're the mother and all that. That's how it works around here.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

The punishment and consequences for lesbians depend on a million factors, but usually lesbians aren't judged so strictly because it is believed that they may right themselves. Most people will forbid her to talk to boys anyway. If the family is really conservative, they will remember the warning that Ahir Zaman³⁴ will come when men put on women's clothes and women will put on men's clothes. They will lock her up at home – there's a 99% guarantee of that because that's what they do in any unexpected situation. They will try to marry her off as punishment or so she doesn't disgrace the family. Every case is unique. Everyone is sure that it's something her girlfriends put her up to and that "the joy of motherhood will right you". There is a danger of bullying. The hunt on women is common because they are less protected. If she is married, the husband might offer a threesome or kill her. Depends on the husband. There isn't a set model.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights activist (Republic of Dagestan)

The experts have told of unique stories where a lesbian would get support from her family, but these stories are more likely an exception.

There was this one family where I noticed that the daughter had a very close relationship with her girlfriend. People started noticing and rumours started about how this man's daughter was always around girls and that she now had a favourite. I thought it might be worth warning him because he is a civil servant and I know that he really loves his daughters. All of his daughters have a say, just like the sons do. And the sons know that their sisters have an equal say. That's how they were brought up. So, when I told him, he said: "Oh, I know this already". It depends on the father's education. He's well-educated. [It depends] on the father's education. The mother's, too, but the father's education is more important. If he is well-educated, he will give her opportunities. I was amazed that he knew this from his daughter and talked to her about it. Secular education makes a difference.

Human rights activist (Chechen Republic)

³⁴ Ahir Zaman (Arabic) is the end of the world in Islam.

It would be erroneous to believe that the only threat to a homosexual or bisexual woman or transgender person are their closest male relatives. Almost everyone who finds out can pose a threat to the life and even relative freedom of a non-heterosexual woman in the North Caucasus.

The source of the threat is society, including women. We mustn't think that women are winged angels and that... I know many cases when it was the mother who was the persecutor of her daughter, and it is monstrous. She can't get support from anyone. I know of a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock and the mother instructed her eldest son to kill her, but her father saved her. This happened in the same republic. We mustn't think that society's prejudice always comes from men – it's not true.

Svetlana Alekseevna Gannushkina, human rights activist

As for the reaction of the authorities, I haven't come across this, so it's hard for me to say. However, considering the manner in which our people sort things out, they are very likely to use blackmail and try to make money off it. The last thing they care about it someone's moral purity. It's all material.

Human rights defender, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

The assumption that support and acceptance can be found in the LGBT+ community itself is premature, since the community is marginalised, closed and lives in a state of constant fear. One might even criticize the use of the term “community” in this context, since common interests are only provisional. Xenophobia, biphobia, lesbiphobia and transphobia are common in the LGBT+ community. The risks faced by homosexual and bisexual women and transgender men are underestimated and are often considered insignificant. This is probably due to the fact that non-heterosexual women are less visible in the community, and violence against them takes place behind closed doors.

Of course I think that being a lesbian is safer than being gay. If you are gay, people will laugh at you and mock you more, but if you're a lesbian, they won't laugh or mock you so much. It is not likely that a lesbian would be beaten or killed in the street and it's a lot more likely for a gay man to be beaten up or killed. I'm guessing the same goes for what happens in the family. If, say, the father who comes from a rural area and didn't get an education finds out that his daughter is a lesbian, he won't kill her. He'll think: “She's just fooling around. I'll marry her off and she'll be alright”. It won't end badly. But if that father finds out that his son is gay – if the family is uneducated and too conservative, they might kill him.

Respondent, Republic of Dagestan, gay, over 30

5. The situation of homosexual and bisexual women and transgender men in the Chechen Republic

The only thing that can support me here and now is the idea that the conflict and mockery of people here, especially those like us, will not last forever, and that in the end we will receive a reward for all these trials.

Volunteer of the Queer Women of the North Caucasus Initiative, Chechen Republic

The study involved 13 lesbians and bisexual women aged 20 to 37 years old and 1 transgender man (32 years old). All of them agreed to a free-form interview on the condition that they remained anonymous (14 people). Of these, 7 people were married according to religious custom (nikah), 7 people were not married. 3 respondents are in a sham marriage. 11 women have a father and siblings in the family, who, due to their age, have the right to control and punish them. One has an underage child whom she has no possibility to bring up (after the divorce, the child was moved to the husband's family to be raised there). The study in the Chechen Republic was accompanied by constant fear on the part of the respondents and required a long period of establishing trusting relationships, complete transparency in our actions and agreement on wording.

5.1. Upbringing in the parental family. Opportunities and limitations

It is difficult to generalise the types of upbringing in the family and the level of the various forms of violence against girls³⁵, as it largely depends on the makeup of the family and their own life experience. Many respondents have noted the use of different forms of violence in the parental family, which we covered in more detail in our previous study³⁶. The findings of the interviews indicate varied experiences of upbringing in the parental family. However, none of the participants of the study deny that a difference in the requirements for boys and girls in society.

In my family, for instance, only men were in favour, only the brothers. There are several girls in my family and everything was always our fault. But children don't understand this. It hurt when our father would do and say those things. When you grow up, when you have a brain and you see how others live, it hurts. It hurts so much that when you're 32 you can't forgive your won father. It's impossible to convey how terrible this is to him. Even though I tried many times. Yeah. The fact that he was a terrible father and he missed a lot. Even self-love. Yeah... you can't erase those memories. That's why I keep thinking that if I ever have children, I hope they are all girls. They will have all the rights. I always tell my girlfriends: "They will have all the things I never had". I've been saying this my whole life. But I don't have any children yet. Otherwise, girls are forbidden everything. The only thing they can do is breathe.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Each family has unique experience, in some cases the behaviour a family demonstrates in society and the internal arrangement of the family are not identical. Outwardly, family members might adhere to accepted standards, but behind closed doors relations may be more trusting and close. However, in the interviews such examples are extremely rare.

³⁵ Sex assigned at birth.

³⁶ Report on a qualitative study of violence against lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation. Project "Queer women of North Caucasus". 2018. // <https://www.outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/Research-by-theQWNC-Group.pdf>

The attitude of the parents depends on what kind of family we grow up in. I have friends who grew up in a family where the girls were number one. The boys were just there, like a stick that's lying there... it depends on the family.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

All 14 participants of interviews from the Chechen Republic speak about the use of different forms of violence in the parental family. Violence against children, both adults and those who have not yet reached adulthood, is often little understood by the parents themselves, that is, they perceived it as an acceptable and often preferred means of upbringing.

People have different methods of upbringing: some shout, some might give a beating. You apologise for her beating you. In my case it was a look – I still tremble when I think of it. I wasn't beaten badly. But the psychological pressure was so bad that I almost wish they'd used physical force.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

He [my brother] once hit me so hard across the face that I started bleeding. He got scared and took me to the hospital; my mother would beat me with a cord. He kept a special stick in the vegetable garden that really hurt and didn't leave a mark.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

And even if there is a boy in the family, don't belittle the girls and say what the girls can and what they cannot do. All girls get are prohibitions, while boys can do whatever.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Father was very cruel. Mother was Father's sixth wife. Father beat my mother and my brother. Father beat Mother at night.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Father often beat mother before our eyes. He knocked out all of Mother's front teeth. When they got divorced, he took us to Kazakhstan. I was very afraid of my father and older brother, they always beat me, almost every day. We had a strict upbringing. And when Mother took us away, she really loved us.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

A point that requires special attention is access to study and work for women. Economic freedom is often an opportunity not only to improve one's financial situation, but also to make decisions about oneself: one's movement, daily routine, communication with others, clothing style and access to means of communications.

I could only work in the village so that my brother could control me.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

I work, but my father picks me up and my father takes me to work.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

My mom's sisters, my aunts, didn't find their purpose. There was no talk of going to university. Because my grandfather kept saying: "Why would a girl need this? She's going to get married and he will provide for her". That's how it used to be. They would get her a husband and he would do everything. And now they [the men] don't want to

work. There are tens of such examples. Now you have to study. So, some things have changed. Every other girl can go and get an education now.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Everyone wanted me to study and no one stood in my way.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

I'm not allowed to work. But a year ago I worked with my aunt. My mother allows me to work, but my cousins are against it.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I graduated from high school and wanted to study, but I was not allowed to. I wanted to go to design school, but they told me it would be either Law or Economics. I entered the correspondence department so I could work and pay for my studies.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I found out that there's an Economics school in our village. When I said I wanted to study there, I was told that only idiots and crazy people go there. They told my sister that I would dishonour them because I'm a whore and I'd start sleeping around. They didn't let me go there. My sister said they wouldn't let me.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

My stepfather condemned my desire to get a higher education. Spending money on girls' education is a "waste". A woman should know how to cook, clean the house and be submissive.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Mom got me a job in a very good place, and while I worked there, I had no trouble getting there on my own. But this was only when I'd just started working, part-time. Work would finish at 7p.m. and I simply couldn't make it home before dark. I had to get used to the adult world. But my father believed that a secretarial job is a disgrace, that only whores worked there.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

After graduating school, I wanted to go to medical school, but I was sent to Islamic [university]. I wrote a letter to Kadyrov [Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Republic of Chechnya] to be admitted to the medical department. He issued an order for me to be enrolled. But it turned out that of all the subjects I hadn't passed my chemistry exam. My brother beat me terribly – I could not get up, and said that I would not go anywhere. But when they called from the university, and the rector said: "Whether you like it or not, this is Kadyrov's order and you will have to give us your sister." We went and they found out I hadn't done chemistry – it was a real triumph for my brother.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Restrictions on movement, control over what a woman wears and whom she communicates with are applied to women regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Wearing a headscarf is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for going outside.

Since I was a child, I have never worn a skirt and have always worn trousers. We couldn't wear trousers at school and according to his [Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic] order we were supposed to wear headscarves and skirts below the knee. I was in 10th grade. Now all girls cover themselves up and even little girls wear a

hijab and long skirt. You didn't see this kind of thing, even though I was the only person in my village who did this. Then they took all my trousers and burned them. For two weeks I didn't leave the house, I wouldn't eat or talk to my mother. My mother burned them because of my aunt. She realised that wearing trousers was wrong. She tried to talk some sense into me, but she never beat me. But it was in vain because I had my own worldview. I was ashamed of wearing a skirt. At that time, I had never worn a skirt and it felt like dressing a guy in a skirt, and I was ashamed. But when they burned my clothes, I was angry with the whole world. I wouldn't eat or talk and I started wearing my brothers' trousers. They were younger than me and they didn't say anything, but they asked me to leave their trousers alone. They're adults now. Back then it was a different time and things weren't as strict as they are now.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

A headscarf must be worn. And you can't have or do anything. All you can do is sit in your corner at home and dream... well, actually, you can't, or you'll be punished. Say, my father can't even imagine me going out for a coffee at lunchtime. He can't wrap his head around it. He's told me a million times: "If I see you out in town, that's it, you won't go to work again". He gets wild sometimes. "If I see or hear... you don't go back to work again". So I'm always risking losing my job, which is unbearable to me. I can't lose my job – I stayed home for 4 months after I got divorced. I started getting panic attacks and all of my problems are a result of those 4 months. It's a hazard for me. "You won't go back to work". At the same time, he won't give me money either. You won't starve – they'll give you food. But you can't leave the house.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Here I can leave at 8 in the morning and stay out until 6 or 7 p.m. He picks up his daughter and his wife and then comes to pick me up. I treasure this time.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

A headscarf should be worn, certain other things, don't go out, don't stay out late. Work and home. You can't go far. Only within the city and not only in the city.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

We can't do anything. We are constantly checked and controlled by our cousins, we can't even go out into the yard without their permission. But we're lucky to have a mother like ours. She's got our back³⁷. But I can't go anywhere for a long time.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

We aren't forced to wear a hijab, but we do have to wear a headscarf. When they aren't looking, I don't wear it.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

I spent six months locked up at home. Because I posted an Instagram story about being out late in the evening. It was awful. Someone showed it to my brother. Prior to that, I'd lived in a town and then in the village. I didn't work. I spent 6 months living there and not working. If I needed something in town, I had to report where I was going and be back by evening.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

³⁷ She makes excuses on our behalf to our brothers and the other men in our family.

My brother really wants me to wear a hijab, this is part of iman³⁸. He spoke to my brother and my sister. His wife refused. He really wants this and I might put it on to calm him down. But I won't put it on and my mother has been supportive thus far. My brother's wife won't wear it. And if his wife doesn't, he can't make me do it.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

I was never allowed to go out after eight in the evening.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The degree of freedom is directly related to the makeup of the family, the presence of wali³⁹ in the parental family itself and his stance. As the father or brothers are directly responsible for the behaviour of the daughter or sister, they use means of controlling and restricting the woman's freedom. It may happen that the brother takes a more active stance than the father and makes his own decisions regarding the life of his sister.

My relatives told my brothers: "Let your sister stay home, she doesn't need an education."

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I once went over to a girlfriend's place to spend the night. It was only about 10 p.m. when my brother suddenly came to take me away. We stood there for about 40 minutes and we were really cold. He'd given me permission to go, but then something happened and he started calling me, asking where I was and what I was doing. He spent around 40 minutes looking for the house, came over and took her home. His excuse was that our mother told him to get me. I asked my mother about this and said: "I was so embarrassed in front of my friends because he came". She said that he wouldn't pick up the phone and that she wanted to tell him to "leave the girl alone". There have been many such situations, it's getting the best of me.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

I have girlfriends who live with their mothers. Their fathers are either married to someone else or have died. They can go on holiday and visit friends whenever and wherever they want. Whether it's for work or not. People like me envy them, in a good way. I tell them: "I hate you, I swear I will curse you"⁴⁰. She can go anywhere she wants at the weekend, say, to Krasnodar. What am I left to do? All I can do is stay home and say: "I hate you".

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Sometimes the brothers are the ones who control the woman. If she's lucky, she has no father and no brothers. But if your mother is OK and she works, she makes her own decisions about how to live her life. I know some girls who have brothers by their father's other wife. Their father is really clumsy and their mother keeps saying: "I do everything, don't interfere. You have your own family". She provides for them. And he says OK. They visit each other, but don't live together. But their mother is just that kind of person, very strong-willed. If they'd had another mother, he would have set his own rules, he would have come over and make all the decisions".

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

³⁸ Iman is faith in the truthfulness of Islam.

³⁹ Wali is a guardian, the oldest man in the family on the father's side, who is responsible for the woman's behaviour (hereinafter).

⁴⁰ She laughs.

If my brothers lived with us, I would not be able to and I would have no choice. Just work and home. All of this would be impossible. My father hasn't started checking my phone yet. When my brother comes over, I am really stressed. He doesn't come over often, only when someone dies.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

It's different for everyone. Sure, when there is no father, there is more freedom. Or the brothers control [everything].

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Mom raised us. But our relatives on our father's side controlled what we wore, what we ate, how we should economise; they told us how to live our lives. There was neither financial, nor moral support. If it so happened that they [our father's relatives] helped [us], they would always reproach us. When our father disappeared, his relatives claimed loss of breadwinner benefits. I don't know how she fed us and raised us.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I can't explain to them that I don't need such care and such protection. It is my problem.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In addition to the makeup of the family, the social status and how close they are to the power structures in the Chechen Republic also play a certain role. According to Rosstat, in 2019 the highest unemployment rate in Russia was recorded in the North Caucasus⁴¹. In the Chechen Republic, virtually the only way you can earn money is by working in a law enforcement agency. In addition to economic benefits, such work imposes a number of obligations and carries special risks. On the one hand, an employee obtains access to many means of controlling the women in his family, but more importantly, there is a higher risk if members of their family commit some kind of "misconduct". As can be seen from the interviews, if brothers or fathers work in a law enforcement agency, then control on their part is increased, as is the women's fear.

Two of my brothers work in the security services. They keep reminding us that if they hear anything bad about us, they won't even bother to check if it's true or not. They will immediately, you know what. And no one will help us.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In the case of disclosure of information about one's sexual orientation and / or gender identity, women are punished as a rule by the father, brothers or other men in the family on the father's side. It is obvious that such responsibility also implies the need for difficult decisions.

At this point it is important to return to the fact that the responsibility for the honour of the family lies with the father, brother or other men. If the behaviour of family members violates the norms or rules, it will be the wali who will publicly ask the whole republic for forgiveness, which is equal to the highest form of humiliation. The practice of public apologies has long been used in Chechnya, and fear of shame prevails over fathers, brothers and uncles. Such shame lowers the social status of both them and all other family members.

⁴¹ The unemployment rate in Chechnya fell to 8% in September / Information Telegraph Agency of Russia (ITAR-TASS) - 31.10.2019 <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7065969>

I am responsible for my family before God and Chechen society. I took my daughter's phone away when she was 12. She wants a phone, but she's still alive and happy. She knows that she has a father who loves her and never forbids her to buy bagfuls of clothes and gold. I tell her that this is the only thing I will restrict her from buying. There will come a time when you will say, Al-Hamdu li-Llyah... There will come a time when you will grow up. My son has a phone... If I see a video, I take it and break it. My son is 18 and I'm worried about him. I don't want to go out there tomorrow and say: "Bekhk ma bil⁴², we messed up". I guard my family from this virus. And it is a virus... I guard my own children against this enemy, and not anybody else. My own... I gave them life and I am accountable to Allah for them. Nobody else, no ruler of any country of the whole world, I am responsible for them. That's why I do what I do and what I think is necessary. I don't forbid her to dress fashionably, there are many things I don't forbid her to do. But this is the one thing I forbid.

Saipuddin Baudinovitch Guchigov⁴³

In some cases, queer women may find supporters. As a rule, these are sisters or mothers, relatives who support and help them, and occasionally queer woman can find support from her brother.

If my mother were alive, she would have protected me. Of course, she would have been hurt and offended. But she would do it anyway. But she is not there.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Nothing will happen. If my mother does find out, she will hide it from them [uncles, cousins].

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I bought a car in 2009, back then only one or two women drove a car. My brother was against it, because it is indecent and bad. But I told him that I needed it for work to deliver goods and groceries, since I am a supply manager. My mom and sister helped me. That was the start of a new life for me. I was learning to drive and driving around town. There's so much freedom in driving around, visiting new places, going to the countryside for a picnic.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

My mother was the one who made the decision about whether I would go to college or not. When I graduated high school, my father said: "No, they are going to get married. Why do they need an education?" But Mother gave us some money, we got the necessary marks and got in. When it was certain that we had got into college, Mother told him: "The girls have entered university". She was screaming, but we'd already passed our exams. She did this without our dad's permission. Because she knew that would not fare well without an education. If she had said no, we wouldn't have been able to study. Some mothers have no backbone, and there are many such weak people who don't even try to do anything and try to ban everything. Our mother never got an education and she made this decision herself. We have completed our studies and we are very grateful to our mother for this.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

⁴² I'm sorry (Chechen language).

⁴³ Phone Educates Society / Galetki Blog // https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8KC6jI5g_0

My sister knows, she's two years younger than me, she found out from my friends. She was shocked and didn't believe them, so I had to tell her everything. She kept my secret.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

His [my father's] wife supported me and said that it wasn't me in the photo, that there were millions of people who look like that. Although she knew it was me. I begged her: treat me as if I were your daughter. And she supported me.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

They let me go to work because my elder brother is quite understanding. My second brother is killing me, though. My elder brother understand everything and lets me work and travel. The second brother thinks he's in charge and that he can boss everyone around. Both of them need to give their permission. Well, actually it's the elder brother who is meant to do that. But the other brother is so mean and he thinks he can get away with it. My elder brother wasn't home at the time. He did arrive and my phone was taken away, too. I couldn't use my phone. He came and took me away. I was lucky.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

My mother can support me. If something happens and they find out, no one can protect me. Even if Mother wanted to do something, she couldn't do anything because it's the men who make the decisions. Brothers, cousins, so-called uncles...

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

If they force her to marry, she may seek help. In general, you can turn to your mother's relatives for help. If they are sympathetic, they will help. Keeping her at home... I've heard of such cases, but it's a bit wild. How can you lock someone up inside their own home at this day and age? I believe them and have no doubt that they are telling the truth. I don't understand the purpose.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

Moreover, women in the family generally do not have the authority to make decisions regarding the whole family. Mothers and sisters do not have a say in protecting their relatives.

No, unfortunately, no one will help.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Marriage is not only obligatory in itself for a woman regardless of her sexual orientation, but it is also a form of coming of age. After she gets married, the woman obtains a little more rights and her rights can be slightly extended after the birth of a child. However, at present the rights of a married woman directly depend on the views and outlook of her husband. Although the fact that she is married does not provide significantly more freedom (what she wears, where she goes and who she communicates still need to be approved by the husband), it allows her to change her situation; for instance, to leave the republic with her husband.

My husband beat me at least once a week. I stopped eating. I was forbidden to leave the house alone.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

My husband decided that I was no good for sex and that I became ugly after I lost twenty kilograms. So he sent me back. But in reality, they were afraid that I would die.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

In many families women are forced to get married. [Even if] They see that she's not doing well and she's being beaten. No! A girl must be married. And if you come back divorced, you're going to want... these vitamins because you're not a young girl anymore and you'll want to cheat.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

You'll be lucky if they don't want to marry you off. When I got a divorce, my brother said: "Let her come home, but if any man turns up, I'm going to marry her off. Otherwise she'll be an old maid and I'll kick her out because I'm sick of her". And he is capable of doing that.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

If you have no mother, the person who can support you is your aunt. In my case it was my aunt. For instance, she's worried that I'm not married. She's trying to set me up with someone. Men are ashamed to talk to me. They usually only arrange it among themselves, and people come over after that. The mother does all of this⁴⁴ after the father has made the arrangements. I'm just lucky.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Three months ago, my brothers wanted to marry me off to a 47-year-old man again. I had to lie, I told my mother that I loved someone else and was going to marry him. They accepted that and it's OK for now. Of course they asked who he was and where he was from.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I went to the shop and didn't notice that my ear and hair were visible. He [my brother] beat me up so badly that I couldn't get up for several days. He knocked me out. None of my relatives or people in the street helped me, they all turned away.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

You can't force someone to marry. I think it's inconceivable that it was possible to marry someone off by force in Chechnya. This hasn't happened before, nor is it happening now. It's one or two in ten thousand cases that a Chechen woman would be forcibly married. It's nonsensical to me. It does happen, but it happens too rarely to be considered a problem. In Dagestan the matchmaking process starts from the cradle. I have a son, you have a daughter, let's arrange a match. And then they grow up.

Human rights activist, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

In the Chechen Republic, there is still a discrepancy between secular marriages and religious marriages (nikahs). Since religious marriages conducted by an imam are recognised in Chechnya, the minimum age for marriage does not actually comply with the laws of the Russian Federation⁴⁵. In addition, the consent of a woman is not a prerequisite; the decision is made by the wali.

⁴⁴ Talks to the girl.

⁴⁵ The Family Code of the Russian Federation 29.12.1995 N 223-Φ3 (06.02.2020 version).

I was married: at the age of fifteen I was married off, at the age of sixteen I got divorced.
Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

My sister was married off without her consent, my brother just found a husband and decided that her time had come. She begged and said that she did not want to marry, but no one helped her.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married
They were actively looking for a husband for me, but the way I talked made them refuse. Then my brother found out and found me a husband anyway.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

When I got married, it was like trading slavery for slavery. On the third day after the wedding, he took me. I don't remember it well. He strangled me.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

5.2. Attitudes towards the parents of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

Almost all respondents spoke of their mother or father as the most significant people in their lives, even if they indicated that they were the perpetrators of the violence.

He [my father] believes that I am the worst daughter – that's what he says. I told him I would prove that I'm the best. I wanted to buy a car. So he would be proud of me and say that I'm the best. I'll prove it to him. I swear I will.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

My dad was just born in the last century, and he is very sensitive. He even writes books – he is very smart and brainy. How could such a daughter have been born to him? He needs me to be normal. If you do something wrong, you need to be removed. He's too orderly. If I were like that, I would have been the best daughter. I'm the problem. I can't confess. I can't share it with others and I can't be the way he wants me to be either.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

She is married and has children, but I know that she lives with a woman. She looks like a "theme" (translator's note: a gay person), I'm not an idiot. My mother has started to suspect this and she isn't surprised, she knows it's none of her business. They're friends and they have a good relationship. She [my mother] started saying that I look like her and should be her daughter. My mother is probably envious and she's frustrated that a woman like that has such daughters, while a normal mother has me. She probably thinks I'm a freak.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

5.3. The problem of sexualised violence

3 respondents reported sexualised violence in their childhood and adolescence. This situation is extremely worrying with regard to the sexual inviolability of girls⁴⁶ in the Chechen Republic.

⁴⁶ Sex assigned at birth.

One of my peers once tried to rape me. He cornered me in an abandoned house and tried to... I was scared. He took off his underpants. I resisted and managed to avoid him. We were the same age.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

So he kept molesting me and when I told him that I would tell on him, he said no one would believe me. And that his father and my father would believe him and then they'd kill me and my mother. One day my father sent me to the yard for some reason. His tractor was there and he was fixing it. I was eight. I went in there and my uncle grabbed me from behind, held my head down, after which I hit him and he hit me. I started screaming. And ran away from him. He accused me of pouring sand into the fuel tank, where you put petrol or diesel. And made out like the tractor wouldn't start. My father was furious and he was looking for me. I hid in the chicken coop. When I think back on this, I ask myself what the point of going there or into the house was – he would find me anyway. Father entered the chicken coop, closed the door and beat me up. I don't remember much, but it turns out that our Russian neighbours heard this and said the screams were so terrible that they cried and wanted to call the police. But I don't remember some bits. I was a very young child. He beat me up and my mother didn't know that he [my uncle] molested me. My father carried me out of the chicken coop.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

5.4. Strategies for building personal relationships online and in real life

When you risk your life, risk losing your freedom and risk bringing punishment not only onto yourself, but also onto your whole family; in the situation of information vacuum in society (the Internet remains the only source of information on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression) the process of becoming aware of your gender identity and sexual orientation and accepting it is extremely difficult. All of the participants of the study noted that they did not know that other homosexual, bisexual and transgender persons existed in the Chechen Republic.

In 2006, I got a phone and started talking to people. Before that I thought I was sick and I was the only one.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Experiencing feelings towards girls in one's teenage years could end in tragedy and deep trauma because risk is felt intuitively as there neither was nor is any available information on the consequences of coming out.

I fell in love with my first [female] teacher. I didn't really understand what was going on, but I really wanted to give her flowers. I told my mother that we needed to buy flowers for my teacher on some special occasion. My mother bought the flowers, but for some reason she decided to go to school with me. That's how she found out that nobody had asked for those flowers. My mother and the teacher thought that I had mixed something up. The teacher was beautiful. But then she got married.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In secondary school I would fall in love with girls. But I couldn't show it. I knew it wouldn't end well. These crushes became my secret.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

At age fifteen, I decided to confess to a friend. I wish I hadn't done it. She was two years older than me. Naturally, this was in Chechnya. She is a Chechen. She found out that it was me, and she began to laugh at me with her friends. I was not ashamed. This was already evident in my appearance and behaviour.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In the interviews we see that the way the lives of lesbian and bisexual women in the Chechen Republic is organised is changing, and a turning point is the year 2016. Before 2016, one could find relatively stable and safe places to meet and hang out.

We used to rent an apartment to hang out and have parties, and that's how we became quite a crowd.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In 2009 I would spend the night at my [female] friend's house, I'd visit her... I was friends with her family. They did not know, but they began to joke that we were like husband and wife. Her mother got sick and passed away within a month. We were together, but it was hard for her.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

My friends and I would go to Pyatigorsk and Makhachkala. I lived a double life: at home with my mother and in the taxi.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Since 2016, information about the persecution, violent treatment and blackmailing of LGBT+ persons started circulating. These facts and the rumours force the community to change their dating and safety strategies. Lesbian and bisexual women have had increasingly limited opportunities to meet in apartments, go to bars and travel outside the Chechen Republic.

They began talking about LGBT people in the Chechen Republic since about 2017, writing about how we dress and how to identify us.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In 2017, people I knew began to disappear. Gay men were being taken to the basements. "Themes"⁴⁷ were afraid to show up. Whoever tried to gather – they were caught and followed. Boys and girls. We stopped getting together in apartments.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In 2013, I graduated. In 2014-2015, the threat began to grow and we all felt it. People started disappearing in late 2015 and early 2016. What happened to a female friend of mine was that her husband printed out her correspondence. He suspected she was dating women.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Six years ago someone rented an apartment in our neighbourhood, some men would come over. My nephew said: "Remember the people who live there? They're "themes". They're over forty or fifty years old. Someone sniffed them out. I tell you this and I feel goosebumps. They burst in with cameras and weapons. They were told to pay 500 000 rubles each. They were all rich. They all had jobs, and they gave it all away. They gave

47 A "theme" is a slang word LGBT+ persons (hereinafter).

them 2 000 000 rubles. There were girls there, too. We don't know, there might have been something there. But the money didn't save them. They told me all of this without realising who I am. And I was sitting there, not saying anything. I don't have 500 000 rubles, what can I do? I don't have that kind of money.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

Another important factor was the availability of Internet access. The Internet made it possible, firstly, to communicate anonymously, and secondly, to communicate at a convenient time while at home. That is where two lives appeared: a real one, which should correspond to the general rules and requirements, and a virtual one, where one could carefully, but rather freely be a part of the community, meet people and exchange information.

That year I entered university, I studied by correspondence. I studied and worked. I had some "natural"⁴⁸ friends in Grozny. We used Arvechat⁴⁹ because messages weren't stored there and we had rooms for "heteros", "gays", "lesbians"... That's where I met LGBTs from the Caucasus. I also had ICQ⁵⁰. I was really scared of meeting people.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

After 2017, the Internet became the only space where one could keep in touch with the community. At the same time, the risks remain high and the disclosure of personal information via the Internet remains a vulnerability for lesbian and bisexual women. People get to know each other and communicate online and only after that they might attempt to meet in person.

Our social media pages are private. Naturally. If anything [gets out], you'll be locked up at home.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Note that 98% of social media profiles are private. Only bloggers have open profiles. I participated in a competition and I created a fake profile to do that. But you had to have a real profile⁵¹, not a fake one, to take part in the competition. With a photo of your face. There was one such photo there, the rest were pictures I downloaded from the Internet. A. was in the photo as well and A. was named. Someone sent this to my father. The entire week was a perfect nightmare. I lied to my father so he would believe me. I thought I would go gray that week. Although people don't actually go grey when they're stressed. It would be something else. He didn't let me go to work, he took away my phone and locked me up. I didn't panic and that's what saved me. That's why I'm still scared of opening that profile, all I've done is deleted that photo.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

In November, a girl wrote to me on Instagram – she had been writing to me for a month. She was married and came to visit me. I didn't know her at all, but she figured out who I was by my photos and pictures. I had a picture of my wedding up there. Two months later I got a divorce and a week later she came to visit me. That's how we met. She wrote to me herself and I was scared, but I followed her on Instagram. I was scared. Is it a yes or a no? She was a modest and loyal wife, I was afraid of her.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

48 "Natural" is a slang word that refers to heterosexual persons (hereinafter)

49 A chat where messages are automatically deleted and you can create chatrooms.

50 ICQ, a popular messenger in the past

51 Containing personal data.

I wrote to her directly – she was testing me. I told her that I had a girlfriend abroad, that I started a new profile and that she had a picture of that girlfriend as her profile picture. I thought it was that friend of mine. We started chatting and I believed it. We don't meet often. She's married. Things are very strict in her home. She goes back every 2-3 weeks. She visits her parents and then her husband. We can't spend the night together. We meet in cafes or something like that. She can visit me in the daytime.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

I would flirt, meet and kiss, but I mostly talked to them via the Internet. And then I met her. On her wedding day. But it is impossible for us to meet. We were only able to meet a couple of times and spent the day together a couple of times.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

I met with a girl from Dagestan online. We went to the market in Khasavyurt to get groceries. We agreed to meet. I told my mother that I was in Grozny, going about my studies. So I stayed at that girl's place several times. Then I found out that she was married and we stopped seeing each other on my initiative.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I don't know how others do it, but I don't have a personal life. I was in a relationship with a girl for four years. We met online and saw each other once or twice a month. Sometimes she would visit us and other times I would spend the night at her place. My mother let me stay the night with her.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The opportunity to meet in person is more of a privilege, which is determined by age, whether the women are married and have children, and by the views of the father and / or brothers.

Communication takes place within a small circle that requires a high level of trust and a clear assessment of the risks and opportunities.

There's no way for me to arrange my personal life. Some people can even stay over at someone's house or leave town. But usually someone just comes up to you to meet you. Say, a year and a half ago this girl came to my workplace and... well, everyone noticed and one of my colleagues said: "Are you stupid? Did you not notice?" I later found out that a mutual acquaintance had sent her to me saying "There's someone you're bound to like in there".

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

[We spend] our birthdays and New Year together. We meet somewhere around our place anyway. In our circle. Everyone has their own circle. People don't show themselves to others. A person from one circle doesn't know who the people from another circle are and what they do. If only there were at least some intersections. It would have been different then. Like, I've come out to you now and that's it. We're not going to go out and share it with others.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

5.5. Key Survival Models

The degree of freedom for self-realisation in personal relationships can be provisionally subdivided into four levels:

- 1) Has no freedom of movement or access to the Internet, work and/or study is banned.
- 2) May use communication devices under the control of parents and/or brothers, but has no freedom of movement.

3) Restricted freedom of movement (on arrangement with the father and/or brothers), may work or study, has relative freedom in using communication devices.

4) May leave the Chechen Republic, may use communication autonomously for the most part. This is the most privileged group and, as a rule, these queer women are married (to a gay or heterosexual man), may have children and are usually over 30.

There's nothing [to do] here, I wish I could go somewhere with my [female] friend. She has a car, her mother is Russian and her father is Chechen. She says, "Let's go..." If it were that easy, I would have gone a long time ago and I would have gone without her. If I had the freedom.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

You can imagine a chain: first there are the people who don't work. Then me – I can work. And then come my "hateful" girlfriends.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

There are girls who hate me simply because I can work.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

When you have a job and you are in town, you can say that you have gone to work and go about your own business. You simply went to work, that's all. No one is going to bother me, call me or control me because I'm at work.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Thus, only several options of how to organise your personal life and minimise risks to one's life and freedom remain.

The first model is an imitation of the behaviour of heterosexual and cisgender women. Complete concealment of personal relationships. Marriage to a heterosexual man, possibly by the decision of one's relatives, the birth of a child.

In Chechnya, I was single. Because some serious control was put in place, everyone – relatives on my mother's and father's side – started suspecting that I liked girls. I started wearing makeup, wearing my hair long, wearing skirts. I got a boyfriend. We dated for 3 years. It was a painful 3 years. Even though we're not allowed to touch girls down there, so there was none of that. But he loved me very much and it bothered me. Then he gave up because he realised I wouldn't marry him. He was literally chasing after me the first year.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Don't let it show, behave when you are outside. I keep forgetting and we hold hands. But I need to control myself.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

There are many who are married and have children – dozens of them, adults with good jobs.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The second model is moving to Moscow or St. Petersburg for work or study. Since it is difficult to find a job in the Chechen Republic to provide for a family, older queer women have the opportunity to leave. Economic independence allows one more independence to shape their life and make independent decisions. At the same time, it is difficult for relatives to lose control of a woman, and the question of her return to Chechnya may arise at any time.

My mother can call me and tell my uncles to bring me back at any moment if I refuse [to return].

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I work and send them money. Mom wants me to come back. But they have no money.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

As a result, I moved to X. First, my female relative, who lives here, just took me in. I asked to go with her, and she did not refuse. We have a good relationship. I decided to stay because I did not want to return. First, my mother said that she missed me, and then she started saying how you can't live without your brother or father. I said that I wanted to work. I made money and sent it home.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

This strategy is almost unattainable for many non-heterosexual women, even those whose relatives allowed them to study at a secular school. Educational institutions should be at least coordinated with the family. The departure of a young girl unaccompanied by relatives will raise questions from relatives and neighbours, and may attract the attention of the authorities. For these reasons, the family chooses educational institutions located in close proximity, or closed religious schools and universities (madrasas).

I can't go anywhere. I always need to come up with some kind of illness, an excuse like: "I'm dying..." But once a year I really need to do research and stuff like that. So I have to come up with something else. Something has to go wrong. Because if I just tell them that I need to go to Moscow – screw me! Others can't get out at all.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The third model is a sham marriage with a gay man. This is a difficult strategy to implement, as the general atmosphere of fear causes distrust of each other. On the one hand, the search for a homosexual partner for marriage is an unsafe process, and on the other hand, they are often expected to have a child in order to make it believable. And if a couple lives in the husband's house with their relatives, they have to spend every day of their lives meeting the expectations of others. In addition, male socialisation and social pressure leave their mark on patterns of behaviour in such a sham marriage. Domestic violence, coercion in the choice of clothing, and restrictions on movement remain in such families.

*To marry a gay man you need to find one first. I only know one, but he lives far a way. I wish I could straight out tell them to f*** off, but I can't.*

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

These gay husbands are just like the others. They can have sex for the sake of having a baby, but you end up owing them anyway.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Her gay husband beat her and she had to return home. She is now afraid to be conspicuous and leave the house. She lives alone with his mother.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

My girlfriend married a gay man and persuaded him to make me his second wife. The hardest part was finding a mullah who would agree to do this.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

The fourth model is living together as a couple. This is an extremely risky strategy, which is virtually doomed to be exposed. Life for a woman outside the constant and total control of the family is possible only after she reaches a certain age, if the family is quite liberal, if she has no brothers, no father and no other coincidental barriers. Due to the high level of risk, female homosexual couples are often forced to stay as far away from members of the LGBT + community as possible; they have to make up an explanation about the nature of their relationship and constantly control their behaviour as a couple.

I know one couple in Chechnya. They live together. But they live together with children, brothers, mothers and fathers. One of them takes care of the children. But sooner or later their parents will want to marry them off. They have been living together for several years now. They manage not to be found out – they've distanced themselves from everyone.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, married

The fifth model is to escape. This is an extreme option, as it carries not only risks for the homosexual or bisexual woman or transgender person, but also significant risks for all their family members. When a girl disappears, the authorities present it as though they joined a radical religious movement, society believes it to be for reasons of sexual immorality, relatives perceive it as disrespect and even an insult to the family. In addition, many queer women, as well as heterosexual, cisgender women in the Chechen Republic (especially young women) do not have sufficient experience of independence and they are terrified of leaving the Republic and cutting ties with their relatives. That is why escaping is a last resort for queer women.

I don't want to spend my entire life living in fear, being afraid, looking over my shoulder. They will find me. And my sisters. It's hard to be without them. Two souls are a family, but one soul is doomed.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I would fall in love from time to time. And I met this one girl. I wrote a letter to her. A nice letter with a slight hint that I like her. But it was not directly stated. This was at camp when it was time to leave. I took my bag, left the camp with my bag, a little money and a map of Russia. I wanted to go somewhere. I was overwhelmed by my feelings... I went wherever my feet took me. Back home everyone cried, my teachers were shocked. People started saying that I got mixed up with some Wahhabis or terrorists.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I packed my bags, got on the train It was a difficult decision. I love my motherland. However, it became totally impossible to live there. I bought a ticket to Moscow. I did not know where I would live. I contacted a distant relative. She refused to let me stay with her, but she took me in for 3 days. I did not care.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

When choosing any effective survival strategy that allows one to stay in the Chechen Republic and maintain relations with their family, one may obtain some freedom of movement. A homosexual or bisexual woman can leave the region from time to time and live a secret life that is in line with what she wants.

If it had not been so strict in Chechnya, then the girls would not have come here on holiday. They arrived, had a holiday here⁵² and left. For an evening or even for the

weekend. Some of them have a girlfriend here. They're normal, sensible people who came here on holiday and then go on working and living in Chechnya.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

5.6. The risk of being outed

Only one transgender man and one lesbian from the Chechen Republic spoke about the experience of coming out.

I was small, well, about thirteen years old. I went and told my mother that I'm a boy. She dismissed the question. I never brought it up again.

Respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

We already lived in Kh. with my family, and there I left my family in a specialised crisis center. Then I began talking to my mother over the Internet and she was persuading me to come back. I came out to her and my mother persuaded me to meet her. When we met, she cried and embraced me. She had never done it before. Mom promised that she would help me and persuaded me to come back to Chechnya for a short while. I wanted to change my name. And then I noticed my brothers and uncle on the plane with me... When we got home, they took away all my documents. Now I can't leave the house on my own, I have to wear a headscarf and perform prayers.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

In the Chechen Republic, coming out bears significant external and internal risks. Internal homophobia and transphobia do not allow one to come out to relatives and friends, and the threat of punishment from one's family members and law enforcement agencies causes a substantial and well-founded fear. In the vast majority of cases, respondents are afraid of being outed. Information about one's sexual orientation and gender identity is usually disclosed when relatives or law enforcement officers check the phones of non-heterosexual women.

My younger brother checked my phone and found a photo of my girlfriends in their underwear. My mother beat me so badly and my father said that I was not fit to live.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

Before leaving Chechnya, I was worried that someone would read my messages and would take away my phone. I deleted my messages before fleeing Chechnya. As of 2016 Chechen security forces started taking girls' phones right in the middle of the street and checking their messages. After several such cases, I deleted everything.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The risks depend largely on how exactly the information was disclosed and what stance the family takes. Revealing photos, romantic messages, the word of a neighbour or relative – all this is evidence against a woman.

If they filmed me, for example, and showed an unnecessary video to my father where I am not alone – to simply show that I am a "theme". It's simple. In my family if someone sees photos of girls, nothing ever occurs to them. If the women start joking and saying they suspect something, I tell them to keep suspecting. But if there's evidence, then everyone will believe it and you'll be a nobody. Words are one thing, but photos and videos... I used to be brave and I kept various photos. But then I went into the cloud and deleted everything. I thought, eff them. Why would I want to deal with this? But it's nice to look back and remember how things were ages ago. Of course, if you just say it, people will

say that things like this don't exist. But if there's evidence, they'll believe it and say "How could I have not noticed?" Take my colleague, for example, we've been working together for ages and she says: "Are you...?" She sees that I chat with women and they always pick me up.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

All the men in the family gather. All the older men of the family (grandfathers, uncles, fathers, older brothers) discuss how to punish the woman for her misconduct. They decide what to do, whom to punish and how to do it. There are two options for a lesbian: to kill her or marry her off. My family are capable of murder, even if someone says that they saw a woman with a man. It is considered a shame for the family, so they can kill a girl for even the smallest things.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Outing has dire consequences. But neither Sharia law, nor the adats contain a system of punishment for female homosexual relations (according to experts). The type of punishment is decided on within the family if the information has not gone beyond the family. Very often, the first reaction is violence against the homosexual or bisexual woman or transgender person.

They believed that I had little faith. When I was in the eleventh grade, I was talking to a girl and we messaged each other, and my sister read those messages. She is still really nosey and she wants to know everything. She got into my phone and told the whole family. What a scandal it was! I became not just a slut, but worse.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

My brother got a call. He answered the call, was silent and listened. Then he hung up. At that time, only my brother and I were at home. He jumped up and grabbed the hammer. With a hammer, he began to break furniture, smashed the TV. Then he began to beat me, waving the hammer around. Mom went into the room and started screaming at him. Brother shouted that he would kill me. He would have killed if it were not for our mother.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

He beat me with a belt. A military one with a metal ... well, the thing at the end. He hit me across the face and on the head.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

The second possible consequence is the deprivation of freedom of movement. The woman is often also deprived of her means of communication and documents at this time.

I was locked in the house for several years after they were told who I was.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

After that, they locked me in the house for six months before the wedding day, they took me to the village. My brother said that if they bring me back home, he will kill me because I dishonoured them.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

Female homosexuality can be reduced to the theory of jinns possessing the human body. A confirmation by the mullah that a non-heterosexual woman is possessed a jinn removes responsibility from the woman and disgrace from the family, but dooms her to violent religious practices. Of the 14 respondents, 10 recalled that in one way or another they were tested for jinns or procedures for casting out jinns.

I found out that we were going to the mullah in a couple of hours. I asked not to go and said that I was already cured. But that didn't help.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

Forced marriage is also seen as a way of changing sexual orientation or gender identity. At its core, it is corrective sexualised violence, but with the blessing of parents and Islam.

The first person to agree became my husband.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, married

She lived with her stepfather. She talked with her father, but he lived his life with his wife. Her father's relatives began pressuring her, she was attached to her mother. Her relatives believed that the stepfather was a stranger; he had been raising her from the age of eight. Her aunt lived in Estonia. We wanted to live together and move to Estonia. But she did not dare to take this step and she was forced to get married. The husband was much older than her. She had not seen the groom before the wedding. It was really difficult. He raped her. I was depressed, it was a tragedy that she got married.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The process of forcibly strengthening the religious faith of a woman who is suspected of homosexuality can take various forms of oppression and does not exclude violence and restrictions on her freedom of movement.

It was the first Islamic madrasa. It's translated as "school", but they translate it as "Islamic school". It was a terrible place. There are two floors together with the kitchen, one floor is for studying. There's one kitchen, with cockroaches. Ages 10 and up, different ages. Of course nobody knows how to cook. I cried. The attitude was terrible – they would insult and humiliate us and force us to clean the rooms. Say, everyone goes to have lunch and they single out one girl and say, "You're not going anywhere until you clean all of this". This happened I Kh. Many of those who go there run away. It's unhygienic. Two showers for seventy girls and three sinks. There was such a queue. You could only have a shower if you got permission, once a month, because you had to wait for your turn. You can't use your phone there. I was caught. Two of the girls had iPhones, the sixth, seventh and eighth model. They confiscated twenty phones and expelled five people and me. Because I was expelled, I was not fed or allowed to go outside. They humiliated and insulted me and wouldn't let me go out into the courtyard. At home I got threats because I "disgraced" them, "your brother will come over and we'll find out what was in that phone and where you got the phone from". At night I cut my wrists with a razor blade, I wanted to kill myself. I didn't want to stay there, but I didn't want to go back home either. I don't know how to cut. I broke the razor apart and took out the razor blade. Then I was taken away. My brother was furious, he beat me up and said: "Whether you like it or not, your ass is staying in that place and you will study there".

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

"Honour" killings are a significant risk for queer women if personal information about them becomes available to their relatives or third parties. All respondents rated this risk as realistic.

If my brothers find out, they will immediately kill me, I know that for sure. It would be a great shame for them.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The only thing my daughter-in-law told me was that if there were problems, then my brother said: "There will be no problems, I will solve them and there will be no problem." He said it for a reason, so I would know.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Two girls ran away after their relatives found out about their relationship. Then we found out that they were found. One was killed, and I did not see her anymore. And the second girl was returned to her husband. Security officers caught a female friend of hers and beat her up. After that she deleted her social media pages, married a gay man and left [the region].

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

They [the older men in the family] will want to lock you inside and bury you in your yard.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, divorced

I can confidently say that my brother can do this [kill me]. He even says that if something happens, then I have no chance. But still, others will find out. For a lesbian, it's the end.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

My brothers openly say that if I leave the house, they will find me and kill me or they will find killers who will do it for 2,000 euros.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

The girls are buried in their garden and in their yard, not even in the cemetery. Nobody wants to let others know about this kind of thing. Well, the relatives will know anyway. So they will find a way to hide [the murder]. They've just disappeared. And the neighbours can be told that they left somewhere. I've heard so many stories about women buried in their yard!

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

One works ... in a high-status job and he killed his mother, because "she had many lovers." Yes. And he is very proud of it – he talks about it. Sometimes nephews can kill a woman if she has an extramarital relationship. If someone stands up for her, then there is only one option – they will just marry you off to this person. And if you were with a woman, you have nowhere to go to.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Informal marginal groups that fight for "morality" and respect for traditions play a significant role in targeted outing. Personal information and photos of young women appear on these social media pages, which inevitably leads to the dissemination of this information and to violence. An example is one of the most famous pages – "Carthage"⁵³. Many attempts to block this page were unsuccessful, since the policy of social networks in Russia is extremely favourably disposed to them.

⁵³ <https://vk.com/karfagenone>

5.7. The life values of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

Life values are the guidelines that determine a person's life, her / his choices, including possible patterns of behaviour. The following values can be singled out from all the interviews:

- Family and relationships with parents, sisters, brothers.

When I was on the run, I send my mother two letters and I got letters back "to be left until called for". In the last letter they asked for an address. To make sure everything was OK. They wrote that my mother was suffering. And that the people in the village were asking about me. I felt really sorry for my mother and I myself was mentally exhausted.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Our girls value their parents more and think about them. And the guys don't think about them at all.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, married

I have one brother and a mother. They are keeping me here. I will stay ... as long as the older brother is supportive and as long as mom is here. And there is this one person. I do not know how. Mom has heart problems, and she has gone through so much that I can't. She was left alone with three children and raised us.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

Family, health, and my near and dear.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

- Independence and the opportunity to make one's own decisions.

I will make all of my life decisions by myself. I just need to find a way around someone [wali].

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I would move in with my girlfriend, start working or studying. I wanted to study to be a gynecologist. And, yes, [I would move] away from Russia.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The deep conflict between these two core values leads to intrapersonal conflict, which further determines the choice of survival strategies.

Well, that is, she would like me to get married and live a normal life. But I can't do it for her sake. She probably thinks that if I come back home, everything will change. It is clear that she hopes and wants me to come back and go back into the closet.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

My nervous system is 80% impaired. Getting me to snap is easy. I hope that something will change.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

5.8. Strategies for building the future

In such conditions of risk and constant pressure, the absence or extreme limitation of the right to make independent decisions regarding one's own life, it is difficult to make plans for the future. Homosexual and bisexual women and transgender persons have no specific plans; life is constructed on a short-term basis.

I have no safety net, no passport, no money.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I do not see my future here. I live for today only.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

All respondents have had thoughts about leaving. These are usually dreams or an estimation of their capabilities. The fear of being caught and returned and the fear of punishment is no less substantial than the fear of separation from the family.

I wanted to leave like the other girls did, but I was afraid. I'm a big coward. I'm afraid they will find me.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

For half of the respondents, the future is based on their desire to leave the region and find a safe place to live.

So when I applied for a visa, I believed in it so much and I said that I didn't give a damn, even if I had to die here. At that moment I didn't care to the extent that I would have left it I had got it. What mattered was that I stayed connected⁵⁴. I guess it wasn't meant to be. Everything I had been looking forward to came crashing down. I don't understand where I would like to go and whom I would like to be with... I don't know anything.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

If I succeed, I will leave and take my sister with me. I would need to get custody of my sister and get us passports.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Even with these plans, all respondents noted that it was important for them to stay in touch with the family, keep in touch with their relatives and neighbours and have an alibi.

I have a dream to have a baby at all costs – in the future. My dream is to move away. To get married and leave. Not to run away. We have so many relatives – I do not want to run and hide – what kind of life would that be? I want to leave and live a normal life. I don't want to suffer. They are afraid of everything there. I could go today if I wanted to, but what kind of life would that be? I can get married [to a man]... and go abroad – my husband would take me there. Some people were lucky and they managed to move away peacefully, they live in different countries. They got married and live there. I haven't been in much luck so far.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30 unmarried

⁵⁴ To the women in the family (the sisters and the mother).

I'll just get a one-way ticket, if it comes to that. My father is the only reason I'm still here. He's old, but he will live much longer. And when he dies, I will leave.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

I want to get married and leave peacefully.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, under 30, unmarried

It would traumatise my mother if I cut off all ties. But if I get married and leave, I can write to her whenever I want, I can come and go. If it works out.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Some respondents openly consider marriage with a heterosexual man to be an inevitable part of their future.

Our uncle will take us away and marry us off. How can we prevent this? The youngest is fourteen years old and they are already talking about her wedding.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

5.9. Military conflicts as a traumatic factor

The first Chechen war unfolded on the territory of the republic and bordering areas from 1994 to 1996. According to the Memorial Human Rights Center, 30 to 40 thousand civilians died during the war⁵⁵. The second Chechen war lasted 10 years from 1999 to 2009.

Many of the respondents over 30 recall the first and second war in the Chechen Republic as a traumatic and difficult event related to the death of loved ones. Undoubtedly, the war broke and claimed many lives. These tragic events had a direct impact on the psychological health of the respondents and on relationships in their families.

At that time, troops would enter through the fields. We became refugees. They said they would bomb us. These were Russian troops. My mother worked in the vineyards. Through them, tanks came from Stavropol. Rumours about them robbing and destroying our village started spreading. We left, and in the eventually it did happen. They ruined houses and threw shells at the village.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

Many relatives and villagers – men – became militants to protect the villages and their homeland. For them, it was a war against invaders, rapists, and murderers. Many women were killed, slaughtered by Russian. There were ordinary soldiers who did not know where they ended up. They did not know that they had been brought to fight and where they were. And there were those who came to kill and fight – adult military contractors.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The villagers were killed, many women were killed. The teacher was killed by a sniper.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

When the war began, we couldn't leave, our family did not have money. We traveled around Chechnya, somehow found out where the military operations would take place. Sometimes, the Russian military themselves, who drove through the streets in military

⁵⁵ Alexander Cherkasov. Book of Numbers. The Book of Losses. The book of the terrible judgment ("Memorial").

⁵⁶ Alexander Cherkasov, Chair of the Memorial Human Right Center: "We had to replace the government". How and who calculated the losses of the first Chechen war / Novaya Gazeta, № 139 – 2019

vehicles and into the loudspeaker, notified civilians. At first, we hid in the basement with our relatives in the village. Almost all members of the teip were there in that large basement. But the military threw grenades into the basements before entering the building. The military did not check to see if there were children or women. Then all our relatives began to look for other safe places. All our relatives went to the mountainous areas by truck. For a while we drove around like that. Then, during the second war, we lived in a refugee camp, then with our relatives.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The first war passed us by. The main battles were in Grozny and the suburbs of Grozny. In 1999, they came from the side of our village. And through our village. Then my half-brother, following his friends, went into action, because he couldn't bear to watch from the sidelines.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

He would visit us sometimes. Under Kh. in the year 2000 they were surrounded. He was wounded in the leg, lost a lot of blood and died⁵⁷. Four brothers died in one family. Many [relatives] went to bring the bodies back. Mother went to look for him.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

By the year 2000, we had already returned to the village. The military were in the fields. Bombs flew over us. They hit a children's camp, so we had to sleep on the floor. Then we held a funeral.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

The rest of the family got across the Terek river. It was not far. They lived at school, cooked outside. Someone left to stay with their relatives. We left later than many. Those who stayed there did not want to leave home, mostly the elderly. A month later we returned.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

We survived, and there was a war going on. During the war we did not leave anywhere. We hid ... Our relatives had a machine gun, and when the soldiers checked the homes, they put their machine gun into the hay the cow was feeding on.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

But even in this difficult time, homosexual and bisexual women, like all others, could find love and try to create a relationship.

When my older brother found out that I was dating a girl, we had a conflict and he forbid us to see each other. This happened during the war and we broke up.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

When they discovered me, I did not know what awaited me at home. I was ready for anything. In wartime, girls would disappear, brothers would kill their sisters, and I thought they could kill me. I thought my older brother would kill me because he inherited my father's personality. He expressed his disapproval and said that I disgraced him and the whole family, that it would be better if I died. And he asked me to kill myself so that he wouldn't have blood on his hands – to write it off as an accident.

Female respondent, Chechen Republic, over 30, unmarried

⁵⁷ She cries.

6. The situation of homosexual women in the Republic of Ingushetia

The study involved 3 lesbians aged 20 to 28. The community of non-heterosexual women in Ingushetia is extremely private. In the study, we encountered an atmosphere of total distrust and fear in the community.

In Ingushetia, everyone hears and knows everything, shares it with their family and parents and all the relatives. All relatives are interconnected.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried.

6.1. Upbringing in the parental family. Opportunities and limitations

The parenting conditions depend on the sex assigned at birth and parental attitudes. Boys are given more freedom; girls have more restraints. This situation is generally applicable to all North Caucasian republics.

There's no difference in parenting, it's just that guys have more freedom, I guess... Are there restraints (for the girls)? I don't know, although there are families where girls are forbidden to study, work or go out.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried.

My father grew up in H., but he is deeply religious and patriarchal. Father always forbade me from wearing pants and short skirts, made me cover everything up. Communication with boys was forbidden.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried.

My father got married, but he always hit me and said I had nowhere to go, that I was alone, and nobody will want me. My father used to beat my mother a lot. My father is a fiery kind of man. He broke my arm once and that arm still hurts in the shoulder.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried.

However, under certain conditions a non-heterosexual woman can find family support. The main factor will be the family's knowledge about the girl's sexual orientation or gender identity. If a woman's private life has not been disclosed, she may find support in the family.

I have a good relationship to my father, to my stepmother not so much. Bro is my man and so is my sister. Although they're my half-siblings. I keep them at a distance. They don't know much about me.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

The chances of receiving support from the family after coming out are lowered.

The relationship with my brother is either non-existent or bad. He judged me and so did my father.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

6.2. Key survival models

Personal lives of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women are organised in a secret and closed environment due to high risks of violence. Private acquaintances are established intuitively.

I was never into guys. I fell in love with my neighbour. Then I realised it was mutual and voilà!

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

A significant part of the personal life has moved to the Internet, where you can communicate anonymously and relatively safely.

The last acquaintance was on VKontakte [popular Russian social media]. That's all I can say about it. I don't use other social media, I don't date. I'm tired of it.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

Despite the significant risks and the general high level of caution among homosexual women in Ingushetia the strategies for building personal relationships are similar to those in the Chechen Republic.

First model – imitation of heterosexual and cisgender women's behaviour. A complete concealment of personal relationships with women. This model can be reinforced by a demonstration of deep religiousness. This strategy allows for more freedom of movement and opportunities to communicate with non-heterosexual women.

I was into girls but then I decided to let go of it.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

A friend from Ingushetia came to see us⁵⁸. She is married and covered. She invited us to visit her, but I wouldn't be able to smoke there, so I declined. If anyone found out about her, she will suffer because that⁵⁹ is not accepted in Islam.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

Second model – Leaving to study or work to a major city in central Russia (Moscow or St. Petersburg). The opportunity to study or work, and even more so outside the region, is only available with the approval of the relatives and is usually limited by the control or supervision of the relative's adult female guardian.

Recently I got into a university in Moscow. I asked my father for permission and had to live with my uncle. First, he was opposed to it but then agreed because it was his brothers request. My uncle's wife and their children also live here. Now I started studying.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

Third model– Escape. A decision to escape is usually an extremely emotional decision, spontaneous and poorly planned. This often results in its failure and increases the risks to life. In other words, the decision to escape is either a last chance to find freedom, or an escape from severe punishment, or an attempt to avoid forced marriage.

I decided to run away after a fight. I quit the institute because of the constant bullying. That meant that now I would have to get married. I didn't tell anybody why I quit my studies, because that would have led to further beatings. My father said I was a "stinking slut and I was to blame," and I said it wasn't like that and that it was hard for me. He raised his hand and hit me so I wouldn't talk back to him. I wasn't preparing for my

⁵⁸ In the Republic of Dagestan.

⁵⁹ Same-sex relationships with women

escape. I got on the bus to X. I had fifteen thousand Rubel on me (about 215 \$) and I left. I found a hostel on the Internet, showed my passport there. I spent the night. They found me two days later. And they didn't file a missing person report, they just used their connections with the police. He came to the hostel with my mother's relative. They took me by force right in front of other people. These people did nothing, they didn't help. I was afraid to make things worse. He dragged me out, put me in the car and brought me home. He beat me up again. Of course, he said I was ungrateful, that I should be punished more, and that even death wouldn't be punishment enough for me. I stayed at home for a year.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

But there is a support system, as far as it is possible, among homosexual women in Ingushetia.

No one is here alone. If I find out that there is some threat, I'll warn them. I will try to help, do my best, talk to the parents of that friend.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

6.3. The risk of being outed

Being outed remains a significant risk for non-heterosexual women from Ingushetia. Outing can occur not only because of external disclosures (disclosed messages, hacked accounts), but also because of a careless coming out in front of friends. This risk remains even in the case of movement to a Central region of Russia.

I accidentally told it to my classmates at the institute. Everyone started talking about it and one of the teachers was our relative. She told my father. He beat me up and kept saying it can't be true. He was outraged how it could be possible that I became like that. He hit me in the face, pulled my hair, hit my chest, hit my body. After that, he locked me in my room. I was there for about 24 hours. He took my phone. He said I wouldn't need it anymore. He said I disgraced our family. I didn't get my phone back until six months later. A month later I was permitted to attend university again and I got a dumbphone so that they could control me.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

Punitive methods are physical violence, restriction of free movement, deprivation and control of means of communication. One of the most common ways to conceal "shameful" behaviour and change sexual orientation is through forced marriage.

My cousin used to say all the time that I should be married. "Why do you need to study?" He thought it wasn't necessary. And he found a rich and wealthy man. They are business partners... I'm not sure what kind of business. My mom said he is divorced, twice, and has three children and he is 30 years old. Such behaviour is usually unacceptable. And that means these were extreme cases⁶⁰. He probably beat up his wives. My dad told me about this decision. I was thinking about suicide.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

⁶⁰Talaq (from Arabic) is divorce in Islam. In Islam, the right to declare a divorce has the husband or a sharia judge, who makes a decision at the request of the wife. All maddhabs postulate that you can not give a divorce to your wife during menstruation or postpartum bleeding. A wife may ask for a divorce only for a substantial reason: when the husband has gone missing; does not provide materially for his wife; does not perform his marital duties; after the marriage has been concluded, the husband flaws that he kept quiet about before come to light, or he has concealed some diseases.

The risk of gender-based murder remains. In general, "honour" killings remain a practically blind spot for documentation, as these stories are not discussed directly in the family but become legends. Women die in strange circumstances or simply disappear.

My older sister died in 1993, five years before I was born. She lived and studied at X. (city of the Central region of Russia) and got pregnant without being married. She wouldn't tell who the father was. She was sent to Ingushetia to her grandfather. A few months later she died of pneumonia... While being pregnant. We were not told anything about her.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

I found out about the wedding and started crying, I freaked out. And my uncle said I should be buried, not married to this man.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

6.4. The life values of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

Family values and family members opinions come into conflict with another value - the value of freedom of decision and independence. In addition, religion (Islam) has a particular value.

I'm always controlling my behaviour.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

I really want to leave but I can't, I won't be able to.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

Of course, I have sinned. Everyone has. I follow three out of five pillars of Islam. I hope I won't burn in hell.

Female respondent, Republic of Ingushetia, under 30, unmarried

7. The situation of homosexual, bisexual and transgender women in the Republic of Dagestan

In Russia, homophobia is getting worse and worse every day. I hear my headmistress at work saying, "Ew, these fags..." and I keep quiet. There is no future in Russia or for Russia. There is no future for me in Russia. I can never become a real member of the Russian society.

*Volunteer of "Queer Women of North Caucasus"
Republic of Dagestan*

The study involved 12 lesbian and bisexual women aged 17 to 42 and 1 transgender woman aged 28. They all agreed to a non-standardised interview on condition of anonymity (13 persons). Of these, 9 were married or are in a religious marriage (nikah) and 4 were not married. Among the respondents only the transgender woman was in a sham marriage. One respondent has rather a formal marriage and her husband knows about her steady relationship with a woman. Eleven women have a father and brothers in the family who have the traditional right to control and punish. Three respondents are raising children. The survey in Dagestan was conducted on conditions of confidentiality, and respondents voiced their fears and risks. Several respondents emphasised the importance of participation in this study as an opportunity to document the situation regarding the rights of non-heterosexual women and transgender people in the Republic of Dagestan.

Dagestan is the most multinational region in Russia. In 2000 the State Council of Dagestan established a list of indigenous peoples of the republic, which includes 14 nationalities: Avars, Aghuls, Azerbaijanis, Dargins, Kumyks, Laks, Lezgins, Tats, Tabasarans, Nogais, Rutuls, Russians, Tsahurs, Chechen-Akkkins. In Dagestan live, according to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, the Avars (Didoists, Andians, Akhvakh, Bezhtas, Karatins, Botlikhans, Hunzibs, Tindals, Khvarshins, Ginukhans, Godoberins, Chamalals and Archins), Dargins (Kubachin, Kaytag), Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, Azerbaijanis, Tabasarans, Russians, Chechens, Nogais, Aguls, Rutuls, Tsakhurs, Armenians, Tatars, Jews, Ukrainians, Ossetians, Georgians, mountain Jews, Ingush and other nationalities. Such diversity of ethnic identity determines in many respects the situation with the rights of women and LGBT+ persons in the republic. Moreover, in communication and interaction even within the community, the topic of ethnic identity remains an important issue.

There are over forty small and large ethnic groups with fourteen written languages. It is difficult to determine the exact number because, for example, people from the upper and lower parts of the same village may represent different ethnic groups and even speak different languages. Not as fundamentally different as the languages of different groups, but in a different dialect.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender (Republic of Dagestan)

It is considered the most religious and the strictest of all nations, and the most respected, because Avars are the pride of all nations. I think some will argue about that. When you say you're an Avar, it means you are a respectable person. It means that "every Avar woman" is like that, meaning a girl is definitely married before the age of 18, girls stay at

home, are raised very well, and have large and religious families. Few girls shame the family... like in Chechnya.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

In reality, we're all certainly not like that. They're empty words. There are no bad nations - there are only bad people. There are very modest Laks and Lezgins but also Russians. But the latter live a freer life. They can talk to boys, their parents know. If my father sees me standing there with a boy, he'll grab me by the hair and scream "Come here!"

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

She is a Lak. Eighty percent live in the cities. What Avar women can't do is permitted to Lak women.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Since childhood, girls⁶¹ know what they are and are not allowed to do. It is expected from the family and the community that all the decisions that a girl or woman makes are not based on her wishes, but on the rules and potential punishment in case of disobedience.

In ninth grade I had a boyfriend. We went out for seven months. Then we broke up. I thought it was a small town. My brother and cousin went to the same school and if they would have found out they would have berated me and taken out of school. It would be severe and very dangerous. Rumours that you are frivolous, do not think about your family, brothers, about the future and that you meet, kiss and hug spread immediately if you just stand and talk to boys. We've been meeting at the park and I've never been alone, always with a girlfriend or my sister, who could bear witness. If he spreads some rumours, they'll prove that nothing happened. If that rumour spreads and got to my brothers, they'd take me out of school. So, I wouldn't have received education. They would have told my father and would have beaten me up badly themselves. It was a parenting method. They would leave me at home. They wouldn't bother about finding out the truth. If the guy says it, then it's true. Because she allowed him to be disrespectful to her. And if the guy respected her, he wouldn't let such rumours get out of hand. Well, it's assumed that if the rumour is groundless, the guy will protect the woman himself.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Female genital mutilation remains an issue in some regions of Dagestan.

My family practiced female circumcision. Uncle M.'s wife had been circumcised. They wanted to circumcise my sisters E and M. But I found it out later. I heard from my aunt about female circumcision. We discussed the age at which boys are circumcised at birth or later. And I was told that there was female circumcision and I asked if I had been circumcised. They told me that I hadn't been circumcised. She said that her daughters were going to be circumcised, but she insisted that they wouldn't do it. M. wanted to circumcise. I think it's like a punishment. But I don't know what to call it. It's not a tradition. It's like a punishment for a girl's sexual desires before marriage, so she won't damage the honour of her family, a way to forbid her to follow her feelings. I felt really sorry for my aunt. When I started reading and found out about it. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, it's terrifying.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I grew up in Dagestan, and in our school children in the third or fourth grade were whispering: "She has been circumcised". I don't believe that female circumcision as we picture it exists in Chechnya. It is more of a problem in the Avar villages, in the direction of the Tsuntinsky District. They've moved to the plains and are now practicing it, but not as much as before. But it's not the cruel African genital mutilation, but with it still has a its cruel sides.

Civil Rights Defender, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

I worked on this topic for two years. In 2016, I had to quickly gather everything I had and publish it. The commotion started, and then two weeks later the Stitching Justice Initiative⁶² published their report as well and the commotion grew so big that no one remembered who had written what. There were three main types of answers: you are all liars and we don't do that; yes we do it and that's how it should be; yes we do it but not in the reported magnitude, so leave us alone. Almost everyone was against visibility. Some said that these were echoes of paganism only a few admitted that it was their muftiate⁶³. There are more circumcisions now. It was also practiced during Soviet times, I first learned about it in 1981.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender

7.1. Upbringing in the parental family. Opportunities and limitations

In Dagestan there are many mixed marriages. The type of family upbringing and the level of different forms of domestic violence against girls⁶⁴ depends on the family composition, the families' socio-economic situation, the parents' traditions and their own life experience. The level of restrictions on movement, control over clothing and communication is largely determined by family attitudes, but the risks increase when sexual orientation and/or gender identity becomes known to family members. In addition, self-censorship and self-limitation remain. Even though societies' expectations about appearance remain, the level of demands varies.

I wear jeans and a T-shirt. If I arrive like this, the neighbours won't say anything. They admire me and invite me to tea. I behave adequately with people.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

A female cousin came to see us. We all went to the sea. We started talking and walked along the beach. We laid down on the sand, it may have been vulgar, but we were at the sea. My brother's friends started taking pictures of me with his cellphone as I walked by. Then one of them took me and threw me to the ground. They were all laughing. And a couple of hours later, my little brother came flying into my room and started beating me up saying that I was at fault for wearing a top and being thrown on the ground.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

⁶² Antonova, Y., Sirazhudinova, S. Female genital mutilation of girls. Report on results of qualitative research in the Republic of Dagestan. Stitching Justice Initiative for Russia. 2016.

⁶³ Muftiate is a self-governing centralised religious organisation that operates on a voluntary basis and unites Muslim religious institutions (religious and educational institutions), as well as the residents of a certain territory, for the purpose of practicing and disseminating Islam. It is headed by a mufti.

⁶⁴ Sex assigned at birth

Once he got out of prison, it became unbearable to talk to him. He wouldn't allow me to leave the house, made me wear a skirt and long shirts. And I don't have that kind of stuff. I have sweaters, but they were too short for him. He didn't like it. And it's cold outside in winter in a skirt. Or I'm texting on the phone and he takes the phone and makes sure that I don't chat with any boys. Why would I? I only talk to girls. And he calms down. He didn't know they weren't regular girls.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The severity of the rules and the punishment system depends on the place where the family lives (town or village), whether there is a father or brothers, the nationalities in the family and attitudes in the family as well as pressure from relatives.

My mother knows. In the beginning, she used to say: "Don't do it, you don't need it." Now she says, "Love whoever you want. What matters is that you have children." My mom is an Avar. I was convinced that she would never accept it. And my father is Russian. So, this isn't a traditional family anymore. My father doesn't know, and I don't know how he feels about it. We haven't discussed it. MY mother read my correspondence when I was 13 or 14 years old. And that's when she was saying: "Don't. Talk to the boys, you're not forbidden to talk to them." And then I told her that it wasn't just a phase. "I don't know if you'll accept me or not, but it won't go away." And she said, "Well if it won't, then it won't, I can't do much about it anyway."

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

There's no such thing as coming home and hugging my dad and telling him where I was. Or greeting him and reporting where I was. There is less talking... more of an appearance as a perfect girl.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Every time he came to visit, I couldn't leave the house. I worked five days a week. And on weekends I had appointments with a cosmetologist, for example. And he said, "You'll stay home." I would explain that I have an appointment, but he still wouldn't let me go. That's when I called my father. My father gave me the permission. He asked me to give him the phone. My father told him I could go, but since my brother is home and my father isn't, it's up to my brother. If I disobey my brother, he will kill me. And my father agreed with him. The family follows this tradition that if my father isn't home, my brother is the elder and his word is the law.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I don't like to cross paths with him, I know what a complicated man he is. I try not to stay alone with him and minimise the time we spent together in the house or the same room, I don't use my phone in front of him. I try to wear a headscarf for appearance to avoid fighting. If he enters the room, then everyone must stand up, say hello to him and only then they can sit back down. It's obligatory. If you don't do that, he'll be very brusque. He'll make a remark, maybe scold you, kick you out of the room. He's very uptight.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I am an only child so I'm always forgiven. Her parents are stricter and she has many sisters. If she had brothers, I'd be more worried.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

My mother is being told that she is bad at parenting. All our relatives are religious, and everyone treats her badly because she married a Russian. Her husband is Russian, her

daughter looks like a guy. Mom says she'll handle it. They are all relatives on her side. I don't even talk to them.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Neither religious marriages (nikah⁶⁵) nor official marriages registered in the civil registry office can protect mothers in the parental families from violence.

I've never met my father - he left my mother when she was pregnant with me. They had a Muslim marriage without a civil registration. They lived together for some time. She told me that when toxemia started, love turned into hate. She started to pester him. It was my cousin who told me that she started to hate him a lot and he ran away from her. Mom said he didn't want her to give birth and tried to get her to have an abortion. And that's it, he left and never came back.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

There is still a significant difference between the upbringing of girls⁶⁶ and boys in Dagestan. The girls' freedoms are severely restricted.

I couldn't see my girlfriends outside of school, my tasks are homework and chores. If I received permission, I could only meet with them under strict supervision. My sister wouldn't let me go either, and I look after the children twenty-four seven. I could not meet with my friend, I was forced to return home when we just prepared tea. During my adolescence I tried to talk to my family about going to a cafe and meeting with my girlfriends, but my sister said I had nothing to talk about with them. I didn't want any conflicts, so I tried not to leave the house at all.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

After he was released from prison in 2017, he stayed in my mother's village N. He was obliged to report to the stations there. He returned to Moscow in 2018 during my exams period. He stayed with my cousin and my uncle. He looked for a job and drank. He didn't stay with us because his parents cared for him a lot, but not really for me. He forbade his parents to get involved in his personal affairs. I asked them to do the same for me, but they didn't care about what I had to say.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I have just downloaded Viber. I didn't know that the messenger sends notifications and that messages open on the whole phone at once. A friend from Georgia wrote me just when he took away my phone. At that moment her message arrived "Are you asleep?" My uncle ran into my room and shoved the phone in my face: "Who's that?" I looked at it and it said M. I answered that it's my friend M. He said: "Show me the correspondence". We have chatted a little before. It's good that there wasn't a single swear word. We talked about work, whether I still had contact with my ex and also whether I was already engaged. I said no and that I'm too young for that. So just a usual conversation. After reading that part he thought that it was a boy who I renamed as a girl. But I didn't realise it back then because I didn't talk to boys at all, so I didn't have anything to hide. I save all the girls by names. He asked me who that is and why she was asking that. I said it didn't have any particular reason. She was just interested, so what about it? Why can't a girl ask another girl whether she is engaged. My sister was sitting nearby and confirmed that it is a girl and said that she knows her too. He became furious "You know

⁶⁵ Nikah is the marriage between a man and a woman in Islamic family law.

⁶⁶ Sex assigned at birth.

her too?”. He came onto her and slapped her really hard! I hid under the blanket and started laughing. It was hysterical laughing. That’s horrible. He called his son who had a sleepover at his friend’s house. He had to come home, take my phone, call that girl and make sure that it was a girl and report that back to his father. He took my phone away. I couldn’t fall asleep for a very long time. I was shocked how my sister could live with him. I thought that my father is an angel compared to him.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

As mentioned above, the relationship to the children can contradict with the republic’s customs. But those cases are exceptions determined by the life experience of the parents.

I have a younger brother. Sometimes my mother says that he is allowed to do things because he is a boy. But there is nothing like a forced dress code for girls. But he is allowed to fight and I am not. My mother sometimes says that she would like to see me in a skirt, but that’s it then. There are no major conflict. For example, they don’t complain about my short haircut. My mother says that she is raising a boyish girl and a girly boy.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

7.2. Allies in the family

The risk of rejection by the family is considered realistic, but not all the respondents are convinced of violence by family members. Only 3 respondents are sure that physical violence is possible. At the time of the study one respondents’ fears were confirmed. For all participants of this the study, the attitude of parents and siblings was very important. Rejection by the family, conflicts, lack of trust and parental health are perceived as significant issues. Even if the respondent is in a situation of ongoing violence, she tries to maintain relations with her family members, improve it or find an excuse for the experienced violence. At the same time, supportive relatives can be found in rare cases, although their ability to protect the girls is extremely limited.

My closest relationships were with my aunts P. and R. I told them almost everything. They knew where I was and what I was doing. They always had my back. They are secular, agree with me in many ways, we often share a mutual opinion. They still live in that village.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Only my deceased grandmother could protect me in the family. I am convinced that she would have done anything to defend me from my mothers’ and fathers’ relatives. She used to say that as long as she is alive no one will touch her girl. She would have killed for her grandchildren.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I am fifty percent sure that my aunt would help me. She would try to hide me if someone wanted to kill me. Anything is possible. But I don’t trust them because they would empathise with my mother. As mothers they understand other parents. They would feel sorry for my mother and would believe her when she would say “We won’t do anything to her”. They would fall for it and give me away.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

My sister called me and said that he came and shouted at her. There was a correspondence with my sister where we talked about my ex-girlfriend. My two sisters A. and I. know about my sexual orientation.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Policemen sometimes asked me. I was buying tickets for my mother at the station. The policeman looked at me and asked "why do you look like that?". I showed him my passport and he asked again "You cut your hair? Why?..". It was summer and I was wearing shorts. He kept bugging me and asked whether I was sick. I told that to my mother. My mother met this policeman. My mother is a fighter, she asked him "Why are you pestering my daughter?", he kowtowed. My mother is always on my side. She can say her discontent directly to my face later, but in general she is on my side.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

But not everyone can find at least some kind of support in the family. You are fortunate if you find supporters outside the family.

I had a best friend M. who knew about my preferences. I ran to him with a smashed face, one slipper and told him everything. He is an unarmed combat fighter. He found all the people deleted those videos from their phones. He fought with my brother and my mother cursed me for that.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

7.3. Domestic violence

All of the 13 female respondents reported about experiences of different kinds of domestic violence. Not only the respondents but their sisters and mothers have been victims of that violence as well.

My stepfather offered to give my mother a ride to work but drove her out of town. She was asking him where they were going, but he answered, „Shut up if you want it to end well". He stopped the car in a deserted place. A rope was prepared on the backrest of the right front seat of the car. He put a rope around her neck from behind and started pulling down trying to strangle her. My mother managed to put her hands between her neck and the rope. My stepfather said: "When you die, all this will be over and then I'll deal with your kids."

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

I never talked directly to my father, according to traditions the communication happens through my mother. But my father often defended me when my mother forced me to do the housework, as required of a woman. For bad cleaning, she hit me, usually my hands, with a rolling pin. My mother said I was ugly and sloppy

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, married

I felt like I was falling asleep, so I took my phone to mute the headphones. My uncle just walked into our room to see if my sister and I were asleep. He saw me on the phone. He yelled so loud, I could hear it in my headphones. I didn't understand what happened. He turned on the light, ran in, stood up in my face and shouted, "What are you doing?". I was trying to explain that I was listening to music. He grabbed my phone and started hitting me with it on the head. I was lying dumbfounded; I was in shock. I'm not his daughter, and he hit me. He said, "You don't need phones." and took my phone away.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The Russian Federation police must protect the victims of violence. At present, the problem of a law on domestic violence is being actively discussed, as in its current form legal regulations do not allow for effective protection of women from beatings, sexualised violence and abuse by family members. Not all women who have survived violence turn to law enforcement agencies for help. Very few women do so with the support of trusted lawyers, close ones or supporters.

They knew where I was, and I was reported missing. I am a difficult child. Mom sat there, and the cop asked me: "Did you take it in your mouth? "Have you been fucked in the ass?" My mother cut my hair, this way she wanted to humiliate me. I tried to explain that I was insulted. Even the law enforcement officers insulted me. When I was fifteen, I was on records as a difficult child. Law enforcement agencies didn't ask me how I could be ready for marriage at that age, they just made me a difficult child.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, married

In addition to physical, psychological and sexualised violence, religious violence requires special attention. Islam is the main religion prevalent in Dagestan and freedom of religion is limited for women.

When I was fifteen, my stepfather's relatives started forcing me to convert to Islam. With the argumentation, "If you're in our tukhum⁶⁷, then convert to Islam." They called me a "Russian pig" and said that my stepfather was wasting money providing me with food. My mother also insisted on accepting Islam. And at seventeen I was forced to do it. I broke because the insults were incessantly. After converting to Islam, I was sent to the mullah for a month for religious education. Everyone made sure I made salah five times a day, wore a headscarf, a long skirt, long-sleeved sweaters.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

7.4. Sexualised violence, early marriage and forced marriage

Everything changes. There used to be predominantly nikahs (Islamic marriages) in the villages. And mainly official registrations through the civil registry office in the cities. Clever people did both. Nikahs are the overwhelming majority in Chechnya, here we are trying both ways. If the family is not deeply religious, they also register an official marriage. But nikahs became more common because you are expected to do that.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender (Republic of Dagestan)

Sexualised violence is an often silenced problem. We will highlight two types of sexualised violence against homosexual, bisexual and transgender women: sexualised violence related to the sex stated in the passport and corrective violence as a method of correcting sexual orientation and gender identity. Both types of sexualised violence are not publicly discussed in the Republic of Dagestan, the North Caucasus or Russia in general.

There are only a few people who know about that at all. I went to kindergarten and I was very young. Me and my kindergarten girlfriends, my brother's classmate and her older sister, we all lived in the same house. There was a park with huge bushes. There were bushes growing in the corners. We used to play hide-and-seek in the back of the house. I

⁶⁷ Tukhum is the "big family", a clan, a wide circle of relatives, or a union of teips.

remember running into the furthest corner, which is a rarely entered. I hid in that far corner between the bushes. A man came after me. I don't know if I can call him that.

I remember how he was dressed: red T-shirt, tall, fat, jeans and sandals. He was a little bearded. I think he was drunk and had red eyes. He asked: "What are you doing here?" I said: "We play hide and seek." "Do the girls know where you're hiding?" I said "No." He sat next to me and picked me up, sat me down in front of him. I don't know how to tell you. I'm embarrassed. ...he kind of went under my panties with his fingers. He didn't come into me, he run his fingers there. I didn't know what was going on. I was really scared. I started crying. I wasn't screaming. I knew it was something bad. They found all the girls there already. And I wasn't screaming... my tears were just dripping. I was really scared. They couldn't find me and started calling me. And I stood there and couldn't shout that I was here. I was speechless or something. I stood there, and I didn't know what to do. My friend's older sister, the oldest one of us, she ran into these bushes: "Oh D., you are here?" And he suddenly stood up and ran away. I was standing there crying. I didn't say anything to anyone. They asked me what happened, but I didn't say anything.

I didn't know if it was good or bad. I was scared and I didn't say anything. I tried to talk about it a few times. I said he didn't do anything. I now understand that if I had told my parents, maybe he would have been found... maybe there were already some other incidents and if someone told about it sooner, then that might not have happened to me. But if I'd told them, it would have been worse. My parents wouldn't let me out, they'd think I wasn't a virgin anymore, that he did something, and that I'm not telling them everything. That I'm hiding something. I'd be treated differently. They would be ashamed of me. My father would treat me differently. Only now I'm starting to realise that. I had forgotten it for a while. But it hasn't gone away. It was with me all the time. Not many people know about it. Even my sisters don't know. No one in the family knows about it. Three people know A., R. and A. Only those three know that I have almost been raped.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

There is the story of our neighbours: a father raped his daughter, and he got her pregnant. As I know, they said she was out having fun and her relatives and brothers decided to kill her. The father said no, and told them that it was his daughter and he'll settle it, he'll decide whether to kill her or not. It's very scary. I've been driving these thoughts away from me, I'm terrified to believe something like that.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

One girl wrote a book. She began to receive messages like "why are you writing something like that, that doesn't happen here." Rape is everywhere, you can't do anything about it.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Sexual violence is so common, I can't even describe it, but I know many stories. Imagine, if you're the head of the family, and you have the right to take your daughter's life for being a bad girl. Do you think he would ever care about her sexual integrity?

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender (Republic of Dagestan)

The problem of sexualised violence is closely linked to early marriage. The family may decide to marry off even an underaged girl after she has been outed or came out herself. However, marriage decisions are also made regardless of the sexual orientation and gender identity of the girl (daughter, sister or granddaughter). The Family Code of the Russian

Federation sets the regulations for marriageable age and marriage conditions, but violations of women's rights in early and other forced marriages in Dagestan and other North Caucasian Republics are being ignored.

THE FAMILY CODE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Article 12. The Terms for Entering into a Marriage

1. To enter into a marriage, the voluntary consent of the man and of the woman entering into it, and their reaching the marriageable age, shall be necessary.
2. The marriage shall not be entered into in the face of the circumstances pointed out in Article 14 of the present Code.

THE FAMILY CODE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Article 13. The Marriageable Age

2. In the presence of valid reasons, the bodies of local self-government at the residence of persons wishing to enter into a marriage may, at the request of such persons, permit entering into a marriage to persons who have reached the age of sixteen years. The procedure and the terms because of whose existence a marriage may be entered into by way of an exception, with account for specific circumstances, before reaching the age of sixteen years, may be laid down by the laws of the subjects of the Russian Federation

My mother forced me into a marriage when I was fifteen. So I left home to live with him. It lasted three and a half months and it was hell. He was twenty-one years old. He was Azerbaijani. He forcibly took my virginity on the third day. And went on a business trip, he was in the military. And I got pregnant right away. When I was expecting, I didn't understand what was happening. I was a child... He had an oak bedroom and our rugs were heavy. My mother-in-law knew I was with child and asked me to lift it. And I said, for some reason, that I could do it, so I went to lift it. I weighed 47 kg back then. In the evening I told my mother that my lower abdominal is hurting. My mother was about fifteen or twenty minutes away from me. My mother decided to bring me to a doctor, but before she arrived, I was already bleeding and had spasms. There was nothing to save. There was a huge scandal, my mother took me away from them. I blamed my mother for marrying me off. She accused me of being too horny since I was little and that I was too active. In her worldview she saw me weaving carpets, baking bread and making khinkali. Because a woman doesn't need any education.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The first time I was matchmade⁶⁸ at fourteen. It was a friend of my father's. He was 35 at the time. My stepfather considered him a good husband and he had a sound financial situation. They brought me a ring and informed me that I was marrying him. I was able to refuse because I had a Russian grandmother who protected me. In Dagestan, weddings are often planned when you are still a teenager. When I was seventeen, I was matchmade for the second time. He was twenty-three. I managed to break off this engagement only after five years. When my grandmother died, I was depressed. I spent a lot of time at the cemetery. The groom decided he didn't need a wife with a mental disorder.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

⁶⁸ Matchmaking refers to the arrangement made by the parents of the bride and groom regarding their marriage or the introduction of a bridegroom of the parents' choice to a woman.

Now my mother almost stopped beating me up. But she still pressures me psychologically and throws something at me from time to time. We have big fights because of the marriage topic. She persistently asks me to marry anyone who would come with a proposal, regardless of his financial situation, his personality etc. She won't care either. Someone proposes-accept! She's been talking about it since I was 16. My cousin was married at the age of 14 and got her child with 16. It is a religious marriage. When she will turn eighteen, they will register it officially. But a religious nikah is a must. As soon as a girl gets her first period she is considered ready for marriage.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

On reaching adulthood, women in Dagestan are vulnerable to violations of their rights, including reproductive rights and the right to freely choose a husband, let alone a wife. The refusal to marry a man is often impossible due to the pressure from family members.

We haven't talked with my father about that topic. I was too embarrassed for that. I asked him once myself when I was 19. At that time, my mother strongly insisted (on marriage). I went to my father and asked him: „Do you have the right to forcefully marry me off?“. He answered “You are my only daughter so if you don't want to, I couldn't force you to do that. But you can't wait until you are old. If there will be a good match, you will marry him.” Old means 24. So, I have two years left.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

When I was 19, my mother repeated for a whole week "he is a good man, a good man." It was some guy from T. who wanted to get engaged. I said, "T. what? I don't want to live there." I started crying. I don't want to be alone all the time, I want to see the person, I want to be in Moscow or in Dagestan. I've never seen this guy, he was thirty-two years old, and I emphasised that to my mother too. I was nineteen, he was thirty-two. The worst thing was when my cousin found out in 2018 (after I was outed). The man was forty years old. When they come to matchmake, they give us time to talk and see whether we are right for each other. To avoid a divorce or misunderstandings later. If you like each other, his and my side of the family approve. I've always agreed to talk to not put myself in danger or at risk of being found out about my preference for girls. I always spoke cold and dry. They always noticed it and it hurt them. And this one was kind of stubborn. He was well-read and smart, he had a business, was rich... That's why my mom wanted me to marry him. Maybe if I had been straight, I would have married him because I could be friends with him. But I had to do something to get him to say no.

Girls are obliged to pray and completely follow the sharia. And I don't comply with it. Right now, I'm distancing myself from religion and am becoming more atheist. And that's why my conscience won't let me stand on the prayer rug and pray, because what I do is dirty. It's the worst sin of all being a lesbian, sleeping with women and talking about certain topics. I told him that I won't wear a headscarf and that I won't pray. He told me that I don't take life seriously and don't fast. He said that it can be cured and that it's all my friends' fault. Thus, if I had married him, it would have meant hell for me. In the end he said that I'm too young for him and that we don't fit together. My mother was hysterical. My father came up to me asked “Well, do you agree to marry him?” and I answered “No”. And he said „No, you will marry him, I will give my approval”. I became furious because that man is old enough to be my father “Are you not ashamed to marry me off to that man?”. My father hit me and I crashed into the wall. My mother protected me and my father went drinking. Then he came back, drunk, and started pestering me. He says without restraints what he thinks, when he is drunk, that can end in a beating or a fight. Usually I defended myself.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Divorce is possible with the consent of the husband, but a divorced woman is condemned by society, although at the same time the expectations towards her behaviour are lowered. The divorce situation becomes more complicated if children are involved.

My brothers' best friend knew that I am divorced. They started pointing fingers at me and saying that I've been "popped" ⁶⁹. *It may not sound bad but if you are divorced you are like furniture. Came by taxi - your f*ck buddy brought you, came home a little bit late - was out f*ucking someone. In the D. city everyone knows each other.*

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

My husband didn't take the kids but kidnapped the older daughter twice. He never touched the younger one. I didn't go to the police because I can rely only on God or I will become an unbeliever. My girl weighed 17 kg, when I got her back, she had only 12 kg in her, because she refused to eat there. Then he kept her for three days in K. I would have allowed the children to live with his new family if they would take care of them. But he and his new wife are giving the children to someone to look after them. And when they come back, they have dirt under their fingernails, unwashed clothes and are hungry.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I violated every possible rule. I started to befriend girls like me, with the same sexual orientation. But I couldn't say to him "Sorry, you can't put it in because I like girls".

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

7.5. Realising one's sexual orientation and gender identity

The understanding and acceptance of one's sexual orientation and gender identity begins and continues before reaching adulthood. Access to complete and relevant information is extremely limited, same-sex relationships and deviations from accepted gender norms are condemned in the society, homosexuality is considered a sin by Islam. All of this results in high levels of self-rejection, internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, which remains even after moving to a safer environment.

I've been engaged since I was 11. And my first attraction manifested itself when I was 12 years old. But I was interested in boys only because they were athletes and defenders, and I felt safer with them. I liked girls as well, but I did not understand that there is another kind of attraction growing inside me. My first intimate relationship happened two years and eight months ago, and the first kiss was when I was seventeen. It scared me away. The first story happened at my mother's house when I was twelve - I kissed my sister. My little brother saw it and it blew up. Five brothers and a bunch of relatives, their wives were there... it spread out fast. My mother started screaming, my uncles beat me up. After that when I felt a desire (for girls), I suppressed it. I didn't even know there were lesbians in Dagestan.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I liked a girl when I was in seventh grade. I fell in love. But I couldn't confess because I was afraid of the shaming and bullying. One of my relatives is gay. He told me a lot about safety rules in Makhachkala. When I studied at the institute my friend confessed to me that she likes girls, she talked openly about her feelings. Talking to her helped me realise what was happening to me and I began to understand my own feelings. I started

⁶⁹ "popped" is a slang word for a girl who has lost her virginity. The word has a negative connotation.

to hang out with other community members. I never new that there are so many girls like me out there.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

I accepted my attraction to men a long time ago. But to understand my own gender is more complicated. There was a time when I lived as a transperson, as a woman, but you can't really call it that. You need to have an unclouded judgement. I think you need to be born a woman. You can assimilate a woman. But what makes a woman a woman is her ability to give birth. The nature or God has created you as a woman. Many of those who know a lot, philosophers and scholars, behave strangely and are different from the general population that considers them weird, and it seems to me that I am in the same group as those people. I'm talking about the way of thinking, because I've seen many times that I say or explain something, and they look at me like I'm an alien.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

My first love was my teacher. But I didn't understand it at that time. I thought that I'm the only one and it can't be love. I loved her secretly for two years. I liked her. Then I liked my neighbour very much. I loved her, but I was scared of how she would look at me and what she would say if she found out. Three years passed like that. She was forced into a marriage, and on the day of her wedding she ran away to me, crying. Two weeks she stayed with me until she got married.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I knew it since childhood. I didn't know what a lesbian is, but I got to know after coming to Makhachkala. I always liked girls. I didn't have an opportunity to talk about it. There was only one person. I always understood that it was something bad. I always thought that it wasn't normal. And that I don't want to live like that. Sometimes it was frustrating so I cried and wept. I was hurting. Why can't I be like everyone else? Am I really the only one? Where did I come from? Here you have a husband and a wife, a mother and a father so I knew I had to marry and have children. That is what I understood well. But I didn't get married. It hurts very much and I cry.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I feel wrong, I feel out of place here. I would fit in if I had been the same as everyone else. Because I'm not like them I got a lot of mental issues..

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

7.6. Coming-out and being outed

Among the respondents from Dagestan who took part in the survey, 5 respondents came out to their parents or other relatives. Coming out is a difficult decision that involves great risks to life.

I came out to my mother only three years ago. My mother was upset and afraid that my stepfather will find out.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

My mother and father know. They fought because of it. My mother said, "Stop saying it, I don't want to know anything". I am an only child. I told them I will bring a husband myself. My mother keeps saying „I'm dying, I'm dying “. At some point I will have to marry anyway. My mother keeps telling me stories about how great marriage is.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I didn't openly tell my brothers. My mother knows, complains a lot about it and urges me to get married. We visited our relatives as a couple. My younger brother knows that we are lesbians. My middle brother is against it and we even fought because of it. After he found out that I'm a lesbian he started blaming my mother, saying it's her fault. From the beginning I told them who I was.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I confided in my distant relative E. that I love my neighbour and that she is getting married. She calmly said she was okay with it. The next day, E. kissed me. I was shocked. That's how my first relationship started which lasted for thirteen years. Five of which we spent in the village, visiting each other.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I was twenty-two when I decided that I was ready to tell my mother who I was. We have already been living separately and met on a bench. Sit there. It was hard for me. My mother said „Get yourself together, son, and tell me what you wanted to say “. I told her that I didn't want to marry a woman. But at the same time I have to have an appropriate Dagestani lifestyle, have children, be like everyone else. I didn't tell her that I was gay or trans. For about three years the relationship with my mother was ok. But everything changed when the time came to get married. She married me off and I agreed because I felt sorry for her. “Son, please marry at least for appearances, so that I can show people something and they won't talk.” I was twenty-five.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I confessed to her. I told her exactly what I felt: „I don't know what's happening, but I think I love you”. She didn't understand me and thought that I mean it as a love for a best friend. When I realised that I told her that I am either bi or lesbian. Of course, she immediately... I was too embarrassed to speak or explain something. I was afraid to scare her off. But that's exactly what had happened. She distanced herself from me. Later I told her that it was all a joke so I wouldn't lose her.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Those are rare cases where coming out didn't have any major consequences. The awareness of a daughter's or sister's sexual orientation generally places responsibility on the relatives for further decisions. When coming out, a woman has the chance to assess her own risks and choose the person to whom she wants to open up to. In the case of outings, information spreads uncontrolled and the issue of sexual orientation and/or gender identity ceases to be part of interpersonal relationships and becomes a family honour issue. Key risks include banishment from the family, physical violence and restriction on freedom of movement, forced marriage, taking away of the children, and other risks.

In summer 2018 I came to Dagestan, into the X village. There is a terrible connection and I couldn't get through with my mobile internet. And they had a computer and wired internet. I went to my VC (Russian social network) page. I had to get the bank data. I wrote everything down and logged out. But I guess my log in was saved. My brother went online from this computer a month later and went straight to my page. He read everything, all the correspondence. There were chats with girls. I discussed my private life there, my relationships. A friend wrote to me then. We talked about the past there, and how I came to realise that I was a lesbian. That was one of the last conversations.

And there was a correspondence with my ex. We got into a fight. He found out in October.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

We had a gay house party. We hung out there and in the morning, I came home and went to bed. My brother came home. He didn't wake me up, he just pulled me out of bed by my hair. I got really mad and started yelling at him, "What are you doing?". He started shouting "Is this true?". I got scared and I had a million thoughts about what I had done wrong in my life. What does he mean? He said: "A. told me everything." I didn't have time to wake up. He started hitting me. I tried to block and defend myself. I said it wasn't true, but he couldn't hear me. His eyes were crazy, and he continued hitting me. I tried to defend myself. I didn't want to be the only one with bruises, but eventually I stopped resisting. He's stronger than I am. He sat down on me and started hitting me in the face. He knelt on my chest, hit my head against the wall. When he punched me in the face several times with his elbow. I tried to cover my face and not resist. He held my hands and started hitting me with his hands. I thought he would break something on my face. I started screaming, I thought he was going to kill me. The neighbours from the next room came running. I don't know whether they heard us screaming, fighting, but either way they didn't interfere. In that flat lived my Grandpa (he's dead now) my father, and my mother who shared a room with me. The sound insulation is good. When I started yelling and screaming, they came. And the two of them started pulling my brother away from me. The neighbour is a strong man, but when he pulled my brother away from me, my brother held my hair and dragged me on the floor with him. He tried to pull him away from me. I was in my pajamas; I grabbed the only jeans and a sweater I had.

I thought I'd get dressed, call a taxi and go to my aunt's house because it was impossible to stay. Aunt S. doesn't live that far, it's about thirty minutes to get to her. I knew he wouldn't touch me there. When my brother realised I was getting dressed, he started screaming that I won't go out and will stay home. While I was in the bathroom, he tore up all of my stuff, cut it with scissors. He said I am not allowed to wear jeans anymore and that I would be wearing the hijab starting tomorrow. I managed to throw my phone under the bed before. I sat in the bathroom and I was afraid that he would find it. The phone is protected with a password, but I was afraid he would crack it and find all the proof there. I would be left with nothing. My personal photos. I was terrified when I thought about it. Then he started breaking down the door and yelling "Come out, I won't leave it like that." The toilet and the bathroom are separate. There is a small window between them, and if you stand on the toilet, you can see each other. A neighbour stood on the toilet and knocked on my window. I got up on the bathtub and asked her to call my mother or call someone because he was going to kill me. I said, "Do something." She called my mother who was already on the way home. They didn't call the police because my brother had done time and the police would take him away.

Everyone, my mother and the neighbour, felt sorry for my brother. My mother didn't feel sorry for me and said that it was my fault. I guess he smelled alcohol and cigarettes when he beat me up. When he smelled it, he started screaming, "Where have you been?". And he started hitting me even harder. My mother came back, she saw my face, my black eye, the scratches, the bump on my head. I put cold on my swollen eye. He said he'd take my phone, that I'd have no social networks, that I'd wear a hijab and stay at home. I didn't say anything about that. I stayed silent. I said "Okay, okay," to calm him down.

My brother called my father and he asked why he beat me up. My brother answered that it was because I got drunk and wasn't home the whole night. And that I raised my voice against him. He didn't say anything about me being a lesbian. He told me he'd go to his cousin's first to find everything out and then he'd return to sort things out with me. I said it wasn't true, I denied it. I know that even if my cousin had mercy and said it

wasn't true my brother wouldn't believe it. Where did he get that information from? My father came back in the evening and said that he shouldn't have hit me so hard. I think you shouldn't hit anyone at all! Especially punching on the chest with his knees when he knows that a woman has to give birth in the future, and in such places, tumors develop quickly. Dad told me to apologise to my brother. I did, but I was really hurt. Why do I have to apologise for my preferences and for being who I am. He (brother) stood there smirking. And I was so eager to tell him to go to hell.

The following days I stayed in bed, I didn't get up, I didn't want to eat or anything at all. I just drank water and coffee. My sisters wrote to my brother that it wasn't true and that the correspondence was just a joke. I wrote to my sisters and my mother called my aunt and told her that my brother beat me up. They asked my mother to see me, but she said I had a black eye, I wasn't feeling good and didn't want to be seen. When everyone was asleep my brother called me into the kitchen and apologised like this: "I didn't want to hit you that hard but I was furious. But I'll find out the truth anyway ". I told him that he could just have talked to me in peace. But I knew there is no life for me anymore. He wouldn't change his mind.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

My friend was accidentally outed as a lesbian in front of her brother. Her brother beat her up and she was detained at home for a long time. Now her relatives monitor her every step.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Once F. stayed, I didn't talk to my husband for a long time. We were still married by Islam laws. I always wear the hijab in front of him. And he started asking me why F. dresses like that. My husband is in the room next door, the kids are in the other room, and we're in bed together. After he arrived, he invited me to Moscow. With F. I feel love and support. My mother was far away. I was so afraid of everything. When my husband came for the third time, he demanded intimacy and that I fly away with him. I walked into the room and told her that I was leaving with my husband. F. was angry and wanted to kick him out of the apartment. The kids told her: "You're better than our dad." But he heard us talking and found everything out. He said, "Have you started mingling with lesbians?" It was an insult to me. But I realise that's who I am. And I was very embarrassed because I've always been perfect. He said I was a kafir⁷⁰, that I'm cursed, and the children shouldn't be with me, that the youngest daughter is "crazy", it won't affect her, so he would only take the oldest one. His mother and father know that I'm a lesbian. They came to visit when I was with F. and I had hickeys all over the body. My mother-in-law said: "It's better to be with a woman than to be married." She supported me.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I have an iman⁷¹ acquittance, bearded, goes to the mosque. His parents are religious and he is bi, and that was it. He is hiding now. When I hear his name among «hachs»⁷² they always say, „It's the one who sleeps with guys, he needs to be beaten up." He receives threats too. Someone said something, the other heard it, that's how it starts. No one tried

⁷⁰ Kufr is the term used to denote the worst sin in Islam – unbelief. A person who has fallen into kufr is called kafir, that is, an infidel.

⁷¹ Iman is faith in the truthfulness of Islam; faith in Allah, angels, Scriptures, prophets, Judgement Day and retribution for good and evil.

⁷² "Hach" is a slang word. In this case it is used in Dagestan to denote a marginal social group with a low level of education, aggressively fighting for traditional views.

to blackmail me. I never tell anyone directly. If they figured it out, then it's fine. If not, I keep silent. Why should they care? Why do they need that information? I won't tell.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

First of all, there is definitely someone with higher education in the Dagestan villages and, even if you imagine a family without it, although it is hard to imagine fifty people where no one has higher education, seeing their daughter kiss another girl may have a lethal result only in 10% of the cases, in the other 90% she will be beaten up and forced into a marriage. Blood brothers may slap her in the face and her father won't kill her but will lock her up in her room. But not for long, she won't have enough will. She'll obey in the open. She'll feel remorse.

Secondly, if she lives in the city, they won't find her. They won't look for a girl, but they would look for a boy. But if they see and find her, they'll try to marry her off. And if she's married, they'll tell her husband and all her relatives. But then again, the husband will be informed, he will beat her up a little and life will go on. Sometimes husbands let them go out with girls, but don't approve of other men. But that remains between husband and wife. If someone starts talking about that, the reaction can vary. And maybe the husband will help to cover it up, so he doesn't set himself up.

Male respondent, Republic of Dagestan, gay, 38

7.7. Honour killings based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression

The topic of "honour" killings is extremely unpopular and the lack of statistics, police reports and public investigations leads to a lack of reliable information on the prevalence of "honour" killings against lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

There is no such thing [honour killings] in Dagestan now, but it happens. It was common a long time ago, especially the brothers [are a threat]. And now it may be happening, but in a different way. Sometimes someone's daughter dies. Why? Well, they say she fell, got food poisoning or something else. They cover it up somehow.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Respondents from Dagestan described honour killings that were not directly related to sexual orientation and gender identity but still happened in their family.

I was in forth or third grade. She was my favourite sister. She was the closest to me out of all my relatives. She is my cousin, but she was like a real sister. I spent all my childhood with their family. After we moved to K. my father was always on business trips and my mother worked all day long. She is a nurse and spent all her time in the hospital. She (my sister) picked me up from kindergarten and school. Her name was L. She was twenty-six or twenty-seven when she was killed. I know that it was on the fourth or the twelfth of February.

The backstory to it was that she was dating a guy since high school. They hid it, never showed it openly. I was a small village and a tiny school. Every family and every neighbour knows each other. They dated secretly, wrote notes to each other and had secret meetings. After graduation, this guy was taken into the army. She didn't know where and for how long and couldn't get in touch with him. There were no phones back then either. While this guy was in the army, they matchmade her with a solid guy. He owned a growing business and a flat. At that time that was a successful person and

women were immediately married off to them without asking for their consent. And she couldn't say that she already had someone and that she is not a virgin any more. Virginity of the bride is very important until today. First, she said that she doesn't want to get married and asked to wait two or three years. But no one listened. She told it to the female side, to her mother and aunt. On her wedding night, her husband realised that she wasn't a virgin. He didn't say anything. He had to show a sheet to prove her virginity, "that her virginity had been broken." The blood on the sheet must be presented to his and her female relatives. Well, most girls keep the sheet. If there is a fight or a misunderstanding in ten years, it will be used as proof that she was a virgin so that they don't get divorced. He had to do something to get a few drops of blood on the sheet...

That young man came back from the army and found out that she was married. He waited for her in front of her house and they kept dating and spending time together secretly. Her husband found out but didn't tell her, just followed them. He found out about the meetings and told her to stop seeing him or he will tell her parents. She said that he should, and that she wants to marry another man. I guess she thought he won't go through with it. Yet her husband told everything to her parents, but they didn't believe him and asked for proof. He said he was going away for three days soon and when he is gone, she is always with him. Her parents found out that guy's address. Her uncle went to check it out.

My father has four brothers and two sisters. The uncles waited in the car until the two of them went into the house and then took her away by force. That guy didn't object, he was afraid and just a shitty person. They brought her to her parents' house and left her there. While no one was there, she packed her things and ran away to her sister's. Her sister lived in X. This sister told me that she was at school and L. stayed at her place. L. saw that a number kept calling every two minutes. She lost six kilograms in a couple of days. When her sister came back, L. came running and asked her to answer the phone. L's mother asked her to send L. back saying that everything would be fine, that they would figure it out. L. and her sister went to a fortune teller. There were few fortune-tellers then, and they were good. The fortune teller said that L. was going on the road, but she had no future. "Road and cliff,"- she should better not go. They didn't believe it. Fifteen minutes after L. came home her uncle arrived and took her away. No one saw her ever since. No one knows where she is. Her father's name was Ch., he arrived with her uncle and someone else. But they say that uncle M. killed her himself. My father was also part of it. I remember that my uncle called my father the next morning at 4 a.m. M. had a KAMAZ. He threw the body inside it and drove all over the village X. until dawn. He didn't know what to do or just hadn't realised what he had just done. He called my father, told him what happened, asked him to come help bury her. I remember because I woke up because of my father's shouting. He went into the pantry and took two shovels. My mother asked where he was going and he said, "You'll find out in the morning." I had to go to school the next day. In the morning my mother cried and wept very loud.

They kept it from me for four years. I loved her very much and I think they didn't want to cause me stress. When I asked where she was, they told me that she was with her relatives in Germany. When the relatives called, I would run up to the phone and ask for L. And they would all start crying. I didn't understand why. My mother told me when I dreamt about her. My mother started crying and told me to not go after the dead. She told me how my uncle had killed her.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

If I had a choice, I'd choose to live rather than to be killed. My father can't kill me himself. But he would ask someone to kidnap me, kill me, and bury me. I think my uncle would do it. I think Uncle T. is a psycho. For him it's enough if I take my phone out and

check the time or answer a message. He could beat me up for it and he has beaten me up like that once before already.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Cases of honour killings are isolated. I think there may be a hundred times fewer homosexuality-related murders in Dagestan than in Chechnya. Of course, I know what's going on in Chechnya.

I know about the honour killings, but there is a small number of them. Usually it happens when a woman in her twenties is having sex with a guy without being married and the whole village finds out about it. And then if her siblings have decided to murder her and kill her. I suppose that may happen, but it seems to me that in one year in all three million of Dagestan there are at most three such cases. I think that's not much. But maybe my estimation is wrong because I'm not monitoring it. These are the cases that are being talked about. And there are also cases that aren't talked about, well, roughly thirty more... But thirty-three women are a lot. Yes... a lot, but there's nothing I can do about it...

Male respondent, Republic of Dagestan, gay, 38

Most of the murders were committed in domestic conditions - at home / on house grounds/ in the apartment, or in deserted or uncrowded areas, usually in the evening or at night, when there are fewer witnesses and it is more convenient to hide the traces of the crime. The highest number of murders were committed in rural areas. Any improvised means were used as a weapon of crime, and in their absence the killer acted with physical force (strangling with his hands, beating). Strangulation and the use of stabbing objects are the most common means of committing "honour" killings. In all the femicide for "honour", cases we have studied it was a guilty intentional act, carried out consciously, volitionally and usually premeditated.

Antonova U., Sirazhudinova S., Killed by gossip, 2.2020

7.8. The life of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons in Dagestan

The life of the LBT community is built on all possible risks, but life in rural areas is particularly conservative and traditional. It is difficult to conceal the personal life and to find LGBT persons in the village, and it is impossible for a homosexual or bisexual woman to build a life without marrying a man.

Rural life is different, they don't understand what it is. My sisters would never say it directly to my face. One sister tells the other and the latter tells me with a hint. The older to the younger and then to the youngest. They won't ask me later. They all have children and families, a normal life. There is no family without freaks, I'm the freak.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

In Dagestan, or more precisely in Makhachkala, there is still the possibility of face-to-face meetings, but with safety rules.

I know her for more than three years and I already gave birth to my second daughter. We met at the beach. We want to go to an all-women-beach. There were no men, water pipes and

women, I first got there when I was seven or eight. The children are playing in the sand and my eyes sparkled when I saw tomboys. They didn't see that I usually wear a hijab because I took it off there. I danced and there was a sparkle between us. There I met my first girlfriend, she was 38. When me and my husband split up, I rented a flat. When he called I put on the hijab and waited. I invited LGBT friends over, around fifteen people, and they never understood how I could sit there in a hijab. But many did understand because we have many gay girls who are married. If they are found out here, they put on the hijab and return home and get married. There is no other choice. There they go clubbing.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

Besides house parties there are private clubs that work in secret. It is difficult to identify them if no one has brought and introduced you there personally. At the same time, such places of rest are a target for aggressive groups.

I was alone at work and happened to overhear a conversation about YYY between girls. I felt lonely and wanted someone to talk to. I went there and sat alone at the table all the time. The girls came up. A. was brave, and she introduced everyone to me. She downloaded me a chat room and said, "Have fun!" She introduced me to the community. It was a lesbian chat room where our group talked. There was something about the name. I don't remember anymore. It was in ICQ⁷³ back then. From 2006 or 2007 I started chatting. In 2006 I was here.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

In XXX you can drink and relax on Saturdays. I was there twice. About seven men stormed the place and said, "We also want to have a drink". I stood up and was about to leave. But one of them came up to D. and grabbed her by the hand. I started screaming and came up to that guy. He told me she should watch her language. We went outside to talk. I said I would call the cops. The owner was hiding. I told them it's a private party. And he answered, "If you call someone we won't be so nice". It was the third time. They grab guys, threaten them, and take their money.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The gay girls call me, say to come, that they are hanging out in a rented flat. In one room are „our“ girls, in the other the "straight" ones. The kitchen is communal. There is beer, wine and sweets.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Meeting new people kind of works itself out. You see someone and feel that she is one of us. You come up to them and start talking. Or on Instagram. But never via apps or online groups. Or just through acquaintances. A lot of the LGBT know each other. Ask anyone who that is and they will tell you. Maybe there are LGBT parties, but I don't go to them. We have our own gang. We hang out in apartments, in a café or in bars where no one will say anything. I only go to one place. Some of those bars closed. Someone complained, the police came and took everybody in. After the curfew at eight they stormed in with the guns and took us in. They said it was a regular inspection.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The access to social media allows to create a relatively safe space for communication, interaction, acquaintance with the community and self-exploration.

⁷³ Formerly a popular messenger.

I don't use apps. I'm afraid to. But in Moscow I used them often. But it is dangerous and in general I am afraid to use them. There is also V⁷⁴. No one at Instagram asks if strange people with the status of "There is only one GOD" or "There is no one but Allah" follows me. I silently put them on the blacklist. And that's it. I delete their messenger without reading. I don't trust them. I think true believers can be not homophobic. But these guys stand with their papaqs. It's really scary to keep them as followers. I think that if they really believe what is in the Book that a woman shouldn't be with a woman, and a man with a man, and a woman shouldn't look like a man and the other way round, then it's really dangerous. Because it's written in the Koran.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

I liked my friend more and more. I didn't understand my feelings. I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I didn't understand what was going on. I started looking on the Internet. I registered on Odnoklassniki (a Russian social media) and searched in social groups. I didn't know where to look. I found Russian, Moscow and other groups... There was: "bi, lesbians..." in the name. I was afraid to sign up and just searched from my browser. I read comments and posts. That's how I started spending more time online. I left a comment in one group once. That way I met a Russian girl who lived in T.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

In the community itself, identity among lesbians is based on heteronormativity. Role models of behaviour in pairs are often based on the division of "active - passive". In this case, the behaviour of the "active" person is similar to a masculine behaviour model, while "passive" is similar to a feminine one with all the traditional requirements.

I'm the active part but look like a passive one. How do I fix that? She is older and had that lifestyle for a while, she is very feminine, but passive. She behaves like a cat and I turn into a macho. She feels embarrassed. I ask her not to wear Dagestani style in Moscow. We are regularly harassed on the subway.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The attitude towards LGBT+ individuals remains extremely negative in Dagestan. Due to high social stigma, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people become susceptible to violence, blackmail and harassment.

I heard it from a waiter. Someone saw how one of us [LGBT] was forced to take a loan at Sberbank [Russian bank]. It's blackmail. Girls usually aren't blackmailed. Neighbours and distant cousins only threaten them. They come visit, beat them up and mock them. They won't blackmail them, because the girls can report it. If you touch even one hair, that's it⁷⁵.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

In Dagestan... such childish pranks... I'm ashamed to talk about it, but I think I should. When I was 18, I left Dagestan - and then my mother came to Moscow and we lived here for four years. I studied, worked and held everything in me. I went out secretly, so that no one would find out. I am a human being and I have feelings, emotions and desires. In November, my aunt died, she was involved in my upbringing. And I had to go to

⁷⁴ Names of apps, forums and websites are concealed for security reasons.

⁷⁵ We are talking about men who are not part of the family and do not have the right to make decisions about women.

Dagestan. These looks of the people... they looked at me like I was an alien. I looked more or less appropriate... like a boy. But I couldn't stay there for long, five days... always the same questions: "Married [to a girl]? Any kids?"...how do you say that it's none of their business? I said I was, but no children. I'm working on it... hiding everything.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

It started back in school when I was a kid. On the street I was called faggy, gay, but we still played together.⁷⁶

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I think there is no difference in the attitude to that between Kumyks and Avars. The important thing is not to bring shame upon either family. Even if someone decides to take matters in their own hands it will be done without discussions or trial. The right for protection... for a transperson from Dagestan? Who can protect me? A lawyer from Dagestan? What if a court of aksakals? Nobody but God, if he exists, could or would protect me.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

Informal marginalised groups are aggressive and violent both on the street and on the Internet.

There is a group of people who look like me and they are called "informals". And there's also a community that walks in sportswear – “gopniki”, I think they are called hachs ⁷⁷. They can start pestering you in the city. Usually these are unacquainted people, young boys can approach you like that. They can say, “Why do you look like that? What's with the haircut?” I don't answer. Sometimes they fight, push and beat the girls up, one of the girls had a concussion.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

My picture was in the group „Amirovs Makhachkala“ because I commented on a picture of my friend with purple hair who was called a fag. After that they posted my picture and wrote that gays and lesbians should be exterminated, that they would kill me, that there is no man in my house.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

All these "religious-sporty" young people are now gathering in all kinds of Instagram publics like “la.fitna”, “Amirovskaya Makhachkala”, “Dagestan Imamat”, “Makhachkala Chicks” and they are very active.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender (Republic of Dagestan)

7.9. Survival strategies

Survival strategies for homosexual, bisexual and transgender women remain similar to those in other North Caucasus Republics.

⁷⁶ Transgender woman

⁷⁷ "Hach" is a slang word. In this case it is used in Dagestan to denote a marginal social group with a low level of education, aggressively fighting for traditional views.

First model – imitation of heterosexual and cisgender women's behaviour. An attempt to fully meet the norms and expectations of the society. Marriage to a heterosexual man (possibly by family decision), childbirth.

It's bizarre for a thirty-six-year-old woman to sit around and not be married. You can't explain that you didn't want to.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

My sister said: "When he calls you, please don't deny anything. He knows everything, and it will only make it worse. When he called, I started denying everything, I didn't know what to say. He screamed so I wouldn't lie. I apologised and said I would delete the page... I didn't know what to say... I said what came to my mind. My sister also asked me to get married, and that I shouldn't have this lifestyle because nothing good will come out of it. I asked my sister to tell them that I would agree to any matchmaking. I asked her to help me to buy some time, so I could figure something out.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

From the beginning he was a guy who understood everything: my preferences, that I could go out and relax, that I can explode and then calm down. There was a time when I smoked grass. He did, too, when he was young, and he let it be. He was convinced that the Almighty had given him an appropriate pair, similar to himself. When I told him, I wasn't ready for intimacy, we did it kind of spontaneously and rarely.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I haven't touched her once. We stayed in the same house for a week, and then I left. We didn't talk about it but became friends later, and we still keep in touch. She supports me sometimes. She's a lot dumber than me, though. When you have no one to talk to, when you feel alone... I'm a grown-up and look at the world differently, the childish sensations go away. Although the child will live forever. Commitments, meaning of life.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

My mother was amazing. She sat down with me and said: "You get married, even for three days, have a child and then live your life". I'm very grateful to her now. I found a husband. Well, I thought I'll close my eyes and put up with it, took a bottle of wine with me for a romantic feeling. I was lucky, I got pregnant after the second time. I went to him and said "That's it! Our meeting was a mistake."

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

My mother says to get married, have a child and then divorce. She doesn't need a husband, she wants grandchildren. If I have a child without being married, she will definitely accept me, but there might be problems later.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Second model- Leaving to study or work in Makhachkala, Moscow or St. Petersburg. The opportunity to leave is only available after parental approval. This does not mean that the woman is not controlled by her relatives after she leaves. There may be an uncle, brother, aunt or older sister in town who oversees the woman. The move itself does not provide security, as rumours quickly reach relatives and neighbours in the homeland.

In 2015 I came to Moscow to study. I went to college and graduated in nursing. After that I worked in a clinic for a couple of months and left as a medical secretary. I worked for two days, and rested two days, but then I asked for a full schedule, as I wanted a higher

salary. According to the rules, I had to give all or more than half of my salary to my mother. The first salaries were small. I had to buy clothes. Then I received more and gave half of it to my mother.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Now I live in the Moscow region. My mother lives in Moscow. I began to receive threats in the autumn which has never happened before, even when I worked as a prostitute. I stopped working and then the threats started coming, always from the same number. I even starred in an erotic solo for money. I don't know what I was thinking... I was fearless then. And now I'm worried. That was like five or six years ago. My classmate called me, "Uh, hey... here the guys say you sleep with men in Moscow." She's from a religious family, all wearing hijabs. I said, don't believe the rumours... and then the messages started coming. I became afraid. It was in September or August. I think I'll be scared and hiding... sitting quietly and waiting for my end. Of course, I'd like to live a little freer than this. Not to be afraid that they will come and say: "Here you are Dagestani and we are Dagestani, so we have the right to punish you." They are able to punish any way they think possible... There was one case where deeply religious guys took anyone they wanted to humiliate, and said on the camera with an ordering tone: "Sit on the bottle". The messages said "death, shame" and the shame is washed away only by blood. It also says they want to piss on me. I've changed my phone numbers a lot, fifteen times since I started living more open. I was afraid to keep the same number so... I thought it was safe.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I was sheltered by a ROC [Russian Orthodox Church] priest, he is a cool person. He kind of knows everything ... and helped me probably out of pity. But he says that he doesn't want to hear and know about it at all. I live in peace. I took a hairdressing course here. I've been working a little. I think on the one hand, I like the job, but the salary is low. "Oh, a man as a hairdresser?" A barber is a man's profession, and I look like a man. It's so hard to look and act like a man... I'm afraid to show emotions. It's not my life, not my life.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

In 2015 I moved to Sankt Petersburg with my girlfriend. She is from a rich family and has a lot of freedoms. She had a short haircut, went to nightclubs, which is not allowed for regular girls in Dagestan.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

She went to A. for one and a half years after the conflict. I closeted myself and didn't leave the house. Then my aunt brought me to Makhachkala. It was hard for me, I kept thinking I was the only one. It was 2005, and there was no Internet in the villages. When I was twenty-five it was like scales have fallen from my eyes, like I was reborn. It hurt. Now I do not understand that love, it was painful. A year and three months after she left, she was supposed to go back to her parents. They would not leave her there. And she texted me, saying she wanted to come back. She asked me if I would meet her. I was living in the basement. When I left, my sisters were against it and I don't have any brothers. My mother and father kept in touch with me for two months. I met her in Makhachkala, she came with a cousin to stay with me. After that she called me every day and said she wanted to move to Makhachkala. Her parents are strict, and in A. she lived with her aunt. But she moved anyway.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

There was a time when I would have loved to move.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Third model - Fake marriage to a homosexual man. Even a fake marriage involves the transfer of rights to a woman to her spouse. But even with all the risks, a sham marriage may be the only way to gain partial freedom.

There was a friend in Chechnya, he was set up. He jumped from the third floor. He came on crutches. They took him out to the park for a walk at night. That was six years ago - he went to Moscow. He married our (non-heterosexual) girl, they have a child. Everyone lives their lives. She's not Chechen, she's Dagestani. They danced lezginka at the wedding.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Fourth model - Escape. Escape is a difficult choice, and it is dictated by the direct risks to life and the impossibility to get protection.

I feel better now. In the first days, I cried all the time at night. I couldn't get over it. I constantly had these thoughts: "What's going on? How's Mom?" I think there panicked. They surely thought where their daughter could disappear to. They didn't understand what happened. Maybe something happened to me. I just drove off like that. Mom didn't know I was a lesbian. My brother didn't tell her then. I don't think she knew. But I know what my brother told my dad. My father called me and told me that when he'll come home, he'd deal with me. I was so afraid my father would find out, because he'd hurt me even more. Of course, I panicked that I will be taken back to Dagestan and killed, maybe sent to the mountains, locked up in some house. When someone opens the door, I immediately think that my father has come for me.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

If I go back to the family now, I know I'll be out of touch. At best, I'll be sent to a madrasa⁷⁸ to get on the right path. There are a lot of them in Dagestan. There are different buildings for girls and boys. I was sent there in the 7th grade. I went there but lived at home. It was peaceful there. I liked it, and I wanted to cover myself then. I said at home that I studied prayers and the life of the prophets. If I would be sent now, I wouldn't be happy, of course. Because I've outgrown it all. I consider my religion very bigoted and arrogant, I'm not satisfied with many things, I'm ready to argue with a lot of them. If they would leave me alive, I would have gone there for my own benefit but leave again in a while.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

One girl went to live with her girlfriend in Kaluga and that's it. They filed a missing person report on her, called and threatened her girlfriend. They were both in their 20s. The relatives said they were terrorists. But she came back, they forced her.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Fifth model - Life in a partnership. Life in pairs involves high risks. And usually few people decide to live openly. Usually, living as a couple must look like a friendship on the outside. In this model, the risks of disclosure increase dramatically. Life with a partner with a

⁷⁸ Madrasa is a Muslim religious and educational institution.

close relationship to the parental family is complicated by the constant control of relatives and the need to hide the relationship.

My family was onto us all the time. And I wanted to take the kids and go away. That was in the first years but even now we want to move and look for work.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, married

We said we were related. Everyone in the village thought that. We had an apartment. We talked, we also called each other since 2008. Girls often rent a flat together and live in different rooms.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

We live like on pins and needles. She is young. She's got to start a family. They know that D. is my flat mate. And my parents know that D.'s my flat mate.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Our ways parted. We didn't show that we lived together. As friends. Not only two, but also four can rent an apartment (girls). Then our friends found out. One of them visited us.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Particular attention should be paid to child-parental relations in homosexual female couples. We can distinguish two options for the child-parental relations: live openly as partners in front of the children or hide the relationship, even when running a joint household. The open option carries significant risks. First, children can be forcibly taken to the father's family. Second, children may give away information about the mother's private life, which will lead to conflicts, "shaming" and even physical punishment.

The kids get along with me. We don't show it to them. Why would they need that? But children respect me as their person, as their aunt. And I can't show it to the kids. There's also the fathers' side. I came to her. Her children have a father. This Father has parents, tukhum. It won't stay that way. If they find out that she is living with me, there will be a scandal, the kids will be taken away, but in the end the kids will also want to stay away. The grown-ups will faint. The only thing that bothers me is that it'll be stressful for the children. There are also the sister and grandma -it's holding me back.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

My son is adult now. He knows about our relationship. When we fight, he can sit us down and tell her and me to the face what he thinks. He comes running back from work if me or her are not feeling well. He grew up like this. But it didn't spread onto him⁷⁹.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

I depend on my relatives, but I've distanced myself from them. I don't want any looks or questions about her. I don't like it when they say, "Why is she with you all the time?", "Why are you together?" My cousin with the more modern attitudes told me "Listen, aren't you gay by any chance?". And I answered something like "What's wrong with you? It doesn't matter what a person looks like, she is really great to talk to. We're friends." And she says, "I'm sick of your tukhum and your family. You always have to find excuses"

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, married

⁷⁹ Meaning that he is heterosexual.

Constant tension and the hiding lead to a high level of domestic violence.

We lived together in a flat for three years. She went into the bathroom after I went to sleep. I heard a noise through the window. I came up to the window and saw her on the phone. I demanded that she gives me her phone and by her shivering I figured that a man was on the other line. We started fighting I hit her with the phone on the head. Before, she would hold my hands and wouldn't let me go. I don't know why she did that, she told me earlier that she was almost raped. "And for what?". She said she was afraid of me.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

We sometimes get into fights when it's this time of the month for her, you know. And either I need to „explain“ [meaning hit] her or I leave for a few days and then come back.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

In some cases, living in a same-sex couple does not necessarily lead to a divorce. A divorce because of the wife's homosexuality is a shame for the husband as well.

We went for a beer with him. I said „I'll be with her“. He only asked whether she new. Of course she knows, he is the father of my children. He sleeps on the sofa in the other room.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, over 30, unmarried

Sixth model - demonstration of dedication to Islam or radical Islamist ideology.

In this case we are talking, on the one hand, about demonstrating one's religiousness by wearing the hijab, which gives a certain credit of trust from relatives and as a result freedom. On the other hand, we are talking about internalised homophobia which pushes into those groups and religious movements that allow finding at least some acceptance. Exclusion from society, inner fears, misunderstanding of oneself, inner tension and inner homophobia, striving to change oneself any way possible, lead to finding oneself in such religious groups.

Regarding the threats: I was part of a certain organization. At that time, I thought they only practiced Islam without provocative acts. I met my husband and started going there. I had no choice, I had to build a relationship with a man. I was going completely out of my way. For Dagestan I'm not a proper creature at all" ... "Then I wore a burqa, only my eyes were uncovered. I had no phone and no contact with the outside world ... and everyone was in shock. The police came to us repeatedly because of my husband. He had a criminal record and I was called in several times. The record was for ISIS⁸⁰ affiliation and recruitment. This group does not recognise other Muslims or the state. Takfirs⁸¹ are those deciding that everyone is unfaithful until proven by them that that person is a Muslim. Of someone is Christian, then he is a kafir⁸² and you can't befriend or talk to him. But I began to understand that they are deceiving themselves, that everyone in Dagestan is a kafir. I, for instance, won't work for someone who is kafir, because they set the rules. To make friends means to abandon Islam. I became afraid because I saw aggression towards girls like me. I was tired because I was left alone. They gave me a book and that's how I got into that religion. I was looking for peace, I wasn't a believer. I

⁸⁰ Terrorist organization prohibited in Russia.

⁸¹ Takfirism is a radical Islamist ideology of Egyptian origin, the basis of which is accusing Muslims of unbelief (kufr).

⁸² Kufr is the term used to denote the worst sin in Islam – unbelief. A person who has fallen into kufr is called kafir, that is, an infidel.

never saw real people, there were only books, books, books. I read a lot about Islam. I was looking for a movement that would suit me.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I have a friend who's married and covered. She goes out with girls and nobody is saying anything because they would never suspect her. But if she would be found out in a hijab, she'll be punished severely. Maybe they would even videotape it. Once two girls came up to me in the park. One in a hijab, and one in a burka. So, they were wearing these dresses and gloves and they asked me "Do you go to the women's beach?" I became scared and I said, "No," "Are you one of "us"?" I walked away.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

7.10. The life values of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

The value of the relationships with parents, sisters and brothers is mentioned in most of the interviews with the respondents.

I thought I had to take care of my mother. But I can't, we argue all the time. I expect support from my mother, the magic words: "Whatever child you are, you're mine, I'll be with you, and we'll get over it." My mother made me stop taking hormones. She tricked me. She said be whatever you want but look like yourself. I cut my hair. I stopped pinching my eyebrows... a little bit. And now she started complaining that I don't have sex with women. But it wasn't enough, she tries to fix me like a broken car. But she is my mother, you know. Who will accept me if not her? If she doesn't want me, I have nothing to hold on to in this life... My mom treats people like me in black and white. She knows almost everything, absolutely everything about me. I thought my mother was my closest person and my guardian angel, but it turned out she was like that when she considered me normal. Until I left her... I couldn't stand it anymore. Everything becomes apparent with time and I don't have the patience to be "normal".

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

My parents are very old. How will they survive if I come out? I want them to live what's left in peace.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

The second value is self-awareness.

I am convinced that it's important to understand. For everyone it is important to understand who they are and how they feel.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

The third value is to be part of the group, to be accepted by the group. To be accepted by the group is one of the basic needs of a person, and the characteristics of the group are less and less important if a person lives in the conditions of exclusion from society and in the atmosphere of non-acceptance.

I'm afraid to stay alone. I don't know what's going to happen and who will care for me when I'm old.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

7.11. Strategies for building the future

Plans for the future are usually full of doubts. In Dagestan they await rejection, fear and pressure, persecution on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and outside the Republic, in Central Russia, discrimination on the basis of nationality.

There is no plan for life. But there is a dream: to wake up in the morning with a calm heart and soul, to know that nothing threatens my life... because I am unconventional. I don't even want to call myself that, who says I'm unconventional? I don't want to be afraid for my life, I want to communicate with people. I don't want to hide my emotions, I want a lot of smiling people. To have at least one child, to learn something and teach him ... to have a job and so that no one would say: "Look, the faggot is here" and "Let's fire him, he's a faggot" or "It's a woman with a cock ...". When I was working as a prostitute ... I've never enjoyed that job, and I was always under stress, not only because the client might be a maniac ... I was and still am afraid of the police. Not even because of my sexual orientation, but because of my skin color, the eyebrows... my name, the prejudice because I am a Dagestani. Thank God it doesn't say on my forehead that I'm LGBT.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

It is quite difficult to have a clear image of the future. Strategies for building the future are greatly influenced by the lack of access to successful examples of lesbian couples' life in Dagestan.

I know we can't be together forever. Two old ladies in the same house? If I'm about to go drive two to three hundred kilometres on the road, then before I leave the house I say: "If anything happens to me, you know what to do: hide your cigarettes and tear apart your notebook." ⁸³

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Can you imagine that if something happens to her, I will have to worry about where the dildo and the notebook are and not about her?

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Fake marriage with a man (for transwomen with women).

Fake marriage and IVF, that's it. Just for the show, at least for a week, then I'll get divorced. At least as a second wife. I have male cousins and uncles and there will be a turmoil. And if someone says something, you can make up an excuse. I'm an only child so they forgive me everything. Her parents are stricter, and she has many sisters. If she had brother, I would have been more worried.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Child birth and joint upbringing

I adore children but I want her to give birth. IVF, but people will say that she is a pregnant Kahba, "a whore".

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Moving to a big city in central Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg).

I moved to Moscow to sell my maternal capital. I will rent a flat and find a job.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I was supposed to go to university this year. My mother says „Come on, go away, there is nothing for you here. Why do you endure that? “ She notices how society treats me, what they can say. We were leaving the store, and we were arguing with her. And the guys passing through called "Shave him and send him to the gym." My mother was shocked, of course. My mother still thinks that there's nothing to do here in Dagestan. My parents let me go. But I was mentally not ready to leave. But now I think I am ready.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Moving abroad, emergency escape or a planned relocation.

I don't plan to stay in Russia, because my daughter must receive treatment either in Germany or in Israel. But I would never go to Israel. And it doesn't mean we will be able to leave.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

I've heard of a lot of people going to Europe and America, but who will give me a visa and who will accept me... I don't know how they are now. I've watched a lot of Chechens who were also gay leave Chechnya and Russia. I'm happy for them, they were saved. So far there are no other options. Nobody wants us, neither here nor there.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

Moving is a difficult decision when returning to one's parents implies a complete abandonment of oneself and one's personal life, while moving outside the country is associated with fear of the unknown.

I would not return to the village. I'll die there. I love and respect my parents, and I don't want to leave them. I want to stay close no matter what. And even when they're gone, I won't leave. I have sisters, I can't leave them. I don't know anything there.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

Register a relationship with a woman (man for a transgender woman)

I want a wedding.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

No plan for life

Honestly, I don't have any life plans. It goes, as it goes. It would be better if life was better. Freedom like in Germany, so that everyone knows about me. It would be easier to live. But we have a great life, if I don't want to, my mother won't be able to do a thing. There's nothing stopping you from loving a person when you come home.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

A passport change, as part of the transition, is a necessity for transgender people. The issuance of a passport with a changed sex in the North Caucasus is associated with direct risks.

To change an ID is a disgrace, I will be humiliated. I don't know anything about ID change. The sex entry is changed in your birthplace and I was born in K, in Dagestan. That's dangerous not only for me but also for my relatives. I know one girl who didn't care and did it, but I can't. I'm too scared and I don't have enough money. In Russia a transition is unrealistic. You need to find a place where you can do it without the fear for your safety. To get lost in Moscow and earn as a prostitute.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, married

8. The situation of homosexual and bisexual women in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic

The Kabardino-Balkarian Republic is mainly populated by Kabardians (57%), Balkars (12.7%) and Russians⁸⁴. The majority of Kabardians and Balkars professes Islam, but the republic is not mono-religious, so until now a part of the population not only professes Christianity but also supports pagan traditions. The situation of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender women depends on the place where they live. Nalchik has slightly more opportunities than the countryside, but it is still not a safe city for lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people.

In Kabardino-Balkaria there is no difference in nationality. I know more Kabardians, Balkars live more in mountainous places. There's a difference between big and small cities. In the city you can tell your sister and sometimes your brother, but the civilization has not reached the countryside yet, so a girl hardly dares to tell it someone. I, for example, shared with my sister who lives in the city. She reacted neutral, she thinks it will pass. But I will not tell those who live in the village, if they find out, there will be moral pressure, but without physical violence. They will try to marry me off.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

The overall situation in Kabardino-Balkaria is better than in other North Caucasian Republics. Better than in Chechnya and Ingushetia, and even North Ossetia, as there is no targeted persecution and no forced marriage. I think ninety percent of the girls can decline marriage. And in Chechnya I know many stories, many of them first-hand. The worst situation is in Chechnya. Ingushetia is somewhere between Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria. We don't have any prisons like in Chechnya. In Ingushetia, girls can walk around in pants. In Chechnya, women are completely oppressed.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Two homosexual and one bisexual woman participated in this study, all under 30 years old (18 to 28 years old) and unmarried.

8.1. Upbringing in the parental family

The issue of parental violence is sadly also a problem that requires special attention in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic.

I'm not saying that everyone is raised that way [with physical violence]. It's just that for our family it's the norm. A lot of girls are raised that way, but not everyone. It doesn't matter if it's a rich or a poor family, I have a friend who comes from a very rich family and her father beats her up occasionally, too. It does not depend on the wealth. It's just

⁸⁴ 2010 All-Russian Population Census. National composition and language proficiency, citizenship. The population by nationality and Russian language proficiency by constituent entities of the Russian Federation.

that.. I wouldn't say it's a tradition, it just happened to some people. It's more like "my mom beat me up, so I'll beat you, too".

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

The police came to our house once, and I just happened to hit my head. It happened... My mother and my sister would often hit me. And when the police came, my mom started saying "I'm disabled, I feel sick, she won't listen to me, such a difficult child." The policemen turned around and said, "Well, my mom hit me hard too, so what?". It's normal there. The police came because, as they said, "We have no right to ignore a call because it's illegal", but they judged me as a human. "This is how you behave with your mom, she's an invalid. Why don't you feel sorry for her?" That's the way it is. My sister, she's so... more traumatised or something. My dad, I'm not making excuses for him, but he's Afghan and he's got problems, violent outbursts. My sister, she was so strong when she was a kid, and she always tried to defend herself, and my dad tried to break her and probably traumatised her. She became crazy, too, just like him. She imitates his behaviour pattern. And that's why we had problems, she tried to be like him, and I wouldn't let her. She's three years older, but she's providing for her family now, and I guess that's why she feels that she has the right to do it.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Some families maintain strict restrictions on movement, deciding where to live and what to wear. But in other families, transgender persons and girls are given freedom of gender expression.

I can go wherever I want, but not everyone has this freedom, everything is up to the family. I know a girl, she wears a chest binder and looks like a guy. Everybody knows her and she wasn't killed. She has a blog, she's 17 years old. She doesn't really get out on her own. When she is live streaming there are insults in the comments.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

As in other republics, girls' opportunities depend largely on the composition of their families.

There is a girl from a rich family. She's a couple of years younger than me, and she's actually a lesbian, too. And she's got five brothers, and if they find out, she'll have it really bad. Not only can she get beaten up by her dad, but by her brother, too. There would be a lot of pressure, both physical and moral. I don't think she would be killed... it's not that bad. She could be beaten up, reported as a difficult teenager, like I was. That happens if you run away from home, fight with someone, or don't go to school.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

8.2. Sexualised violence

Of the three respondents, two spoke about their experiences of sexualised violence, which is of great concern. Respondents also pointed to the difficulties women face when trying to defend themselves.

My relative tried to rape me, so did the boys from our house. But now I'm rehabilitated and not afraid of men.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

50 % of the girls from the Caucasus choose women for this reason. Almost all my friends experienced sexualised violence. Thirty to forty years old men, and in Chechnya they just say, "I'll do it to you, and you'll be the guilty one," and there is nothing you can do against that bastard. In Kabardino-Balkaria the man will be punished. In Kabardino-Balkaria, a man is to blame, but not everyone tells what happened. Almost none of the women will tell what happened. I tried to forget, too. To act like nothing happened. I still shiver, blush when I talk about it... no one wants to remember.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Domestic violence is not talked about in the open, but if there is a severe beating and the mother files a police report, they will react. But the girls are afraid of their parents and don't do it. I had an internship at the police, almost everything is investigated here except corruption. To be more precise, they are looking into smaller delicts.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

8.3. Realising one's sexual orientation and gender identity. Coming out and being outed

When talking about awareness of their sexual orientation, respondents suggested that homosexual orientation was the result of some traumatic event or happened accidentally.

I've never emphasised my bisexuality. I've been friends with a girl for a long time, and she's been supporting me emotionally. I had a hard time in my life when my loved ones were dying. I was fourteen and it was really hard for me to get over it all, and my father was also having mental problems. I was depressed, and that's why she helped me. I just realised that I felt at ease with her. I started talking to her, and our relationship just got to that point. It just happened to be so easy. I was bi from the beginning. The story with my dad- he was drinking and hitting me, so I started avoiding boys.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Two of the respondents have been outed. The parental reaction to homosexuality and bisexuality was extremely negative. Women were subjected to coercion and violence by family members.

My mother always does it... well, we have parents like that, they're always trying to control their child, especially if it's a girl. And I'm not very open with my parents. My mom read my correspondence, she hacked into my VC account in the attempt to understand me. She has this kind of friends. She's a well-read and a literate person, she's got a big circle of friends. She had her friends help her to hack into my accounts. She found my diaries and read them. At the same time, she hacked into my account and didn't tell me about it, she monitored me for months. That's how she found out. And my father still doesn't believe it. He doesn't believe her, he thinks, she's lying. My mother just likes to exaggerate, and he thinks she's just exaggerating. My father is aggressive, and he reacts very strongly. But my father said that it just can't be true. She pretended not to notice at first. That's what she said: "I thought you were just curious about this. That you'd just try it and then let it be, like you always do. But you keep going on and on and on. I can't stop you, you are almost beyond saving, soon you will surely start taking drugs." She was fierce when she revealed that she knew everything.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

She beat me up and yelled at me, and then the emotional pressure started. For her, my sexual orientation means horror and a mortal sin. She started pressuring me saying that

she is disabled. Her health is bad indeed. She really likes to emphasise it. It's like, "I'm dying, I'm feeling really bad and you still do that." I just answer, "Mom, it's fine, please don't do this." And she's like, "Then delete all the social network accounts, remove all your friends, remove her," with the emphasis, "Add her to the black list." I did that. I have several accounts and it turned out that my mother had the password from the other page as well. She read my dialog from that other page about this situation and how I did what my mother asked me just to calm her down. It's so funny because she yelled at me because of it. I was sixteen, I guess. But I wasn't even dating that girl yet. It was just mutual sympathy and it was just too obvious.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

They said they would tell all my relatives. My mother wanted to take me to Upper Balkaria - it's a mountainous area and there's no internet at all. It's like a village. And she threatened me that she would take me there, to ban me for a year, and that I will surely change there.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Respondents also believe that reactions in families may be different and depend, among other things, on the position and composition of the family. Although the comments contradict themselves: denying forced marriages and violence in families, the respondents give examples illustrating that there is both forced confinement, violence and forced marriage in the republic.

When my mother found out she was very stressed, she was crying and had a nervous breakdown. Some of my friend's families had gotten over it. Especially poor and single-parent families where they didn't pay much attention to the child. If everything in the family is "as it should be" she'll be forced to enter a marriage, but not beaten up. I do not know of anyone in Kabardino-Balkaria to be locked up, but one acquaintance of mine is not allowed to go anywhere. At least until she is married. Forced confinement is present only in Chechnya. You become an adult only after you get married.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

If someone finds out, you will be locked up for one or two days. They will pressure you morally. Forbid social networks and contact to girls.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Homophobia and biphobia are combined with xenophobia. Negative ideas about others: about Russians or residents of large cities, allow family members to transfer responsibility for the homosexual relations of a daughter / sister / wife to others who "taught", "seduced" and "corrupted" them.

I think I'm bisexual, but the bigger problem is that I had a relationship with a Russian girl. Of course, it's a problem that she is a girl. But my mother was convinced that I was being corrupted by the Russians. That it's their fault I fell in love with a girl.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

My mother thinks I was seduced by a girl. But if I live with my aunt like this, it's okay. She sincerely hopes that I've changed.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

They think that if they are Kabardians or Balkars, they are definitely good people, or as long as they are from the Caucasus. If not, then they don't have a namus⁸⁵, it means that they have been raised wrong, and they are definitely bad. There are good people, but most of them are bad. Especially in big cities, but that's a widespread opinion. They think there are so many bad people in Moscow. That's why girls don't dare to move there.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

8.4. The life of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

Meetings of non-heterosexual women in Kabardino-Balkaria cannot be held openly and require caution. There is still room for communication and building personal relationships on the Internet. In forums and social networks, fake pages and nicknames are used to ensure anonymity.

We don't have clubs and apps don't work either. There are VC sites where you can get to know other people. Only for Caucasian girls. Seventy percent of the girls know each other. And we spend time walking and meeting up. This online group is very old. Everyone comes together and...

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

In Kabardino-Balkaria the lesbian and bisexual community has opportunities to meet in person and socialise.

They hang out at the bus stops or shisha lounges, but one of them usually looks like a guy. There are active and passive ones, there are also those who do both, a "universal". Most started to go universal. But you don't see butch and femme⁸⁶ that often. I know some butches, I've seen them two or three times. These are isolated cases in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

The public's attitude towards homosexual and bisexual women in the Republic is primary characterised by open judgement. The reason may be that their appearance does not conform to traditional perceptions of women.

The family does not allow short haircuts. Women drive, wear skirts, pants, sometimes even miniskirts. Although there will be judgmental looks. You'll be judged for a short haircut. We have no honour killings. There are more lesbians in Dagestan and many girls mimic butches. Dagestan is in a better position. In Makhachkala there's a lot of dirty incomprehensible movements. Girls of the night. And nobody cares how you look and where you go to like that.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

There are only a few with a short haircut. We are not repressed by our brothers. It got easier.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

It used to be easier. Less knew about us and some, if suspected, thought it was wrong to say it. But there's a positive tendency among young people. Now sixteen-year-olds and

⁸⁵ Namus is a set of moral principles regarding honour and shame.

⁸⁶ Butch lesbian is a lesbian who exhibits a masculine behaviour pattern. Femme is a lesbian with a feminine model of behaviour. The difference between "Butch" and "Femme" is very tentative. Many lesbians do not classify themselves in any of these categories.

eighteen-year-olds are not so aggressive about the fact that there are LGBT people in the Republic.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

8.5. Survival strategies

Since a small number of respondents participated in the survey, we assume that there could be much more popular survival strategies than we know. Respondents describe four survival strategies.

The first model is imitating the behaviour of heterosexual women. An attempt to fully meet gender norms and expectations in society. Marriage to a heterosexual man, possibly by decision of relatives, birth of a child.

I have a classmate there - she's a lesbian and she hides it. She's afraid that her parents will find out. And when at one point they did find out, she just broke off the connection with her girlfriend. She pretended that there was nothing. She said "Okay, okay, I'm not really a lesbian - it was all a game. Really, I'm normal." Well, it's impossible to go out with a girl for a few years and say it was all a game. She even tried to date boys, but it never worked out. She pretends that everything is fine, and they put up with it. She's changed a lot and is trying to be the typical Caucasian pride: a dress to the floor. A daughter her mother is proud of and so on.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

I think she was just afraid of losing and leaving her comfort zone. She was just comfortable with her family, and she was afraid that she would lose the relationship to and the support from her family. She decided that they wouldn't love her the way she was, so she had to change. But I don't know if she really changed or is just trying to pretend that she did.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

The second model is moving to Moscow, St. Petersburg or another city. In a big city there is an opportunity not only to live a freer and safer life, but also a better chance to find a job that will provide for your life. The main difficulty is that in order to move a girl must obtain the permission of her parents.

About twenty percent of the girls don't get the permission to move.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

I've lived in Moscow for five years and came back only for studying. Moscow and St. Petersburg are big cities. My parents wouldn't have been against it if my mother hadn't found out about me.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

Third model is a fake marriage with a homosexual man.

Fake marriages remain a strategy that not only allows one to live by imitating the only acceptable behavioural pattern, but also to leave for another region.

Fake marriages are very rare. We just found a husband for one girl. They will marry soon and then she will leave for St. Petersburg.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

The fourth model is mutual help in the community.

I've helped a girl from Chechen Republic, but she was caught two times. She almost killed herself after that. Without a fake marriage they won't let her go anywhere. We write to each other.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

If a girl disappears, I call and write to their mothers, if they don't answer, then I turn to LGBT-support. I fear for those in the Chechen Republic, Dagestan and Ingushetia.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

8.6. Strategies for building the future

Plans for the future are unprecise, there are aspirations, desires or unwillingness.

1) Moving to a major city in central Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg)

I don't want to get married. You can't build a life with a girl. If girls start making plans here, the only option is to leave. Because in a couple of years, questions start to come up and everyone starts suspecting something.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

2) Moving abroad

We will move to where we can be together and be left alone. I'm just waiting for her to finish college.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

3) Lack of a plan for life or a plan based on the desire for an unwanted future

I don't want to get married.

Female respondent, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, under 30, unmarried

9. The situation of homosexual women in the Republic of North Ossetia – the State of Alania

North Ossetia, State Alania, is a Republic of the North Caucasus where Orthodoxy, traditional Ossetian beliefs and Islam are represented. There are several dialects in modern North Ossetia: Digorian and Iron. The institute of elders, adats, the influence of Christianity and Islam, pagan traditions - all of these are of great importance in society.

Here not many are religious. But traditions are kept, holy places and sanctuaries are maintained. We are Christians. We have different dialects: Iron, Digorian, Kudarian. It's all Ossetian language, but a little bit different. Digorian is mainly spoken by Muslims, the rest are Christians. We have idolatry. The Khetag bush is a holy place. There are many places in the mountains where there are vessels for money donations. St. George's⁸⁷ place is the patron saint of men and travellers. The Khetag Grove⁸⁸, the Khetag bush. Everything is mixed up. A sanctuary for women and men. All over Ossetia there are many holy places and festivals of these holy place. They carry three pies (earth, sun and air), meat and Ossetian beer. Everyone has its own place. Each family name has its own holy family places.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

There is an official Council of Elders - "Big Word - Styr Nykhas" or an important word. Previously, there was a place called nhazh, it means "word", where elders gathered and discussed something: problems and solutions. Officially, there is a Council in addition to the Government. This is the voice of the people. Most likely, they do not make decisions about women. They are more involved in political and cultural activities. For example, in the resolution of the Ossetian-Ingush conflict. They maintain Ossetian culture, national festivals are held with their participation. It works through private ways.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

According to the respondents, the situation with the rights of non-heterosexual women in North Ossetia is somewhat better than in other regions of the North Caucasus, but you can't say that there are no life risks for lesbians and bisexual women.

We are different from Dagestan and Chechnya. Dagestan is six hours away from us. There are more freedoms, but it is still illegal and frowned upon. Our situation is a bit better than in Chechnya and Ingushetia. There are clubs in Dagestan, we don't have something like that here.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

The attitude of the society does not change, although they say that young people are more open and Ossetian traditions are fading..., I have not noticed that. They are fading, as our elders themselves forget what is being done and for what purpose. There was a wake... I think we have a cult of the dead... A bed is made - they put things together on a chair... I ask an old woman: "For what?". She answers, "It's the right thing to do." She can't explain what it's for. They don't know, so how could they pass it on?

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

⁸⁷ «Uastyrdzhi». For further information: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/31554/>

⁸⁸ Khetag Grove is a sacred place for Ossetians, the origin of which is associated with an ancient legend. It says that Kabardian Christian Khetag, who refused to accept Islam, fled to Ossetia, but he had no strength to get to the forest and hide there. And then the forest itself came to the fugitive, hiding him from his pursuers.

Four homosexual respondents participated in the study, all four unmarried, two under 30 and two over 30 (26 to 46 years). The interview was conducted on condition of anonymity.

9.1. Upbringing in the parental family. Opportunities and limitations

Respondents noted in the interviews that there is a difference in upbringing based on the sex assigned at birth. The difference in upbringing directly depends on the fact that more demands are placed on the girl and the woman⁸⁹ as well as the responsibility for the honour of the whole family.

The difference is that the boy in the family is directly or indirectly compelled to be the future "owner" of the house and family. This kind of upbringing makes it clear to the boy that he can command not only by a year or two years elder sisters, but also those with a five or ten years difference. He even can afford to talk to an outsider girl as if she belonged to him. Even though I don't have any siblings, I've seen my cousins and brothers of my girlfriends brought up this way. I won't say that it's always like that, but mostly it is. The guy is allowed to move around more freely in space-time, is not so strictly subjected to curfews and he is completely free to visit any establishment. And no one will point a finger at him, will not say that he wasn't brought up in accordance with the mountain adats and is branding his pure name. And the girl could bring a lot of suspicion upon her if she went to a club just to spend time with her friends and dance.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

With age, upon entering into a marriage, provided a son is born, a woman may regain some of her rights. Only if these conditions are met will the woman receive the right to travel and partially the rights to make her own decisions.

In the given period of life there is not much control from the family. It's enough for me to tell where, with whom and why I intend to meet and what to do, and in fifty percent of the cases I lie to my parents about that, and, of course, it's better to be back home before midnight. And that's because I was able to get out of the house, went away and support myself. Two or three years ago, I couldn't afford to come home after 10 pm and go out for a walk more than once a week. I have a good relationship with my parents and sisters as long as there are no conflicts. Confrontations usually happen between their, a little conservative, point of view and mine. I start hearing "What are you, a guy?" or "Well, it's not really a woman's thing." Since I'm twenty-nine, the times when I could somehow be punished (not let out of the house, and sometimes even slapped) are over. Now, if my mother does not like something, for example, "I came home too late," "you meet more often than necessary with your friends," "you talk too much on the phone," she just makes a scene and shouts at me, but it happens rarely. Apart from my sisters and parents, my family may be influenced to some extent by my closest relatives - my uncle and aunt. But their influence is insignificant and in no way relates to serious issues. I just have to act like a diligent girl in front of them, so that "no one would think anything bad".

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

My brother keeps saying that I'm dressing "wrong" and I need to grow my hair. I've stopped wearing dresses for the last six months, which is really annoying to my brother. The last time I arrived, I had an emotional conversation with him. My brother asked me to take the ring off my thumb, I said to him that it wasn't about the ring. Our mother interrupted the conversation on time, and we went into different directions. That was

⁸⁹ Sex assigned at birth

about six months ago. After that, I got a call from my brother's childhood friend, a named brother.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

In North Ossetia-Alania, more than one religion may be practiced in the family, but the general requirements for women remain regardless of the religion of the parents. Girls' lives are controlled by their relatives, even if the woman lives apart from her family.

In general, I would call my family religious. My family has two religions. My father is traditional Ossetian, and my mother and sisters are Christians. I was baptised as a child, but I am not religious.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

Now me and my brother videocall every evening. I don't know why he became so controlling. I'm thinking about moving in with a friend, just in case. But for now, I can go anywhere I want. I let my mom at home know. I started doing sports and going on trips. School, college and then I went to another town, bought tickets and said I'm leaving.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

Marriage remains a necessity and in fact an inevitability for a woman. And this inevitability forces non-heterosexual women to seek safe options for declining marriage.

There were talks about marriage. My mother said „Go get married “. And I said, „There is no one suitable there and no one I'm in love with”. There were some relationships with guys when I was younger, but it didn't get serious. My relatives tried to introduce me to some men and arrange matchmakings, but I declined and didn't meet them.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

My brother occasionally, at least once every six months and sometimes more often, comes and checks on how I live, who I live with. A couple of months ago he became more persistent in saying that it is time for me to get married and offered me to return to Ossetia. I don't know where it came from. A couple of months ago I allowed myself on the street, I don't know how to say it, to be with a girl, hug her, kiss her, maybe someone saw us. Just after that, the question of me moving, coming home and living at home came up very persistently. Maybe this is due to the fact that, by the Caucasian standards, I should have been married a long time ago.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

The tradition of marrying as a virgin and proving this fact greatly increases the risks for girls who are already sexually active. The consequences can be extremely unfortunate for the girls and lead to their death.

I think my brothers are not maniacs, they don't want shame and publicity, so for them the best option is to marry me off. And every day, they insist on marriage more and more. By the Caucasian standards, I should have gotten married a long time ago. Besides everything else, in Ossetia you get married as a virgin, I have already had sexual relations with girls, and even if I force myself, break myself and get married, I will be expelled with disgrace and questions will start. There will be consequences. I guess they are still holding back, to not to marry me off, because my parents are not feeling well, they are old, and an open conflict can have a bad effect on their health.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

9.2. Realising one's sexual orientation

As in other North Caucasian republics, access to complete and relevant information on sexual orientation and gender identity is limited in North Ossetia. Under certain circumstances, the Internet allows to find not only quality information and scientific knowledge, but also a platform for communicating with the community of non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus.

For me it's always been more interesting and comfortable with girls. I wanted to listen to them, pay attention to them, look at them, and then touch them. How did I get into the "gay community"? When I started to realise that I liked girls, I turned to what was available at the time - the Internet. I was able to find answers to some of my questions. In addition, in my first year at the university, life brought me together with my future best friend, who was just like me. When you're not alone, then things don't seem so scary. Slowly dating started on the Internet, it turned out that there were more of us than I could have imagined. Online dating turned into real dating, through new friends and acquaintances. So this is usually how dating happens - through acquaintances, or using dating sites or apps (T., Z., W⁹⁰.) and all sorts of VC [Russian social Network] sites, of which "What the mountains are silent about" is the most popular, at least among my acquaintances.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

I was with a girl for the first nine years, and I felt like we were the only ones. We didn't know that there were websites, that people get to know each other, there are many opportunities to go out and there are many girls. And then it was as if our eyes were opened: there are websites, there are a lot of girls.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

Before coming to St. Petersburg, I didn't know that homosexual people exist, or rather I heard that there are some crazy people, because in Ossetia they are brought to the madhouse or disappear. I came to St. Petersburg. A relative got me a job at his place. I met my first girlfriend at work.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

A free Internet is an opportunity to make the life of a non-heterosexual woman a little more fulfilling, an opportunity to understand what is happening and to accept herself.

Now the influence of the Internet on young people is immense, people do not communicate in real life easily. To have access to a lot of information is not bad. Internet helps to access information about sex minorities. And young people will know. The girl does not understand what is happening to her, she will look it up and see that there are such people and it is possible to live with it, maybe it will be easier for her. But to not live only on the web, there must be real life acquaintances and accessibility.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

9.3. Coming out and being outed

To open up to family and friends, to talk about your homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenerness is a risky step. There was no one among the respondents who would come out to her family.

90 The names of websites, forums and clubs are concealed for security reasons.

Few people say what their life is like... even their parents will hide it. The family may accept it if the father or brother or the mother is not a tyrant. They'll be ashamed. Try to hide everything.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

Soon after I started living alone in another city, my brother began to suspect something, I think. To date, he has no proof that I'm a lesbian, he only suspects it. There was talk about whether I was gay or not, I said I wasn't, and he believed me or pretended to believe...

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

My father died twelve years ago. Before that he wasn't really interested in my personal life and drank a lot. He was a Caucasian and he would have never thought possible that I could do something wrong. If he found out, maybe he would have beaten me up. My mother is not familiar with this subject and she would never think of something like that.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

But it is hard to defend against rumours and conversations. When entering a relationship with a woman, there is an immediate risk that family members will receive information about the sexual orientation of their daughter, sister or mother.

I was twenty years old when my mother heard rumours about me and my orientation, which were based only on the length of my friend's hair. We haven't been seen doing something. But it was enough to forbid me communicating with her. My phone was taken away from me, I was let out of the house only to go to the university, controlling my every step on the way to and from university. It took me a lot of effort to convince my family that it wasn't true. Maybe there would have been someone else braver than me and who wouldn't have denied who they were in front of the family and regained more freedoms and rights, so to speak. I don't know how she'd react if she found out now, but I think the same way as before, with hysterics, fainting, tears, so I wouldn't want to do it again. I don't want to hurt my mom, so I'll always lie to her. Lying is very depressing. The constant need to make things up gives me the headaches, in the literal and figurative sense. But lies are the least of the evils in this scenario.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

The outing consequences are not only family conflicts, but also, at a minimum, restrictions on freedom of movement, communication, mobile phone and Internet.

If the information goes beyond the family, there are other risks, such as losing your job.

Frankly speaking, I don't care how my co-workers would react to such news, but I think I could get fired.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

If you live openly, there will be shaming. For example, I work at a school. If the parents will find out they will point fingers at me and tell it to my face. They'll go to the Ministry of Education to complain, and I may be asked to leave work. They would argue that they don't want a person like that teaching their children.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

I'm even afraid to think what will happen if my relatives find out. I don't think there will be physical violence. My brother or someone else will maybe slap me. Physical violence is possible in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Maybe still in North Ossetia in other families where the father or brother might do it. I won't be physically abused. I'm afraid, because it's embarrassing, they won't understand it and will not approve, and will talk about me behind my back.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

As for me: I won't be locked up at home or married off. There are so many relatives, both close and distant. Naturally, they will judge and talk to each other, and try to do something - to reason me and talk me out of it. Although my sister guesses about my relationship with girls. She won't say anything. She doesn't say anything and she's quiet. She never asks.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

If my brothers find out that I'm a lesbian, they will lock me up at home, try to find me a groom, but most likely send me to the madhouse, and then lock me up at my parents' home without a chance for leaving.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

9.4. Honour killings based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression

There is no precise or even approximate information about the killings of "honour" in the Republic of North Ossetia, State Alania, and at present there can't be. Neither family nor close friends initiate investigations.

I know only of one case here in Ossetia when a girl was killed for being with a girl. A more common practice is violence, insults, house arrest, and they take away your phone.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

9.5. The life of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons

Under the conditions described by the respondents, building relationships with women is dangerous and difficult. Places for meetings are limited, it is extremely risky to meet openly and every part of the life that goes beyond what is allowed by traditional rules is kept secret.

The greatest danger is always the society: straight friends, neighbours, relatives, colleagues, classmates. You always have to be collected and attentive, watch what you say and to whom.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

I don't tell just anyone that I'm gay.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

According to the respondents, there are no LGBT clubs in North Ossetia. Open meetings on the streets are impossible, as the risks of disclosing personal information are extremely high. The Internet remains a place for dating and relationship development, although it cannot be considered absolutely safe for homosexual and bisexual women from the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania.

In Dagestan they have more freedom, there is a club for girls and boys. The regular boys know about it and they don't care. And we are condemned if our boys find out. We had situations like this, where I walked with a girl and someone shouted: "Lesbians!". It's upsetting. In Dagestan it's more or less ok. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, everything is forbidden. If we hide it, we can somehow exist. If no one knows, you can keep on living. And if they do, it becomes difficult.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

We have a clan. Many relatives. The city is quite small, 400 000 people, and 900 000 in the whole republic. We meet in a group, and everyone is either a relative, or a neighbour, or someone who knows someone. And even in an unfamiliar group, you can't behave as freely as you want to. It will affect you somehow, because an acquaintance, relative or neighbour will be there. The clannishness is felt gravely. If you hide it, then you just pose as friends, you can't do it openly.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

We meet online: M⁹¹. and some other websites. I registered to one and the communication didn't work out. Men are offering: "Do you want a cunnilingus?" Women are more inventive. I once talked to a girl on this website. She asked me: "What do you do? What and who do you teach?" and then, "Do you like touching children?". A man wouldn't ask that question. And women are more resourceful in their fantasies. It's unacceptable for me, not that I'm a prude, but there are norms... and there are a lot of questions like that from women.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

You usually meet either online or in a group. I got acquainted with Z. on Odnoklassniki⁹², we added each other as friends and started chatting. And then with another girl. There is a woman who helps you to find a girlfriend, also after a bad breakup. She tried to introduce me to someone, but it didn't work for me.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

9.6. Survival strategies

Survival strategies for non-heterosexual women are not limited to interview data, but we assume that the main ones are presented below and that they are similar to those in other North Caucasian republics.

The first model is the imitation of the behaviour of heterosexual and cisgender women. An attempt to fully meet the norms and expectations in society.

To fool them I told them that I met a boy. I receive flowers and minimise their suspicion. I make sure there is at least one man around me, that I'm not always with girls, in case if there is someone, it won't raise suspicion. I don't sleep with them, we just talk and walk.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

⁹¹ Names of websites, forums and clubs are hidden for safety reasons.

⁹² Russian social network.

The second model is moving to Moscow or St. Petersburg for work or studying.

When I went home last time, I lived with my parents for about a month, I convinced my mother that it was better for me to live in St. Petersburg, because I had a job there and that it was better for everyone.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

At some point, it felt better, I calmed down, my brother became less controlling, came to visit less frequent and I started organizing speed dating for girls with a friend, it was in 2017. That's when a lot of my pictures related to this topic got online. When I realised that, I stopped doing speed dating.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

The third model is life in a partnership. Living together is not only an opportunity, but mainly a risk; moreover, living together does not imply openness. A couple often has to come up with an explanation for their neighbours and relatives.

My girlfriends were part of the family and came to visit. We dated for nine years with each of them. Now I'm waiting for a relationship. They came to visit as female friends. My brother, mother, sister and sister-in-law all treated them well. They loved them.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

I lived in one flat with a girl. I told my parents that I moved to a flat. When they found out that I live with a girl, I explained that there are two rooms and it's easier to pay the rent. We lived for two years in different flats. I think they didn't suspect anything. My mother is not familiar with this topic. My brother suspects something but doesn't tell. Maybe because I'm more independent now they are ok with me living in a flat.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

9.7. Strategies for building the future

Fake marriage with a man (for transwomen - with women).

In order for my family not to raise any questions, I introduced them my gay friend as my boyfriend, with whom we have been happily "dating" for eight years now. They are eagerly waiting for a wedding which is never gonna happen. I will have to find a new gay guy to be my boyfriend.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

Of course, it would be ideal to have a sham marriage with my gay friend, but he doesn't want a marriage. And to find a suitable person to play the role of a husband, though a fake one, with whom we could become friends, live under the same roof in peace and understanding, who would be responsible enough to have children but only through IVF⁹³ or AI⁹⁴ is very difficult. Marriage in general is difficult even for heterosexual couples. And when you are gay, marriage can be a double headache.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

⁹³ In Vitro Fertilization is an assisted reproductive technology, which involves removing an egg from a woman's body and its artificial fertilization. The resulting embryo is kept in an incubator and then implanted into the uterus for further development.

⁹⁴ Artificial Insemination is an assisted reproductive technology through the introduction of spermatozoa prepared in the laboratory into the uterine cavity, at the moment or on the eve before ovulation.

Childbirth

I decided not to marry but pursue my career. Five years ago, I left the region to continue my studies. I stayed here to work and have no desire to come back. In five or six years, I would like to try IVF myself, without a "husband". By then, my mother will probably accept that I am still an old maiden and will be happy to at least receive an extracorporeal grandson or granddaughter, the sex doesn't matter.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

Moving to a major city in central Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg)

I can leave if I have to. Only my other half could give me a push to do it. If it is really the right person I could go to another town and settle down there. Change my place of residence. Probably somewhere in Russia.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

The future? I don't know. I don't see it, but I want to. I would have my own apartment and I wouldn't be living with my family. I just want to live with someone I love, to travel. I love even a little hiking. And go to another city. Live for my own pleasure and travel.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

Mutual help is also a survival strategy that provides support one way or another.

I would do anything to keep my friends out of danger. For example, I would hide a person at my place or at trusted acquaintances' for a while, and then help them move to a safer region where you can decide how to live, and go to the police.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

I was nine years in a relationship with a woman. She and I still have a good relationship. She's like family, a friend, a guardian angel. If something happened, I would look for her my whole life. I don't know where, how, or what. I would go to the police... they'll be investigating for a while, but if there's no sign of her, they would drop it.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, over 30, unmarried

10. Findings of a survey of non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus on strategies for building the future

I do not believe that anything will change in the Caucasus regarding the attitude to us, because I was born there and I know these people, I know how they think, every look and every moment, every thought in their heads. It's just that some people can't say them out loud because of their decency, but some ask leading questions in the respective tone: "Well, why don't you have children? "That's mocking.

Female respondent, Republic of Dagestan, under 30, unmarried

We conducted a survey in a forum for homosexual women about their plans for the future. Forty homosexual and bisexual women from the North Caucasus of different ages and from different republics answered the questions. The survey was conducted anonymously, as the vast majority of forum participants had fake profiles⁹⁵.

Study findings:

- sham marriage (2 respondents) 5%
- study or work in Moscow or another city (8 respondents) 20%
- leave the gay community (3 respondents) 7.5%
- marriage to a heterosexual man (6 respondents) 15%
- live with your girlfriend in secret (9 respondents) 22.5%
- own version in the comments (5 respondents) 12.5%
- come out (0 respondents) 0%
- request asylum or leave the country (3 respondents) 7.5%
- still undecided (8 respondents) 20%

According to the survey, for those respondents who have a plan, the most popular strategy is to live in secret in a partnership. According to the interviews, this is one of the most dangerous strategies. The second most popular strategy is to go to Moscow or another big city, where you can live more freely and reduce the control of the relatives. Entering a heterosexual marriage is also a common strategy. This marriage allows more freedom, especially after the birth of a child.

Get married, have rug rats, dive into the gay community.

From comments on the forum for lesbian and bisexual women in the North Caucasus

Heterosexual marriage, sham marriage or the desire to change one's behaviour without marriage (leaving the gay community) are attempts to mimic the acceptance of the established gender norms. Living according to the requirements of society can reduce the risks not only for their lives, but also for their families. None of the respondents answered that they were planning to come out. Moreover, coming outs are often condemned in the community of non-heterosexual women from the North Caucasus Republics, which is reflected in the comments on publications about coming-outs.

"Try to come out to the last generation who lived out their lives with certain values/traditions, and wait to be understood", "You will give grandma a heart attack", "Why does your grandmother need to know about you? You are not in Europe, where grandmothers are more understandable", "Why come out where it's not necessary?",

⁹⁵ Account profiles have fictitious names and do not contain any personal information.

"You dumb nuts, you came out to your poor grandmother, what did you expect? and what would it change?", "I feel sorry for the grandmother. These selfish people think only about themselves".

From comments on the forum for lesbian and bisexual women in the North Caucasus

Among the comments in three cases the respondents said that they would find work. Work is a condition for relative economic independence, which allows making decisions for your own life.

In the comments to the survey, you can find optimistic strategies for building a future.

Provide a good life for my family and myself, to travel the rest of my life with my partner, to start a family with my beloved girlfriend and live with her for the rest of my life.

From comments on the forum for lesbian and bisexual women in the North Caucasus

The high risks to life of lesbian and bisexual women are in some cases also reflected in the comments.

Survive.

From comments on the forum for lesbian and bisexual women in the North Caucasus

Non-heterosexual women turn to each other for help in difficult life situations, despite the high risks. Everyone who took part in the survey has different levels of trust to the community, but the trend towards mutual help and support is steady. When asked, "Do your gay friends or acquaintances approach you for help?" the answers were

- Yes, they do 60%
- No, they don't 33,33 %
- Other version in the comments 6,67 %

Conclusion

My dream is trivial and almost impossible for me to realise: I want to go to the top of Mount Everest and, of course, come back.

Female respondent, Republic of North Ossetia, under 30, unmarried

The North Caucasus is a unique region with a rich history and culture. It is a multinational region, with different religious movements on its territory. Each republic has greater or lesser representation of institutions regulating public and private life: adat, sharia, the institute of elders and secular laws of the Russian Federation. A significant role in the practice of applying the norms of adat, sharia and the Code of Laws of the Russian Federation is played by the political regime in the republic, the economic situation, the historical experience of deportations and wars.

Important concepts regulating life in the North Caucasus are "honour" and "shame", which apply to the whole family at the act of one member. Social status, and in some cases the whole life of a family, depends on that reputation. In the Chechen Republic, the notions of "honour" and "shame" are no longer only an area of private relations but also political concepts, as evidenced by the practice of public humiliation and falsification of criminal cases by order and with the support of the authorities.

In this entrenched patriarchal system women are the most vulnerable. A whole system of physical, sexualised, psychological violence works against them: forced religious practices, early and/or forced marriage, restrictions on freedom of movement and communication, female genital mutilation, "honour" killings. Law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation and heads of religious associations not only do not oppose this punishment system for women in the North Caucasus, but they often even support it.

The high level of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the North Caucasus takes the form of state persecution in the Chechen Republic, and harassment, threats and violence in the other Republics. At present, the efforts of human rights organizations are practically ineffective and the conditions for homosexual, bisexual and transgender women remain extremely dangerous.

What will help make the situation safer? Cultural development, promotion of human rights principles, morals softening. We must stop shooting at them, we must stop grabbing these guys. They will never accept the values that come from the Russian society until Russian society starts to be loyal and friendly to them. When the Caucasus feels that it's something different from the rest of Russia, there is nothing we can do to make a change there. And this is not the main priority now. Every day I get information that they are accused under false pretexts of terrorism and other things. Until it stops, it is impossible to talk about something, about good influence from Russia and even from us, as for them we merge with these persecutors. They come to me, they come to complain, and then they come for help, and I try to help, and then in Facebook, in my personal account, I read "we will never forgive you Russians". It's on my personal Facebook page. And I can't say that I'm not responsible. Or ask "why do you think it refers to me?". That's because for them there's "they" and there's "we", and I'm included in that "they" and you can't do anything about it. So, until there's peace, there's no point in talking about these prejudices. It is necessary to talk about them, but we don't expect to have any great effect.

Svetlana Gannushkina, Human Rights Defender

In the face of constant risks, the lives of non-heterosexual women require the search for survival strategies that will improve their safety. The following strategies can be highlighted from the respondents' answers:

- 1) Imitating the heterosexual and cisgender women behaviour. This strategy involves marriage to a heterosexual man, the birth of a child, and possible divorce. For society and the family, heterosexual behaviour is demonstrated by the respondents. This complex forced choice can involve the complete abandonment of personal relationships with women and instead secret meetings with them.
- 2) Fake marriage to a gay man is often seen as an opportunity to gain freedom while maintaining a relationship with the parental family. This is a complex strategy to implement, as a general climate of fear causes mistrust within the LGBT+ community. On the one hand, finding a homosexual partner for marriage is not a safe process, and on the other hand, to avoid doubts childbirth is often required as well as meeting the family expectations and receiving parental approval. In addition, a fake marriage and spousal relationships can become a subject to the scrutiny of relatives. This strategy also conceals the risk that a lesbian, bisexual woman or a transgender man will simply change one system of slavery to another by choosing this strategy. Homosexual men are implementing the same patriarchal models in relation to women that are accepted in society. The life of a woman, even in a sham marriage, is regulated by adat, sharia, and public opinion.
- 3) Moving to Moscow or another big city where it is possible to get lost and reduce the control from relatives and society. In addition to a heterosexual marriage or a fake marriage, education or employment can be reasons for the family approval to move. Given the difficult economic situation in the region, having a job helps the whole family. As a rule, only divorced women or women over thirty years of age can leave to find work. In the case of non-heterosexual women, moving is an option that allows to build partnerships, although the control of the relatives remains.
- 4) Life in a partnership involves high risks and the obligatory creation of a certain legend explaining living or even raising children together. Joint meetings can still be explained by friendship, especially since tactile contacts of women do not arouse any suspicions in that society. But living together raises many questions. Neighbours, sudden visit of relatives, visit of a doctor, appeal to different social services - everything can be a reason for doubts and rumours. It is important to note here that rumours are a sufficient reason to bring shame upon the whole family. But this survival strategy allows some couples to raise their children together.
- 5) Demonstration of dedication to Islam or radical Islamist ideology. Demonstration does not imply absolute pretense. A non-heterosexual woman does not lose her right to religious freedom and ethnic identity, as often portrayed in society. But it is the demonstration of her commitment to religion that helps her use stereotypes in the society to improve her safety. The hijab is a symbol of full compliance with the rules of Islam and can grant immunity status until a certain point. However, the punishment for homosexual relations for a covered girl is much harsher. In addition, the high level of internalised homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, rejection, and the fear of being outed lead to a search for a way out in radical religious movements. Thus, she has a high risk of being involved in illegal activities and being prosecuted by the police or relatives.
- 6) Escape is often a tactical decision, dictated by suddenly increased risks. Escape can also be a deliberate, planned decision against the ongoing violence. Such a strategy is seen as a last resort because family members are more likely to be affected by an escape. In the Chechen Republic, family members may be persecuted by the authorities, while in other republics the family is highly likely to be condemned and excluded from social life. Non-heterosexual women are considered property and searched by their families accordingly. It is often assumed that the decision to escape wasn't made by the woman autonomously.

Speculations about recruitment, kidnapping⁹⁶ and deception arise. At the same time, the legal mechanisms that work in the rest of Russia do not apply when it comes to women from the North Caucasian Republics, especially if relatives suspect that a woman is homosexual, bisexual or transgender. Such a long-term tactical decision or strategy is psychologically one of the most difficult for non-heterosexual women and transgender men, as it implies assuming back full responsibility for their own lives.

- 7) Mutual support and consolidation. This strategy works at the grass-roots level, i.e. mutual support for girlfriends, the possibility of seeking help for a girlfriend, and reporting to the police when necessary. Interview results indicate a lack of systematic approach to mutual assistance among lesbians, bisexual and transgender people in the North Caucasus. Some closed groups and forums are becoming the first platforms for developing consolidation. Internet access makes the use of this strategy possible. A more or less free private life for non-heterosexual women and mutual assistance are only possible on the Internet.

The choice of a survival strategy is based on the internal conflict between two values: family value, family honour and reputation, family security and personal freedom, and personal security. Thus, the choice of strategy is influenced by the ability to maintain contact with parents, sisters or other close relatives.

Survival strategies include planning and building the future in stages. The respondents link their future to the following events:

- Childbirth. The opportunity to raise a child independently rather than in the husband's family is essential. Respondents either plan to raise the child independently or in a partnership.
- Sham marriage with a homosexual man (for transgender women - with women) or conditional marriage until the moment of conception. Marriage for conception is motivated by a desire to preserve the relationship with the parental family and their reputation.
- Moving to a large city in Central Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg) to find a job, reduce the control of relatives, and reduce the level of rejection in the surrounding society.
- Moving abroad (emergency escape or planned relocation). This strategy is driven by a desire for freedom and partnership (in the future, but more often with an already existing partner). But moving is a difficult choice when returning to one's parents implies a complete abandonment of oneself and one's private life, while moving outside the country involves the fear of the unknown, the need to break off contacts with relatives, the family's rejection of the daughter, and the need to hide for the rest of your life. This strategy of building the future is also linked to the desire to legally formalise marital relations with a partner.
- Living secretly in partnership in the North Caucasus.
- Life according to the gender norms of the North Caucasus. This strategy for building the future results from many factors: the high level of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, risks of violence against non-heterosexual women, shame on the family, but above all, the lack of visible effective alternative life models for lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the North Caucasus.
- Participation in building a system of mutual support for lesbians, bisexual women and transgender people in the North Caucasus. This is the most unpopular strategy as it involves high risks and assumes privileges for non-heterosexual women.
- Lack of a clear plan for the future. Non-heterosexual women in the North Caucasus live without a plan for the future and focus on the present, on building an actual survival

⁹⁶ Kheda Saratova: "The kidnappers of Selima P. will answer for what they did." / Chechnya today. 02.06.2019
https://chechnyatoday.com/news/326639?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+chechnyatoday+%28Чеченская+республика+СЕГОДНЯ%29

model. This is mainly the case for respondents from the Chechen Republic, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

In general, survival strategies in the present are consistent with strategies for building the future.

All reasonable parents advise their children to leave if a girl is a free thinker and her mother understands and wants a freer and more conflict-free life for her.

Svetlana Anokhina, journalist, human rights defender (Republic of Dagestan)

Survival strategies for non-heterosexual women and transgender people in the North Caucasus are based on the meagre range of available methods to change their living conditions. The system of collective responsibility, oppression, coercion and restrictions, internal conflicts of values, internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia make it very difficult to freely choose and implement life strategies in the professional and family spheres. In turn, the combination of the institutions of adat, sharia, criminal culture and secular laws of the Russian Federation makes the system of oppression of women legitimate in the North Caucasus.

Adats were for the past. Now it's a period of decomposition. Our human rights defenders are suffering from this. They picture us as some Indians and patriarchals. That's not true. The sexual revolution is happening, and it's gaining momentum.

Human rights defender, lawyer (Chechen Republic)

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Survival strategies of homosexual and bisexual women and transgender persons in the North Caucasus

Qualitative study findings

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