

A CONFIDENT STEP TOWARDS THE FUTURE?

Research of socio-psychological and adaptation needs of wives, widows and children of killed and sentenced fighters in the North Caucasus

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ABOUT CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND PREVENTION CENTRE

THE CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND PREVENTION CENTRE (CAPC) is a think-and-do tank established by Dr. Ekaterina Sokirianskaia at the end of 2017. CAPC's mission is to provide nuanced and accurate field-based analysis of violent conflicts, propose tailored conflict resolution strategies, policies, and tools; implement interventions that will minimise the likelihood of deadly violence; and facilitate conflict resolution and mitigation.

We engage in raising early warning awareness, advocate for the rule of law, and support violent extremism prevention and post-conflict reconciliation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The armed conflict in the North Caucasus, one of the longest and the most violent in Europe, has almost abated. The jihadist insurgency in the North Caucasus has ceased to exist with most of the several thousand radicals who went to fight in the Middle East killed in Syria and Iraq. In recent years, Russia has been actively repatriating their children and some of their wives from the conflict zone. Returnee re-integration and rehabilitation, however, can take up to several years.

At the same time, there are tens of thousands of widows, wives and children of people whom the security services considered former fighters already living in the North Caucasus. Now that the situation has quieted, the government and society should revisit their attitudes towards these families and employ measures for their psychological and social support and social inclusion, instead of strict law enforcement control and stigmatization that has been the modal response so far.

The armed conflict in the North Caucasus, which started in Chechnya (1994–1996, 1999–2009), and had spread all over the region by 2007, produced three generations of combatants. The first wave comprised mostly of secular separatists who fought with Russia for Chechnya's independence in 1994, was then followed by the banned *Imarat Kavkaz*¹ group that aimed at creating a radical Sharia-based state in the North Caucasus. The most recent wave of fighters in the North Caucasus heeded the call of jihadist and other armed groups in Syria and Iraq and went to the Middle East to fight in 2012–2017. Each of those generations left several thousands of widows and children behind.

Thousands of the men who engaged in fighting in Chechnya or joined jihadist armed groups in other republics were detained and sentenced to long prison terms, which also deeply affected their families. For many years, the children, wives and widows—severely traumatized, often unable to work in the public sector, socially vulnerable, stigmatized, scrutinized, and sometimes directly targeted by the law enforcement—have had to cope with their tragedy on their own.

This report is based on in-depth interviews with 40 women in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan and analyses how the loss of a husband and father killed during the armed conflict in the North Caucasus or in the Middle East, or sentenced to a long prison term for participation in an illegal armed group, affects the life of his immediate family. It also analyzes the experiences of several families that hosted widows and children who have returned from Syria and Iraq.

Interviews show that all the women were severely traumatized by the killing, enforced disappearance, or the long prison term of their husband, and in many cases this psychological trauma caused severe health issues. According to the respondents, the first months after the event they felt shock, fear, helplessness and a sense of loss of the meaning in their life. While many of the women did not see the arrest or death of their husbands coming, others contemplated such a possibility as they were aware of their husbands' involvement with armed insurgency and their ideological views. Almost all women who did not re-marry said that their condition did not improve with time, and some acknowledged that the loss of their

¹*The organization is recognized as a terrorist organization and banned in Russia*

husband had completely crushed them.

Help from relatives has been the major source of support in the women's adaptation to their new life. Faith and work were named as the second. Relatives offer material support, babysit, purchase school supplies for children and help to find housing solutions. However, several women were denied support both by their own family and by their husbands'.

Responsibility for their children helped most of the women overcome their state of helplessness. In Chechnya, two out of ten women interviewed had to fight for custody after their husbands' death: the families of their husbands tried to take their children away from them as according to the Chechen traditions, after the divorce or death of the husband children stay in the man's family. One of the women has not been able to win the custody over her son, and he has been growing up separated from his mother.

Only one of the women we interviewed deliberately sought help from a psychological counsellor. Another widow who had returned from Syria had counselling sessions during her pre-trial detention. Both spoke very highly about their counselling experience. Almost everyone else mentioned that they needed psychological counselling badly, but that such services were too expensive for them and/or unavailable in smaller towns and villages.

Over two thirds of our interviewees do not have permanent employment or a home of their own. Unemployed women mostly live off survivor's pensions, support from their relatives or one-time charitable help. In Chechnya, some of the women interviewed have been denied survivor's benefits on the grounds that their husbands fought against the state. Many women who have a job ask their relatives or neighbors to babysit or leave their little children unsupervised. According to the interviewees, their main needs include medical treatment and medications for their children, education and housing. Two thirds of these families cannot afford extracurricular or developmental activities for their children.

In most cases, our interviewees have not been denied medical, educational or other services. However, in two cases educational institutions officially denied enrolment to children. Nearly all women said that they had been barred from working in the public sector after what happened to their husbands. One of the women was dismissed from a kindergarten after her husband had attacked security officers. While generally the community has not been pushing these women and their children away, many of the respondents have encountered certain instances of prejudice on the part of their neighbors, fellow villagers or schoolteachers. Only a few of our interviewees complained of isolation and exclusion.

Today, the interactions between the government and former fighter's wives or widows have been almost exclusively limited to law enforcement control and monitoring measures by the security forces. However, these measures towards fighters' widows and wives vary between the republics in the North Caucasus. The situation in Ingushetia has been the most favorable so far: during our interviews, the respondents did not report any serious violations with security forces conducting interrogations and investigations and said they usually operate within the law. The relatively favorable attitude towards former fighters' wives and children has been due to the radicalization prevention approach taken by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov who headed Ingushetia between 2008 and 2019. During his years in office, work with fighters' families was prioritized and he created two public councils to this end. Although there were no public reports on any activities by these councils, the general policy of support instead of repression sent an important message both to the society and the security forces.

In Chechnya there has been no consistent attitude among security forces towards the

widows and wives of the different generations of former fighters. Half of the Chechen women told us about pressure by the security forces, often very serious pressure; others did not complain about violations of their rights by the law enforcement officials. The women who mentioned having problems with law enforcement agencies had nothing in common: their husbands were killed or convicted at different times and belonged to different ideological strands in the North Caucasus insurgency. It seems that the fate of each family, including getting the survivor's pension, often depends on the local official in charge and the higher rank their husband had had in the insurgency.

In Dagestan, the situation appears to be the worst due to the widespread introduction of the so-called "preventive registration" list in 2015 when around 16,000 people, including almost all of the widows and wives of the insurgency members, were registered as "religious extremists". Although, according to the Interior Ministry in Dagestan, the "preventive registration" has not been operational since 2017, our interviewees noted that unofficially it was still operating.

According to our interviewees, under the "preventive registration" (profuchet) measures the police have significantly limited their rights to private life and freedom of movement: they were put under surveillance; their phones have been wiretapped; the law enforcement regularly monitored their whereabouts, called them in for questioning, checked their homes, and controlled their travel outside the location they live in; they have been fingerprinted, samples of their saliva have been collected, and their voice recorded; and they are de-facto barred from official employment in the public sector. Due to strong reaction by the civil society and the citizens themselves, in the last two years the scale of control and rough pressure associated with profuchet have been reduced. Many women said the surveillance and control had been particularly intense in the first months or years after their husbands' arrest or death and had ebbed away later. Our interviewees in Dagestan admitted that over the last two to three years the situation around the "preventive registration" calmed down, with the authorities reducing the pressure while still maintaining monitoring and control. Only one woman told us that the authorities tried to talk to her about religion and radical ideologies, but it was done so unprofessionally that it did nothing but irritate her.

Putting the security forces nearly exclusively in charge of the relations with fighters' wives and widows, the government can hardly expect any result other than pressure and restraint, resulting in feelings of frustration, anger and even hatred by these women and by association, of their children. Furthermore, such feelings can be conducive for radicalization. Law enforcement work with women identified as 'high risk' should remain within the strict confines of the law or else it will be counterproductive.

The "preventive registration" of children that singles them out among peers and thus stigmatizes them causes particular irritation and concern among women in Dagestan. Officers from juvenile departments meet with schoolteachers asking them to prepare references and visit children's homes. Our interviewees said that their children had been summoned to the law enforcement agencies, photographed along with other fighters' children, and talked to in the absence of their parents, including on religious topics. On the other hand, the local authorities and education staff in Dagestan told us that juvenile inspectors work for the benefit of the children, they try to make sure that such children receive a full secondary education, and in some municipalities the children were specifically enrolled in better schools where they could get better care and support. Similar work has been apparently conducted

in Ingushetia, but in a more subtle manner; hence, it does not cause much annoyance. In Dagestan and Chechnya, teenage and adolescent sons of fighters can get into trouble with the law enforcement authorities, including unlawful arrests and beatings.

All prisoners' wives keep in touch with their husbands although not all of them can afford visits to prison colonies. Most of the women talk to their husbands over the phone with varying degrees of frequency. Many women noted that after the arrest, their relationships with their husbands had not changed or in some cases even improved and they are waiting for their husbands to come back home.

While all children have been psychologically affected by the killing or detention of their fathers, older children who better remember their fathers suffer much worse than younger kids. The children who were old enough to comprehend the loss of their fathers have been impacted the most; those who were born afterwards, the least. Trauma affected the children's health, school progress, development and socialization; however, only few had access to professional psychological counselling.

Many women are concerned about how to explain to their children what happened to their fathers, why they were killed or imprisoned. Some families in Ingushetia and Dagestan avoid talking about their father's fate with their children. Consequently, the children learn about what happened to their dad from other people or the internet.

In Chechnya, families often told children that their father fought and was killed for his beliefs or his homeland. All Chechen prisoners' wives reported that their children were proud of their fathers. Most of the children have a deep need to see their father as a positive figure, so the authorities' attempts to portray fathers as villains can hardly be expected to be successful. A wider discussion about the post-Soviet Chechen history involving independent experts and eyewitnesses could help the younger generation in shaping critical views of the tragic events and forge a more accurate attitude towards what happened in the republic. They need to understand that all sides of the conflict committed grave crimes. Unfortunately, in contemporary Chechnya and Russia, organizing such open discussions is nearly impossible; however, they will have to take place in the future as without debate and mutual recognition of guilt, neither reconciliation nor sustainable peace will be possible. Promoting non-violent conflict resolution and anti-war initiatives could also help.

In Chechnya, the children of our interviewees whose husbands have been serving life in prison have the opportunity of long visits with their fathers. All the mothers mentioned that meeting their fathers in a prison setting was very harsh on their children. Psychological counselling before and after such trips could make them less traumatizing.

Most of the women said that their children demonstrated good or satisfactory results at school. Only two women in each republic reported being able to support the development of their children as much as they would like to. These women are the most financially secure due to having their own businesses or substantial help from their parents. The rest of the women cannot afford extracurricular activities for their children and/or are too busy to take children there with no one else being able to do that for them.

While the children who returned from the conflict zone in Syria or Iraq have much in common with the children of combatants who fought in Russia, they also have many specific challenges. The returning children have been traumatized more severely; some were injured. Their health and adaptation issues are more serious: little children cannot speak Russian well, whereas the older children have missed out on a significant period of school education. In

Chechnya, where the community generally disapproves of cross-ethnic marriages, especially between a Chechen woman and an outsider, relatives might reject returning children born in such marriage. Moreover, while people often sympathize with widows of those who fought in the North Caucasus, they categorically disapprove of women who left for the Middle East and ostracize them.

Returning orphans are usually taken care of by their grandmothers — older women with health issues traumatized by the loss of their son or daughter. The grandmothers interviewed have not received full custody over their grandchildren yet, hence they are not eligible for child benefits and must support the children from their pensions. They are in dire straits, lacking money to pay for medications and medical treatment and lacking the resources to support their grandchildren holistically and fill the gaps in their education. They often do not know how to best support the children in coping with the loss of their parents, in addition to other tremendous challenges in the community or at school.

All the interviewees highlighted the need for adaptation programs for their families. For successful rehabilitation, such families need social and psychological support, charitable help, and assistance in educating their children and promoting their development. All interactions with the law enforcement agencies should operate strictly within the law. The work with such families should be transparent, delicate and non-stigmatizing. Specially trained advisors on radicalization prevention can be involved, if needed. Orphans who returned from the conflict zone in the Middle East require special rehabilitation and integration support. Lasting peace in the North Caucasus depends in a large part on how successful, psychologically resilient, and socially included the affected children grow up to be.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the governments and law enforcement authorities of North Caucasus republics:

1. Support programs for social and psychological rehabilitation of the families of former fighters that offer comprehensive psychological, legal, medical and social assistance. Such programs can also provide support to other families affected by armed conflict, including widows of killed police officers and other families in acute life crisis that meet certain criteria;
2. Refrain from pressuring charitable organizations and public initiatives that offer material, legal, social and psychological assistance to such families and comply with the laws and regulations of the Russian Federation.

To help in coping with the acute crisis related to the detention or death of the breadwinner:

To government and non-government organizations providing counselling services:

3. Develop free counselling programs for family members of former fighters and ensure the confidentiality of such assistance in accordance with the Russian laws and regulations;
4. Under such programs, offer counselling not only to families in acute crisis, but also to children visiting their fathers in prisons, before and especially after such visits, and to women who need professional advice on how to talk to their children about the fate of their father, including his arrest or death. The latter can include a counsellor's participation in such conversations upon the family's request.

To religious leaders and mosques:

5. Engage female theologians with appropriate religious education, conduct individual sessions to help vulnerable women overcome trauma and difficult circumstances.

To help in the successful adaptation to life without a breadwinner:

To the Regional Ombudspersons:

6. Reach out to public services and education employees explaining that discrimination and degrading treatment of former fighters' families will not be tolerated.

To human rights organizations:

7. Offer legal assistance to the families of former fighters on a wide range of issues, including but not limited to: social, family issues (including widows' rights to raise their children, custody, and survivor's benefits).

To law enforcement authorities:

8. Work with the families of killed or imprisoned fighters strictly within the law, ruling out any ill-treatment or invasion of their privacy. Searches and arrests of suspects who have children at home need to be conducted in a manner that minimizes children's traumatic experiences. All violations by police officers should be investigated and prosecuted. Dagestan should abolish its "preventive registration" practices not only de-jure, but also de-facto.

To social organizations and charitable foundations:

9. Help families who struggle with satisfying their basic needs to purchase medications, food, and school supplies;
10. Provide vocational and small business training courses to assist women from vulnerable families with earning a living, including training in modern and marketable skills such as doing business online and social media marketing. The training centers need to have childcare groups that would allow mothers to learn.

To promote the successful development and adaptation of former fighters' children:

To government institutions:

11. Educational institutions should not single out affected children into a separate group and thus engage them in preventive activities. Any support measures should be discreet and non-stigmatizing;
12. A special system to facilitate the education of such children, prepare them for school and help them realize their full potential, needs to be created.

To assist in the re-integration of the children who returned from the conflict zone in the Middle East

To regional governments in Chechnya and Dagestan

13. Chechnya and Dagestan should open special re-socialization programs to provide legal, psychological, theological and educational support to the families and guardians of the returnees. These programs should organize visiting services to deliver consultations and counselling in rural areas;
14. Organize re-integration summer camps for children and their guardians who returned from Syria and Iraq that would include psychological counselling aimed at overcoming traumas, medical treatment, educational activities to catch up on the school program, and sports and entertainment for children. Private funding should be attracted to support this activity.
15. The authorities have to engage various independent specialists, including from non-government and especially local women organizations, in the work with vulnerable families.

To health ministries in Chechnya and Dagestan:

16. Provide additional health resort packages to treat children who returned from the conflict zone.

To non-government organizations and charitable foundations:

17. Create a network of volunteer tutors to help returning children catch up in their studies free of charge, including by means of online tutoring for children in remote villages. Also, volunteer household help should be provided to the children's guardians, if needed;
18. Secure charitable help to cover returnee children's basic needs, including food, medical treatment and medications, until their guardians have access to guardian benefits.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the 2019 defeat of the terrorist organization ISIS², which managed to seize and maintain control over large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2014–2016, the question arose of what to do with the children and orphans of fighters who were killed. The majority of countries are not repatriating them or are repatriating only children or orphans who lost both parents. Some countries such as Russia and Kazakhstan, however, are implementing proactive programs for their return.

According to Kazakhstan’s National Security Committee, in 2019 595 citizens of Kazakhstan—55 men, 156 women, and 406 children—have been repatriated from Syria in coordination with the NSC³. Russia has repatriated 24 women and more than 200 children from Syria and Iraq under a special program⁴. After the women and children returned from the conflict zone, the question of their re-integration and rehabilitation arose. In many western countries, governments are refusing to repatriate children precisely because they are not confident that they can be successfully re-integrated and de-radicalized.

In a similar line of reasoning, security agencies in Russia classify the widows and wives of militants who have been killed or sentenced to prison in the North Caucasus as a group at high risk of radicalization: in Dagestan they are added to so-called a ‘prevention’ registration list; in Chechnya, preventive interviews and “work” with adolescents. Despite these efforts, it looks like many of these steps only lead to greater isolation, frustration, and bitterness among the women and children. At the same time, the authorities and broader public do not know what the real needs of these families are and what must be done to help them successfully cope with this severe life crisis.

For this reason, the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center decided to carry out a small study of how the three waves of women and children in Russia either coped or are coping with the loss of their breadwinner—the husbands and fathers who were killed during the Chechen wars (1994–1996, 1999–2009) and in subsequent special operations in neighboring republics, who were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms, or disappeared after detention. We also interviewed widows who returned to Chechnya and Dagestan from Syria and Iraq and families to which orphaned children were brought from the Middle East. By our estimates, at least several tens of thousands of wives and children of former militants are living in the Northern Caucasus. This is a large group of people with special needs that deserves detailed analysis; however, we are unaware of any serious sociopsychological studies of these families.

We therefore set ourselves to the task of analyzing how the loss of a husband/father killed during armed conflict in the Northern Caucasus or in the Middle East, or sentenced to a long prison term for participating in illegal armed groups, affects the lives of their family members (widows, wives, and children). We were interested in the dynamics of their mental and physical health indicators, adaptation mechanisms, and the types of support that families received during this critical period and thereafter. We tried to derive a picture of their essential needs, their access to various services, their relationships with relatives, friends,

² *The organization has been declared a terrorist organization and banned in Russia.*

³ *“Operation Jusan: 595 Kazakhstanis were repatriated from Syria”, Inform.kz, February 6, 2020*

⁴ *“Children of the Caliphate: What Awaits Them after IS*”, Kavkazsky Uzel, December 1, 2017.*

the community, and law enforcement agencies, and to analyze the nature and intensity of the communication/relationships with incarcerated husbands/fathers.

During the study we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 women, including 35 women who were widows or wives of former fighters: 14 women living in the Republic of Ingushetia, 11 women living in Dagestan, and 10 women from Chechnya (8 in Chechnya and another 2 currently outside Chechnya). We also interviewed 7 families to which children returned from Syria and Iraq: 3 widows and 3 grandmothers in Chechnya and Dagestan, and one aunt of two Dagestani boys brought from Syria who were awaiting their Russian documents in Istanbul. One widow was interviewed a year ago; the remaining women were interviewed between July and December 2019. Widows and wives of men who fought in the Northern Caucasus were interviewed in various cities, towns and villages in each republic. Research in Ingushetia was conducted by a consultant of the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center, director at resource center “Razvitiye” Janette Akhilgov; research in Dagestan, Istanbul and interviews with Chechen women outside Chechnya by Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, and interviews in Chechnya were conducted by two local consultants who preferred not to have their names mentioned. In the process of report writing we were consulted by a psychologist specializing in counseling families in acute crisis situations, Natalia Nesterenko.

Certain difficulties arose during the fieldwork. Finding respondents ready to give an interview turned out to be more difficult than initially anticipated given the large number of women in the target category. In Ingushetia, about half of the potential respondents refused to give interviews, stating that they “don’t want to dredge this up again” or that they “don’t have the strength to think back on it.” Some women refused because of various apprehensions.

In Chechnya one of the major challenges we faced during the search for respondents was fear. None of the interviewees wanted her real name to be revealed in the interview. None of them agreed to speak on the spot. Three of the interviewees were in kinship relations to the interviewer. Before each interview she [the interviewer] talked with the women for 30 minutes to 2 hours. The fact that the respondents could reach her at any time and hold her accountable “according to Chechen customs” if she violated their confidentiality was very important to them.

It turned out to be easiest to find respondents in Dagestan. Nevertheless, for the safety and comfort of all the interviewees, their real names and the small towns where they might be identified based on biographical information are not disclosed.

This study does not claim to be a representative sample. We interviewed only those respondents who agreed to be interviewed. However, on the basis of the range of ages, places of residence, level of education and living standards, we assume that this group of respondents reflects the basic characteristics of the larger group: the families of killed and incarcerated husbands and fathers.

II. WHY FAMILY MEMBERS OF FORMER FIGHTERS?

We consider studying the situation of the former fighters' families important for three main reasons: first, this is a fairly large social group but one that is at the same time often invisible to the public, to which society rarely pays attention. Second, this group obviously has particular needs that are not being addressed; and third, it is crucial to the long-term peace in and stabilization of the Northern Caucasus that the former fighters' family members cope successfully with the crises related to the death or arrest of a father and that their children feel like full-fledged, successful members of society.

Open sources have no exact data on the number of widows/wives and children of the fighters. Armed conflict in the Northern Caucasus has now practically ceased, but since 1994 three generations of men have participated. In 1994 the entry of Russian troops into Chechnya and the start of the operation to "restore constitutional order" mobilized thousands of Chechens—teachers, farmers, singers, journalists. They were mostly secular separatists who went to fight for the idea of Chechen independence from Russia.

Both sides—the federal forces and Chechen separatists—incurred significant losses in the first war. There are no exact data on losses among the supporters of Chechen independence; each side exaggerated its adversary's losses and downplayed its own. Federal sources claimed that 17,391 Chechen fighters died, which seems unlikely. According to more probable estimates, the separatists lost anywhere from 2,500 to 10,000 people⁵.

From 1996–1999, the self-proclaimed Chechen republic of Ichkeria was de facto independent until the second Chechen war, officially named a "counterterrorist operation," began in 1999 and mobilized thousands of battleworthy Chechens. Many of those who had fought in the first war did not join in the second because the ideology of Chechen separatism underwent significant changes in the interbellum period, and radical Islamists began to dominate it.

In 2002 the conflict started spreading to neighboring Ingushetia, which at that time hosted 300,000 Chechen refugees who had fled from mass bombings of their towns and villages. The insurgents carried out attacks, in response to which the security forces drummed up unlawful violence: abductions, torture, extrajudicial executions, to name a few methods⁶. By 2004, Ingushetia had turned into a conflict zone; and not only Chechens, but also local Ingush were actively joining armed groups.

On October 13–14, 2005, some 100 to 200 insurgents attacked security agency buildings in Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR). According to official data, 33 members of law enforcement personnel, 15 noncombatants and 92 attackers were killed as a result of the attack. More than 100 people, primarily Ministry of Internal Affairs employees, were wounded, and more than 2,000 people were detained on suspicion of involvement in

⁵ G. V. Krivosheeva "Russia and the USSR in Wars of the 20th Century: Armed Forces Losses," p. 584, 2001. "The Price of War, Caucasus, Realities, December 12, 2017

⁶ "Conveyer of Violence. Human Rights Violations during Counter-terrorism Operations in the Republic of Ingushetia", Memorial Human Rights Center, September 1, 2005.

the attack⁷.

By 2007 the Chechen secular separatist project had transformed into a Northern Caucasus jihadi movement, and instead of Ichkeria, the insurgents' leaders proclaimed the goal of establishing a Northern Caucasus sharia state: "the Caucasus Emirate"⁸. Officially the second war ended in 2009 when the "counterterrorist operation" regime was called off⁹.

Data on the militants' losses in the second war differ. In July 2002 the federal side reported 13,517 militants killed¹⁰. According to journalist Andrei Babitsky, who interviewed Chechen separatist leaders in 2005, he estimated the number of militants killed from 1999–2005 at 3,600. According to Memorial Human Rights Center, 3,000–5,000 were disappeared usually after detention¹¹. We assign the disappeared to the same category not because we consider abductees complicit in the armed underground, but because that is what the security services considers them and thus treat the wives of the disappeared the same way as they treat widows of those killed.

The armed conflict has now almost petered out because of the mass exodus of Northern Caucasus radicals to Syria and Iraq in 2014–2016 and the obliteration of the remaining militant groups in the Northern Caucasus. The insurgency has ceased to exist, although from time to time the region experiences attacks by individuals or small groups of very young people who have come under the influence of ISIS ideology. Despite the noticeable calm and near lack of armed clashes, Aleksandr Bortnikov, head of the FSB [Federal Security Service] stated that in the first 9 months of 2019 some 700 suspected militants were detained in Russia¹². These data are for the whole country, but the North Caucasus traditionally accounts for most of these detainees. According to Bortnikov, in the last few years 5,500 Russian citizens joined terrorist organizations abroad¹³.

We therefore get from 10,000 to 28,000 dead Chechen separatist fighters during the active phase of the Chechen conflict alone, including the disappeared. To this number we need to add about 5,500 to account for those who left for Syria and Iraq, and the dead and convicted militants in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and the KBR. There are likewise no reliable statistics on losses of fighters in these regions in 2002–2020.

The Memorial Human Rights Center bulletin on the situation of the North Caucasus conflict zone in the winter of 2018–2019 presents a table of fighters lost (tab.1) in the region over a far shorter period – from 2012 through 2018 (based on data from law enforcement agencies)¹⁴.

⁷ November 1, 2005; Irina Gordienko. *The Trial of the 58 // Kavkazskaya politika*. 2012. June 30: "The Case of the 58. Nalchik," Memorial Human Rights Center. "Northern Caucasus: Challenges of Integration (ii), the Islamic Factor, Armed Underground, and the Struggle with It", International Crisis Group, October 19, 2012.

⁸ The organization has been declared a terrorist organization and banned in Russia.

⁹ "In Chechnya the Counterterrorism Operations Regime Has Been Lifted Canceled", RBK, April 16, 2009.

¹⁰ "War and Human Rights", Human Rights in Russia, January 28, 2004.

¹¹ "Cherkasov: a book about Chechnya's disappeared – this is a story of the Impunity of the Russian Military", Kavkazsky Uzel, February 13, 2012.

¹² "The FSB reports on the prevention of 39 acts of terrorism in 2019", Kommersant, October 16, 2019.

¹³ "The FSB reports on the prevention of 39 acts of terrorism in 2019", Kommersant, October 16, 2019.

¹⁴ "The Situation in the Northern Caucasus Conflict Zone: An Assessment by Human Rights Activists. Winter 2018 – 2019", Memorial Human Rights Center, April 15, 2019.

Table 1.

| Year | Militants killed / including leaders | Militants and supporters detained / found guilty | Total losses among illegal militant groups |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 2012 | 391 / 50 | 461 / 44 | 896 |
| 2013 | 260 / 42 | More than 500 / 72 | More than 832 |
| 2014 | 243 | 644 | 887 |
| 2015 | 156 / 36 | 770 | 926 |
| 2016 | More than 164 (according to other data — 140) / 24) | More than 900 | More than 1064 (according to other data — 1040) |
| 2017 | 78 | 1018 | 1096 |
| 2018 | 65 / 10 | 861 | 926 |

According to the table, militant losses over seven years tally to more than 6,627; however, human rights activists question these data. Analyzing the statistics made public by the security agencies of each individual republic and their statements about the significant decline in terrorist activity as of 2016, and the fact that there were almost no militants left in their republics, the bulletin’s authors conclude that federal departmental statistics may be significantly overstated in order to make their reports more “impressive”.

Even if just half of the men killed and arrested since 1994 were married and had children, then tens of thousands of women and children were consequently left without a breadwinner. This is a large group of people for a small region. Today the first-wave generation of children have become adults, and many are already parents, it is therefore hardly possible to have much impact on their lives. Yet their stories are instructive for the general understanding of the problem. Children of the second and third generations are still small or teenagers and can and should be supported in their rehabilitation and development.

The militants’ families also need attention because this group obviously has unique needs—to address past traumas, the stigma of their position in society, and law enforcement agencies’ attitudes towards them. In the heat of the violent conflict in the North Caucasus security agencies treated militants’ families with great suspicion and even hatred. In Chechnya and Dagestan, they carried out reprisals against family members: the security agencies would often blow up and burn their homes. After the terrorist attack on Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002, the Russian military blew up the homes of the relatives of the suicide bombers¹⁵. In Chechnya and Dagestan, houses were blown up in all subsequent years. Human rights organizations spoke of persistent reprisals toward militants’ relatives¹⁶. The author of this report herself was a witness when, on February 20, 2014, the home of the parents of Alauddin Dadaev, who was suspected of aiding militia members, was blown up in Agachaul village in the Republic of Dagestan. This occurred three days after Dadaev was detained far from home; there was no anti-terrorist operation when the house was blown up. His relatives were

¹⁵ Y. Yuzik “The Suicide Attackers of Nord-Ost: We Tear Off the Masks,” chapter 2 in “The Brides of Allah; The Identities and Fates of All the Widows of the Terrorists Blown Up in Russia,” 2003.

¹⁶ “Invisible War” Russia’s Abusive Response to the Dagestan Insurgency”, Human Rights Watch, July 18, 2015. “What Your Children Do Will Touch Upon You. Punitive House-Burning in Chechnya as Collective Punishment”, Human Rights Watch, July 2, 2009.

evacuated, the building was blown up in front of the relatives and civic activists who arrived at the site, and later it was declared that an explosive device inside it was disarmed¹⁷.

The predicament of militants' family members in Chechnya was worsened with the completion of the "Chechenization" of the conflict in 2003–2004, whereby authority in the republic was transferred to pro-Russian Chechen militias and local Chechens began performing law enforcement functions. After consolidating power, the incumbent leader Ramzan Kadyrov broadly applied the principle of collective responsibility and local security agencies arrested, took hostage, tortured, and burned the homes of militants' family members¹⁸. The prime targets were the families of men who had fought against Kadyrov's forces as part of the "Caucasus Emirate".

After the official end of the "counterterrorist operation" in Chechnya, the families were still in the spotlight. In 2016–2017, public expulsions of family members of killed militants from settlements were launched in Chechnya, supposedly on the basis of village assembly decisions, but in fact the authorities were behind them. The relatives of policemen who had been killed were incited to declare blood feuds against the relatives of the killed militants, appealing to the tradition of the vendetta but clearly subverting its rules¹⁹.

It was primarily men who were the targets of the repressions but women were also subject to psychological and physical coercion.

Today in all the North Caucasus regions, security forces treat the widows and wives of killed or imprisoned militants as a group at high risk of radicalization. They believe that the children of these militants might be susceptible to radicalization due to a desire to avenge their fathers. In recent years, the militants' family members have become the targets of increasingly active "prevention work" which is aimed at preventing radicalization. This prevention work basically amounts to monitoring the women's movements within Dagestan and to prophylactic talks in Chechnya, which will be detailed in chapter III of this report. In our view, preventing radicalization must first and foremost involve supporting these families, especially the children, to ensure that they successfully cope with the family crisis caused by their father's death or arrest, develop harmoniously and engage constructively in the life of the society.

¹⁷ "Dagestan: Security Forces Planned to Explode an IEDs in Dadaev's", Memorial Human Rights Center, February 21, 2014.

¹⁸ "Chechnya 2004: "New Counter Terror" Methods. Hostage-Taking and Repression Toward Relatives of Presumed Combatants", Memorial Human Rights Center, March 17, 200. "Chechnya: About 30 Villagers Tortured, Demanding that They Vilify Their Neighbors", Memorial Human Rights Center, July 28, 2017.

¹⁹ *The Vendetta (Chir) in Chechnya is strictly regulated. The relatives of one man killed can "take" one life from the killer's family. It should be either the killer or his closest male relative. If the killer has already been killed, no vendetta is declared. One therefore cannot declare a vendetta on an insurgent already killed.*

III. THE IMPACT OF THE LOSS OR LONG-TERM IMPRISONMENT OF A HUSBAND ON WIVES AND WIDOWS

This chapter will look into how the loss or long-term imprisonment of the husband affected the lives of the women we've interviewed. At the time of their spouses' detentions/deaths, the respondents we surveyed had been married anywhere from 3 months to 25 years. The respondents' pre-nuptial relationships began in different ways:

- marriage proposal by relatives;
- elopement;
- introduction through relatives and subsequent socializing that ended in marriage;
- introduction at events, through friends, in refugee camps, socializing, and subsequent marriage;
- a husband abducted one woman against her will;
- marriage in Syria arranged by third parties to a stranger.

All women who got married in the North Caucasus, except the one abducted by her husband, married for love. But even the woman who was abducted said that soon after the marriage she began to have feelings for her husband, eventually falling under his ideological influence, which greatly changed her outlook towards the authorities to one of hatred. The woman who entered into a sharia marriage in Syria says that she loved both of her now deceased husbands "as brothers," but married them under duress "in dirty rags, out of hopelessness."

According to the responds, the dead/convicted men all had some traits in common: a high religiosity and an ostensible lack of 'bad habits' (drinking, smoking, gambling, etc.). Despite some similarities, they exhibited variety in their patterns of behavior toward their wives and children. Some of the surveyed women spoke of a partnership in which they helped one another.

"He was calm, without ranting. He helped me with our little daughter. He got up at night all the time and rocked her — she was very fussy." Jannat, Ingushetia

"He loved his children insanely... very affectionate." — Hadija, Ingushetia

"He knew how to make money, to bargain. He had experience. He always tried to do more and more. He really enjoyed it. He even enjoyed helping his wife hang curtains... I could talk forever about my husband, what he was like to me, and still is, Inshallah." — Toita, Chechnya

In other cases, there were instances when relationships were built on domination and coercion. In Ingushetia, three respondents recalled episodes of physical and psychological coercion by their husbands and their relatives.

One of them told how, a month after the wedding, she was delayed at the university and

could not get home before dark. Her disgruntled husband and mother-in-law greeted her. Then, in the bedroom, where she had gone to change clothing, her husband reprimanded her for this and hit her several times. Returning to the kitchen, she tried to cheer up her mother-in-law's mood by telling her that she makes wonderful dough and suggested that they make varenniki [dumplings] together. In response her mother-in-law ordered her to wash her hands first, since she had come "after just playing with her husband's genitals". Then she had to wash her hands, make the varenniki, set the table, and serve the family.

One of the convicted husbands in Ingushetia was getting ready to take a second wife before his arrest, which very much upset our respondent.

In Chechnya, all the interviewees except the one who got married after abduction, described their husbands solely in positive terms. The latter reported feeling profound bitterness toward her husband and even hatred for what she and her children had to experience as a result of his actions for a long time after his death. But seven years later, after finally rebuilding her life, she said that she had "let it go" and the bitterness was gone.

Emotional and physical health

The overwhelming majority of interviewees said that the loss or arrest of their husbands greatly influenced their emotional and physical health. The women describe their state right after the loss as that of shock. They all depended on their husbands, both financially and psychologically; they all say that they did not know what to do next.

"At that time, I felt...totally lost to the whole world. I was still pregnant... I had a mental breakdown after my husband went missing. I was really nervous, I started shaking and have had trouble breathing ever since. I was under very great nervous stress. Until my baby was born, I cried almost every night. I cried when I was left alone." — Toita, Chechnya.

Right after it happened, the women felt empty, lost, depressed, sluggish, powerless, unneeded, and unable to eat, speak or move. Many women said that they had serious health problems; two developed eating disorders and lost a great deal of weight.

"A feeling as if my brain was frozen." — Aza, Ingushetia.

"For three days I couldn't even take a sip of water." — Madina, Ingushetia.

"At that moment, I couldn't say a word. I couldn't cook for the children. My mother-in-law helped me, she cooked, my relatives yelled at me 'At least take pity on the children!' I didn't eat and almost became dystrophic. I thought, he's starving, and here I am eating food." — Kamilla, wife of a convict, Dagestan.

Many women were pregnant when their husbands died, were kidnapped, or were arrested, which adversely affected their condition and the delivery:

"I was pregnant, I was under such stress, I had a very bad delivery, the baby was in the intensive care." — Madina, Dagestan

"When my husband disappeared, I was pregnant with twins. The stress really harmed my pregnancy. I lost almost 15 kilograms in two months. I fainted. The doctors even told

me to have an abortion... And afterwards I simply stopped talking. I even pushed away my little boys. I changed a lot, I thought I was going crazy. I felt as if the whole world had turned black. I had no interest in life. Nothing bothered me – the fact that I had to give birth, that I have children, that I was supposed to bring them up – none of this mattered. Only one feeling that my time has run out” – Hava, Chechnya

Raisat from Makhachkala lost her baby. The little girl died on the second day after her birth.

The wife of a convicted man from Chechnya explained that her pain has not gone away and that her mental state has not improved since her husband’s arrest 16 years ago. All of the women who have not remarried since their husbands’ death or detention spoke about this.

According to the interviewees:

“My condition has not changed since then. Nothing but a void. Now, I think, it’s even harder. There’s no one with whom I can share my joy or hurt.” – Zarina, Chechnya

“Since then I feel that the right side of my body, my right arm, is gone. What kind of state can a person who has no right arm be in?” – Karina, Chechnya

In Ingushetia, one respondent whose husband has been imprisoned for more than three years, said that her condition has only gotten worse. She also noted that she feels bad, but no one pays attention to her. She has a constant morbid fear for her children, which emerged after her husband’s detention. She is afraid to let them out of the house. The widow from Dagestan, also described her state as in “constant fear for her children.”

Some respondents said that the loss of their husbands completely “broke” them.

“I was totally broken. I’m floating with the current... For ten years I hoped (that he would be found), now I don’t hope.” – Maret, widow of a missing man, Grozny, Chechnya.

“As if my life is over, the meaning of life is lost.” – Gulizar, Khasavyurt, Dagestan.

One widow admitted that, after her husband died, she did not want to live anymore, and if someone back then had suggested that she blew herself up, she might have done so. The children kept her from this radical path. A year after her husband’s death this woman was able to leave Chechnya, and the ideas about death and destruction passed. *“When I left Chechnya, I calmed down: a different society, freedom, you do what you want, no one disturbs you or forces you to do anything. And as soon as I got out of [Chechnya], everything changed for the better for me.”*

For the majority of women, the arrest or death of their husband was a surprise.

A 22-year-old widow from Chechnya, whose husband left her pregnant with twins and went to Syria, said:

“This was a total surprise to me. Even when he left, I didn’t believe for a minute that he’d die. He was really looking forward to the children. He said, ‘God willing, I’ll have another

son.' *And two were born! He was planning to spend his life with me.*" — Hava, Chechnya

Other women were aware of what might happen to their husbands. Most often it was when the man was in hiding or, in the case of Chechnya, he was fighting on the side of the separatists. Zarina from Grozny said:

"The federals killed him on a federal highway and brought him to our village's district police station. I understood that they might kill him. Even when I got married, I realized that this might happen."

Another widow from Chechnya, whose husband attacked a district police station, said that, half a year after she got married, she started to notice that he was acting strangely. *"He'd tell me, 'Go to bed,' but would go out through the window and come back 3-4 hours later. I'd ask, 'Where were you?' but he wouldn't say. He'd change his clothes. He'd leave in some clothes and come back in others. He'd bring some sort of packages. Soon I understood everything. At first, I was terrified, horrified, I didn't understand what I was to do. I couldn't talk to anyone. That was taboo. My husband trained me that everything that happens inside of the house is secret. He beat me often and I kept quiet about that too. He said, 'if you say a single word to anyone, I'll show you'. Closer to the end, I realized how it would all end. He told his mother and sisters, 'You'll see what will happen to that police station, how they'll go flying into pieces'. He particularly hated that internal affairs office. They'd taken him and tortured him and his friends, they'd even rape men. I'm in no way justifying him, I'm just saying what was his reason.* — Satsita, Chechnya

According to the interviewees, relatives helped them most in adapting to their new reality. In Ingushetia, 57% cited the support of relatives (their own and/or their husband's); in Dagestan — 80 %, in Chechnya — 80 %.

"My mom and dad supported me the most. No one else. The children, naturally, but primarily my mom and dad."

The interviewees ranked their faith as second in importance:

"I'm very glad that I went through this with iman (faith). God gave me the patience to withstand, to survive all this... I never went to a psychologist. I needed no medications. When things are bad, we Muslims call on the Creator himself." — Hava, Chechnya

The wife of a disappeared man from Kaspiisk also said that she was helped by prayer and appeals to Allah, while among people her girlfriends supported her the most.

Raisat from Makhachkala said that psychologically she helps herself:

"Now there are a whole lot of books, everything is open. Google is the psychologist and Google is the imam."

She added that faith supported her too:

"And mom helped with the children: my mom is my main life partner."

The wives of convicts who maintained close relations with their husbands said that their spouses support them:

"I now get support from the fact that I visit him, that I see him, that I hear him, that he

says to me, *‘Inshallah, it will all pass. Allah is the witness of all and may he punish those who were truly guilty.’*” — Toita, Chechnya

Jobs helped many women get over their grief. A 22-year-old widow from Chechnya, whose husband went to Syria, said:

“That tragedy had a huge impact on my mental state... I cried day and night... I didn’t want to go outside, I didn’t want to see anyone, I didn’t want anyone to talk about him, to ask me about him... My mother told me, ‘You need to go to work to divert yourself.’ When I went to work at a store I began to change, I began to be out in public. I was taking my job very responsibly. And I somehow pushed this grief away from me.”— Hava, Chechnya

The widow from Kaspiysk said that she opened a small business after her husband was killed. This helped her start making a living and gradually adapt to her new realities.

Almost all the women said that responsibility for their children made them overcome their powerlessness and helplessness:

“I focused on self-preservation — I was pregnant... Then I focused on baby.” — Aisha, Ingushetia.

“The children put me back on my feet... [they became] the meaning of life... no time to think about him.” — Asya, Ingushetia.

Nine of the ten women interviewed in Chechnya live with their children. The child was taken away from one woman whose husband disappeared and was found killed much later. She lived with her husband’s relatives for three years after her husband’s disappearance, but her relationship with her mother-in-law became very difficult so she went back to her own family; when she did this, her mother-in-law took her son away from her²⁰.

This woman said that she found support in no one:

“No one supported me, in the literal sense of the word. To the contrary, my relatives blamed me for marrying him. His mother blamed me for marrying her son. There was no support. Now I am over it, but then it was very terrible.” — Madina, Chechnya

The mother-in-law of another widow also tried to take her children away, but her parents put up a fight for their grandchildren. “My mom battled for my children. My father also defended me. He said, ‘Don’t give them up, they’ll grow up just like their father.’ My father gave me a lot of support in this situation, although other relatives, uncles, came and demanded that we give the children to my mother-in-law. They said, ‘Who did she marry?! These aren’t our children; you need to give up these children and be done [with the relationship] with this family.’ They blamed me. In our culture even if a woman is not guilty (her relatives know that the girl was abducted by her husband) she’s still guilty.” — Satsita, Chechnya

In Dagestan all the mothers live with their children. One woman who returned from Syria lives with a daughter from her first marriage, but her son from her second marriage

²⁰ According to Chechen tradition, after a divorce or a husband’s death, children most often remain with the father’s family. It is believed that the child “belongs” to the father’s teip (clan) and that this clan is responsible for the child.

remained in Syria. Her second husband did not allow her to take the baby with her.

Another woman from Chechnya said that grief and the need to help her children get on their feet by herself hardened her and made her stronger:

“I see life like a dream. What is destined is what will be. I’ve reconciled myself. This doesn’t mean that I don’t want anything good, that I don’t want to live. It’s just that life is a dream, and nothing more. You can’t even blink and it’s all over. The fact that I went through everything that I did, that I survived all this, hardened me in a good sense. Not that I’ve become a brutal, hard-hearted person, but... I’ve become psychologically resilient.”

Not one of the women we interviewed in Chechnya went to a psychologist intentionally. Only one had experience interacting with a specialist, but only because her friend is a practicing psychologist. The woman says that it helped her, that she felt relief. The session was one-on-one and she understood the point of psychotherapy; according to her, if she’d gone to sessions with a therapist regularly, it would have helped her. Another widow – with a degree in psychology herself, said that it helped her greatly to overcome the trauma. Seven years after her husband was gone she believes that she has overcome her crisis through prayers and psychotherapeutic techniques.

In Dagestan only one widow (who returned from Syria) worked with a psychologist in preliminary detention center. She described this experience as extremely positive and said that she became very good friends with the psychologist.

“She called me a ‘terrorist princess.’ She always said, ‘oh, here’s my little terrorist.’ She grew to love me.”

In Ingushetia as well, only one respondent said that she received a psychologist’s help. Psychological help enabled her to come to terms with her husband’s sentence and to realize that life goes on. Before this professional analysis, the respondent woke up and fell asleep thinking about how to help her husband, who had been sentenced to 16 years.

In Chechnya all the interviewees reported that they needed psychological help. In Dagestan the women also said that they were very much in need of a psychologist, but the services of these specialists cost too much. Moreover, outside Makhachkala, in small towns qualified psychologists are nearly non-existent. Thus, Zaira, who was widowed at the age of 17, said:

“There was support from relatives, but it wasn’t enough for me. I lacked the opportunity of talking to someone, I couldn’t share it all with my parents. I shared with my girlfriends and with my sister, too. But I would have gladly gone to a psychologist, I’d have gone to anyone, I wouldn’t care whether they were Muslim or not.”

Asiyat from Dagestan described her self-help mechanisms in the following manner:

“There is such a huge stone on my heart. I have girlfriends, relatives, I can share with them superficially, but I can’t tell them everything. She’ll go tomorrow – and share it with this and that. I’d go to a psychologist, but you can’t find one here [small town], and it takes a lot of money. I love taking long-distance trains. You can befriend someone, tell them everything and then go away. Once a year I go to Moscow for treatment. I can’t wait for those trips.”

In Dagestan only one woman whose husband was convicted for participating in an illegal militant group, said that she wouldn't go to a psychologist:

“I wouldn't have gone to a psychologist; I wouldn't have wanted them to meddle. My condition depended on my husband's condition. If I knew that he was in trouble, it wouldn't be any better for me. When he became better, I was better. If he is having a bad time in prison (they sent him to a punishment cell, there are fights there), I feel down too, I suffer and go back into depression. But when I understood that he was OK, that he was no longer being tortured, I felt better.”— Zura, Dagestan.

Our interviews have thus shown that all the women experienced psychological trauma because of their husbands' murder, abduction, or long-term imprisonment. Many respondents explained how vulnerable they were in the aftermath of their husbands' death and described their condition as “life in a fog”, reporting that they “couldn't think reasonably” or “lived as if in a dream”. Most likely their psyche was not capable of coping with the shock of the trauma and the coping mechanism of disassociation was initiated whereby they perceived the developments of events around them as if they see them in their sleep.

The bereavement one feels for someone dear to them affects many aspects of a person's life. Feelings of loneliness, despair and apathy; feeling an inability to share one's suffering, a lack of understanding by the people around you, the loss of meaning in life, a lack of support, the lack of a desire to live, and even suicidal thoughts—all these conditions are very typical of the bereavement process. Numerous psychological studies assert that the loss of a spouse is one of the greatest stresses that a person can experience in life.

Nonetheless, a lot depends on the circumstances of the loss. The sudden death of the husband hit our respondents harder compared to, for instance, a death that was a result of a long and grueling illness. Plans for the future which were connected to the spouse, hopes and dreams, all collapsed in one moment. Moreover, the circumstances of the death of the husband led to the loss of certain social connections, feelings of stigma and shame, conflicts with relatives, problems related to guardianship of children, and even to feelings of isolation among the women. This is the fundamental difference between the widows of militants and, for example, widows of policemen who were killed on duty, who by the state and the majority of the society are perceived as heroes (they are decorated posthumously and their families receive condolences and support).

Usually the acute state of grief fades within one year and only a small number of people remain in it longer, which sometimes leads to mental disorders, debilitating depression, neurosis, phobias, and psychosomatic illnesses, all of which affect not only the quality of life, but can also reduce lifespan. Psychologists claim that women strongly dependent on their husbands are inclined to experience higher levels of anxiety for extended periods of time²¹.

Most of our respondents felt that they “got trapped” in their trauma—it remains with them for many years and, their condition is not improving, which is affecting their physical health.

Obviously without proper psychological help many of our respondents will remain in an extremely vulnerable situation for a long time. The help of relatives was and is the greatest support that the women received; next in importance was their faith, which indicates that

²¹ “Grief, Loneliness, and Losing a Spouse”, *Psychology Today*, March 16, 2015.

professional psychological help combined with theological support would be beneficial to women who wish to receive it. Counsel by women with higher religious education and adhering to moderate views in Islam could be important during this time of life crisis.

Life Essentials

The death or long-term imprisonment of the husband turned women into the main or only breadwinners, who now had to assume responsibility for providing for the household and caring for the children.

36% of the women interviewed in Ingushetia have a permanent job (they work in a shop or have their own small business); 43% don't have any employment, largely because they are taking care of their children or their children are seriously ill. Two women have unstable income — they wash dishes at weddings or are trying to set up a hijama (therapeutic cupping) office. In Dagestan two women are working (in a canteen), three have their own shops; the rest are not working but are taking care of their children.

Zaira who widowed at the age of 17 said:

“I have an online shop — a small business, it really helped me out... When I had the baby, a lot of people gave me money as gifts, I saved it and decided to sell things on Instagram. I didn't like to keep begging money from my parents, and I had to raise my son. Now I sell Islamic clothing. The business is growing, it really helps me out. After all it brings some income and keeps me occupied; I am diverted from other thoughts and focus on my work.”
— Zaira, Kaspiysk, Dagestan.

After her husband was abducted, Aida from Dagestan was left with two children — aged 2 years and 4 months. She explained that she earns some cash by sewing cloths and her mother helps her with money as well.

In Chechnya only half of the women have an opportunity to earn money. Four of the interviewees have a higher education. The majority of working women in Chechnya admitted that what they make is not enough for them. In Dagestan, two of the four who have their own incomes said that they are barely making ends meet.

Many women said that official employment in the public sector (which accounts for most of the employment in the region) was closed to them. In Chechnya one of the widows said that she lost her new job because of her husband.

“I got a job at a new kindergarten as a speech therapist and psychologist. The head of the kindergarten didn't know what happened to my husband. I worked tirelessly there for two weeks, cleaned up, and arranged my office, getting ready for the school opening. One day I saw a Russian-speaking man approaching and he started asking questions... I was immediately on guard. Then a couple of days later the head calls me in and says, ‘I don't want to upset you, but a commission came and said, “How could you let that woman in the door!” I have to fire you.’ I burst into tears; I had never felt so insulted as the way they demeaned me. This had a huge impact on me, I feel ill when I remember that incident. At that time that job meant everything to me. As soon as I was hired there, I forgot my tragedy. I forgot my husband and thought only about the children, I realized that life goes on. But they didn't give me a chance.” Satsita, Chechnya

Women who are not working live mostly on survivor benefits, help from relatives, their parents' pensions, and one-time help from outsiders who know that their children are growing up without a father. One respondent, who has six children, has been living on both her own pension and that of her disabled sister ever since her husband was imprisoned in 2004. In Ingushetia almost all of the interviewees admitted that they receive help in the form of small donations from private individuals or charitable foundations. This apparently indicates that there is less pressure on charitable foundations helping these women in that republic.

"Once a man came and brought 20,000 rubles. I wept for a long time. Sometimes they brought meat, clothing." — Madina, Ingushetia.

In Dagestan an activist who helps widows with food said that she is constantly in the crosshairs of the security services, her telephone is tapped, and they put her on the preventive watch list. The charitable initiative she works for helps over 700 families in Dagestan.

"We give them food once every six months. Four packages of flour, four kilograms of pasta, two bottles of oil, sugar, a package of buckwheat groats, a package of barley and farina, and potatoes, onions and beets. And we organize parties for orphans. A lot of women are living in hardship. Some of them go to live in the villages, they are going away, leaving small children, and go to do cleaning at nights. A lot of them are orphans themselves. Some get no help from their parents. They say, 'You shouldn't have married a husband like that,' and reject them. They have to survive," the activist explained.

In Ingushetia the working women we interviewed also said that they mostly leave their small children with relatives (mothers, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law) or alone because until recently the availability in the kindergartens had been very limited²². One respondent, who had six children when her husband was kidnapped and disappeared, had to quickly return to work and asked the neighbors to keep an eye on her children.

Most of the interviewees don't have their own homes and therefore must stay with relatives. In Ingushetia more than half of the respondents live with relatives: 21% with their own families — with brothers, brothers' families, and unmarried sisters; 43% of respondents with their husbands' parents and other relatives. A little more than one-third of the women have their own homes that are either not finished, are now being built, or were built with relatives' support.

Only two of the interviewees in Chechnya and one in Dagestan have their own homes. The rest live with their husbands' relatives or with their own parents.

"I'm living with my parents. My son and I have a separate bedroom, but we share a kitchen [with my parents]. My father and mother help us with food. But I work, and we live on my income. I'd sell something, I'd buy something, [so I have] my own earnings. But it's not enough. Sometimes I borrow money, finagle somehow.. Especially because my child is now a teenager, in 11th grade — tutors, sports, and so on, we need a lot..." — Hava, Chechnya.

"Most of all we need housing. I'd want my son to have it. I'm not getting any help from the government or private organizations. Just, once a year the Ministry of Labor distributes a package of rice and something else. People help. Especially in the month of Ramadan."

²² *The situation has somewhat improved as a result of implementation of the targeted federal program of support for socio-economic development of the Republic Ingushetia in 2010-2016.*

People give charity; on the day when the end of the fast is celebrated they donate money; this really helps us. After that holiday we usually go to the clinic to have my son's checkup. If anything is left, we buy him something small. This happens once a year." — Zarina, Chechnya

In Ingushetia, the interviewees cited housing as what they needed most; improved living conditions were also mentioned as some women are living in dilapidated houses without basic appliances. One woman in Ingushetia acknowledged that her family's greatest need is to pay for her child's treatment and medicines. Women who have older children who have finished school cite primary needs such as money for buying books and clothes for school and money to pay for local transportation for college students to attend lectures. Kindergarten costs were also mentioned.

Only one of the women interviewed in Ingushetia and three in Dagestan said that they have no special needs — that they and their children have everything they need.

In the Chechen republic half of the interviewees are in one way or another receiving social security survivor benefits from the government. Two of the interviewees were denied benefits because their spouses participated in combat, despite the fact that such denial is illegal. Another woman reported that she was not eligible for any benefits because her husband is alive, even though he is serving a life sentence. However, another wife of a sentenced man was receiving the same benefits.

In Dagestan and Ingushetia all the mothers of underage children are getting survivor benefits of 7,800 rubles (around 130 USD) per child. Some widows are receiving benefits for themselves as well²³.

Access to employment and the ability to generate income are crucially important for the successful rehabilitation of the family and for its members to get their lives back on track after the loss of the husband and father. The unofficial ban on employment in the state-funded institutions for widows of fighters is not only illegal, but also counter-productive; it does not let an affected family find its new way in life and is instead contributing to their 'trauma trap'.

Access to services, relations with relatives and society

In general, the women we interviewed did not face a denial of services from medical, educational, or other organizations because their husbands had been killed or arrested. There was an instance in Ingushetia where one of the respondents was peremptorily denied admission of her child into the first grade at the school near their home ostensibly because there were no vacant places, although she later learned that children continued to be accepted there. This may have been caused by financial reasons more than the attitude towards the family (corruption).

Another respondent said that she had a hard time obtaining her child's birth certificate, and the registry office employee remarked over the telephone, "Why are all the criminal children coming to us?" Yet another respondent reported that when she tried to enroll her children in preschool, they told her that because her husband was a militant, they wouldn't give them places in the preschool. In Chechnya, the head of the preschool asked one respondent "in an apologetic tone" to remove her children from the institution, but later allowed them to attend unofficially, asking the mother not to show her face there, but for the grandfather or

²³ Amounts in USD are calculated based on the rates at the time of the interview

grandmother to pick up the children. In Dagestan none of the women we interviewed were denied medical or educational services.

Respondents' relationships with relatives after their husbands' death, disappearance, or imprisonment developed in different ways. For the overwhelming majority of women, relatives (their own and their husbands') were their anchors and primary sources of support.

The women's relatives most often helped with childcare, money and a place in their homes. Most often they are the ones who help the women build a house or pay school-related expenses. In Ingushetia only one respondent had problems in her relationship with relatives, but difficulties began when she got married. The woman's relatives considered her husband a Wahhabi²⁴; so, after he was arrested and convicted, they continuously reminded her of the possible consequences of her marriage. The respondent has now reduced her interactions with relatives to attending weddings and funerals. A similar situation unfolded in the family of one widow from Chechnya:

"They always reproached me and called me a divorcee. They said it's my fault that my life turned out this way because I picked such a husband for myself. They called my husband a Wahhabi. My female relatives would mostly say this, the men were better. Strangers said nothing, but my own relatives did."

Another woman in Chechnya mentioned that at some point her relatives stopped interacting with her. All the rest say that their relatives' attitude toward them has not changed.

Relationships with the husbands' families also varied. In Ingushetia half of the women interviewed said that their husband's relatives gave them moral and financial support. Where relationships with the husbands' families are difficult now, in most cases they were strained well before his death or arrest.

In Chechnya roughly half of the interviewees had good relationships with their husbands' relatives while the rest reported bad ones. One of the widows, as stated above, left her husband's relatives for her father's house, so her husband's family took her son away, and her mother-in-law did everything she could to prevent the mother and son from meeting.

"The three years I spent in my mother-in-law's house were dreadful. I couldn't go and see my parents. She [the mother-in-law] didn't let me out with my son, but after leaving him, I didn't even want to go[back] for a day. I thought that they'd take him from me. So, I didn't go. She (the mother-in-law) told my son, 'I'm your mother, and she (me) is Madina.' This was when he was only learning to talk...Once my uncle took me back to my father's house, he didn't let me back. My husband's relatives took the boy and I remained at home. After this they sometimes would let me see [my son] but only with difficulty. Then my mother-in-law asked me to sign a waiver that I was abandoning my son in order to get pension for him. I refused her, of course. But since they never let me see him, I haven't seen him for three years. The last time I saw him was in 2016. I went to his school, and he ran away from me. His grandmother, my former mother-in-law, is training him. I remarried after 13 years and she tells him that your mother abandoned you to get married." — Madina, Grozny.

²⁴ Wahhabism is a religious-political strand in Islam named after the spiritual leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), which emerged in the 18th century. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab considered that true Islam was practiced only by the first three generations of followers of Prophet Muhammad and he advocated against all the subsequent innovations. The authorities and security services in the North Caucasus consider the followers of this movement to be extremists, even though the movement is officially not banned in Russia

The problem of depriving mothers the right to raise their children in Chechnya and Ingushetia goes beyond the focus of this report and requires separate research and a systematic policy within the framework of the Russian law. Here we can only note that this problem seriously affects the condition of women, who lost their husbands or whose husbands were sentenced to long prison terms.

For the most part, there were no serious conflicts with the community or neighbors because of what happened. In Ingushetia only one respondent mentioned that right after her husband's murder people said bad things about him and called him a terrorist. In Chechnya only one respondent had a conflict because her husband participated in the insurgency. According to the widow, a woman in her village blamed her husband, arguing that because of him this woman's brother joined the insurgency in the 2000s.

"A few months after my husband's murder she came up to me and said: 'So how do you like being a widow? How is life treating you now?' She was openly gloating," said Zarina.

According to another respondent in Chechnya, after her husband blew himself up, she felt that the attitude toward her changed. "Among neighbors, villagers at the bus stop. They didn't say hello, they turned away, my girlfriends didn't come to see me. So, I left, I couldn't live there. I felt like an outcast." She explained this attitude toward her by the fact that her husband was a suicide bomber:

"Self-destruction is suicide, and it's forbidden in Islam. When a man is just fighting, a lot of people treat him as a defender of his homeland, but once he blew himself up, he became a radical, people saw him as a radical." — Satsita, Chechnya.

Another woman said that she noticed that her neighbors did not want to socialize right after her husband disappeared, but this passed after some time. None of the other women complained of mistreatment from society. Quite the opposite: it seems like the society treats them with pity, sees them as victims, and is trying to help. In Ingushetia most of the respondents said that the people around them sympathize and sometimes try to give them goods for free, or do not take payment for children's courses. Widows in Dagestan also emphasized the support and sympathy of neighbors and acquaintances.

"I always felt this support, because my husband was such a sociable person... Everyone knew that he might come to the aid of anyone without ulterior motives. So, there was never anything negative toward me." — Zaira, Dagestan.

Aida, whose husband was taken by the security forces in the courtyard of their building in front of many neighbors and later disappeared, said that the neighbors began treating her better:

"The ones who didn't say hello before began to do so. People supported me. If today they don't believe that the innocent are kidnapped, when they encounter such cases themselves, they start to believe. And more and more people believe."

Toita from Chechnya, whose husband was sentenced to life in prison, said that the attitude towards her changed after her husband's arrest, but not for long:

The society and authorities should not forget that widows and children of fighters are not responsible for their husbands' deeds. Oftentimes the stigmatization of such families is not only the outcome of internal social cleavages and consequences of armed conflict, but is

a result of the actions of the security services and politicians, as well as the result of biased coverage of security issues in the media. Objective and nuanced reporting about families of fighters, reportages and stories of what they have to go through, could contribute to more tolerant attitudes towards them in the society.

Personal growth

The death and long-term imprisonment of husbands had a varying effect on opportunities for personal growth and self-fulfillment among the women we interviewed. In Ingushetia one-third of the interviewees had no plans to work, even if their husbands were nearby. One respondent said that the imprisonment/death of her husband limited her ability to spend time with the children, to support them, and to give them a good education. She had grand plans. She graduated from school with top honors and was in her last year of law school when, in 2012, her husband was killed in a special force's operation. The woman had to miss a lot of classes; she was expelled and then could not be reinstated. One-fifth of respondents said that the death/long-term imprisonment of a husband had no influence on opportunities for their personal development.

The majority of working women in Chechnya doubt that if their husbands were alive or free they would have worked or gotten an education. Specifically, they say, if their husbands were with them they would not want to work.

Hava from Chechnya believes that she would have had a career if it had not been for her husband's arrest and long imprisonment:

“My husband's arrest influenced my opportunities in the sense that I lost almost ten years of my life simply running from prison to prison and to different institutions in Pyatigorsk and Volgograd. I could not have gotten a full-time job or done anything on my own. I often think about what I would've done had I not lost the most important time, when we can do something when we are young. But I didn't want to be tormented by a feeling of guilt for abandoning [my husband's case] and deciding that I'd better live my own life.” — Hava, Chechnya.

Aisha from Makhachkala feels the same way. She has two degrees: a higher pedagogical and secondary medical one. Now she dedicates all her time to educating three children: she takes them to after-school activities and sports training, helps them study languages and do homework. She has no time for her own development:

“I'd really like to see myself as a successful working woman. I'd like to realize my potential... I like medicine more than teaching. I'd want to advance further in that field.”

Relations with the imprisoned husbands

In Ingushetia two of the seven wives of convicts have never gone to visit their husbands because of a lack of funds, although they very much want to. Three women mentioned that the Red Cross was a tremendous help in making it possible for them to visit their husbands in prison. The International Red Cross's Family Visit Program was launched in January 2005 to help the relatives of citizens detained and incarcerated because of armed conflicts in the

North Caucasus maintain family ties²⁵.

Because these convicts are often sent to prisons a considerable distance from the North Caucasus republics, many of their relatives do not have the resources to go and see them. In Ingushetia one of the interviewees visited her husband only once during seven years in prison. Four of the five women who did visit were also able to take one child to see their father.

Some 90% of the interviewees now maintain telephone contact with their imprisoned husbands. Some of the husbands can afford a video call two or three times a day, but there are those who have spoken only two or three times during their entire imprisonment (more than three years). During the transfer to prison, which takes several months, the women have no contact at all with their husbands and no information about them. Some prisoners are allowed to call from a pay phone for 10–15 minutes only once or twice a month. The imprisoned husbands who call from cell phones hide this from the prison administrations, since they are regularly put in isolation for this violation.

For the majority of the interviewees, their relationship with their imprisoned husbands has not changed or has changed for the better. They became closer and more caring.

“My relationship with my husband has not changed. We’ve only begun to love one another more.” – Madina, Nazran.

“The distance makes us closer. Our relationship changed for the better. After he was convicted, he told me, ‘I let you go, if you want to live your life, you can get married.’ In Islam this is what he had to say to me so that I would decide for myself. But I’ve been waiting for him, and I’ll wait. We have three sons, how could I not wait? He appreciates this. And because that’s the way he is, I’ll keep waiting.” – Safia, Chechnya.

“He really appreciates it. He knows that he needs us. He’s afraid of saying something that would hurt”. – Toita, Grozny.

In Ingushetia the women describe their husbands’ situation in prison as complicated. Some said that during the investigations their husbands were tortured, lost their hair and teeth, had their eyes gouged out, and had broken ribs that healed improperly. One of the respondents told of how she accumulated the money that different people had given her as aid to send 85,000 (1,415 USD) rubles to her husband so that he could have his teeth replaced, which he lost as a result of torture. Another said that the prison where her husband is being held is considered a ‘showcase’, and the housing conditions and the attitude of the staff of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate there are humane.

In Chechnya two of the three respondents whose husbands are serving sentences maintain contact with them and go for long visits. One of them said that she does not lose hope that her husband will be freed, although he is serving a life sentence.

The second stopped visiting her husband three years ago. She admits that as far as she is concerned her husband is merely the father of her child, “he is a stranger to me.” She explains the change in attitude by the fact that she gave up on her husband, stopped waiting, and accepted that he will never get out of prison. Both women cite about the same amount of

²⁵ “Head of the ICRC Delegation in the RF: Whom We Are Helping in the Northern Caucasus”, *Interfax*, March 13, 2017.

money they have to spend on one prison visit: 60,000 to 70,000 rubles (1,000-1,150 USD). They gather this money with relatives' help or borrow it. Two received help from the Red Cross. The women have no difficulties with law enforcement or relatives when they visit prison.

Chechen women describe their husbands' situation in prison as harsh. One says that previously her husband was often sent to administrative segregation. She says that he often complained of torture. "At his request we even sent a lawyer to see him, we made an arrangement with a human rights organization in Moscow, since he complained that he was being tortured," says the woman. She thinks that this is happening because her husband is serving his sentence in a maximum-security prison.

The second woman says that her husband's conditions changed after they changed his form of custody, from special to general.

In Dagestan a prisoner's wife said that she goes to visit regularly, is constantly in contact, and is very much waiting for his return. She always tries to keep up with what is happening with her husband and takes any of his problems in prison very hard.

Interactions with law enforcement agencies

The attitude of law enforcement agencies toward militants' widows and wives varies from republic to republic. The situation is most favorable to them in Ingushetia: in our interviews there we did not document any flagrant violations, security forces largely conducted questioning and investigations within the framework of the law. One-third of respondents in the republic had no interactions with law enforcement agencies after their husbands' arrest/murder. The rest said that these interactions amounted to visits by law enforcement officers with general questions, orders to conduct home searches, or demands that they come to the military base, city internal affairs office, or Center for Combat on Extremism for interviews or fingerprinting and DNA tests. Only one woman said that Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel put pressure on her.

The fairly favorable climate that militants' wives and children are experiencing in Ingushetia can be explained by the attitude towards the problem of preventing radicalization of Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, who was the head of the republic in 2008–2019. In 2017 the issue of rehabilitation of militants' family members was named as a priority in Ingushetia. Ingush authorities announced the establishment of a Coordinating Council consisting of members of youth organizations, which was supposed to work with families of militia members. The republic's first Community Council for work with militants' relatives and victims of the conflict was formed in February 2017²⁶. Admittedly, the media later reported no information about the activities of these public entities; they turned out to be 'stillborn' organizations. Nevertheless, the attitude of support, not repression, sent important signals to both society and the security agencies.

The situation in Chechnya is much less favorable, which is predictable given the intensity and protracted character of the armed conflict. While Chechnya has no preventive watch list of citizens in the "at risk group", each police chief has his own list of families to monitor.

²⁶ *Ingushetia will establish a Youth Council to socialize militants' family members 1.2017, www.ingushetia.ru. Ingushetia has formed a Council to socialize families of participants in and victims of armed conflicts. February 14, 2017. www.ingushetia.ru*

Young people are tracked and regularly picked up by police officers and security agencies; and the children of former militants who have grown up are “put on notice” and “worked on.” Women are also monitored; some are not approached, but others are frequently called in for questioning and followed, their phones are tapped, and some have been pressed hard in an effort to recruit them for permanent cooperation or to provide information against someone else.

In Chechnya a woman whose husband was killed in Syria says that until recently she was often called to the district police station, the prosecutor’s office, and the district FSB office. The woman claims that security agencies called her in every day, even when she was in her last month of pregnancy.

“They asked whether my husband had contacted me, what kind of questions he asked me, whether I knew when he left or of his plans to leave. Even after they said that he was gone (slain), they also asked me to come in. They came to see me, asking whether it was true, whether it was certain, or maybe he was alive? But now they know for sure because he is on the list of the deceased. He used to be on the list of disappeared. Now they have ... more or less quieted. They don’t bother me. They used to come to my work, to my home, and knock on the door... I always had to fill out some questionnaires, to write some statements. Always the same thing: when did he leave, when did he arrive, when was the last time he contacted you. They even said that they were fed up with it themselves, but the bosses above demand it. But they were never rude or insulting.” — Hava, Grozny, Chechnya.

A respondent whose husband is serving a life sentence talks about the psychological pressure that an investigator put her under when he was investigating her husband’s case. He made her sign some papers and yelled at her. Other women both in Chechnya and in Dagestan spoke of similar situations during investigations.

Another widow in Chechnya, whose husband was killed 13 years ago, said that they have recently started calling her into the district internal affairs office. They also have preventive conversations with her about how she should be raising her son.

“They say, have educational talks with your children. Watch that they don’t slip off the road. They called my son and me into the office twice, and they often call in my mother-in-law and my husband’s brother. They took them to the cemetery, the FSB calls them in. When they invited me without my son in, they told me not to tell my son about his father. They said that I shouldn’t say that his father fought, that he was a courageous man. Instead I was supposed to say that his father was wrong, was misled, and you shouldn’t do as he did... They said, watch whom they interact with, where they go. They don’t want us to tell our children that they should be like their fathers.” — Zarina, Chechnya.

“You shouldn’t tell him that his father was a hero,” — another respondent quotes security officials.

The situation of a widow whose husband was a suicide bomber and killed himself and three security service employees was worse. She said that after her husband committed this act of terrorism her life turned into hell:

“I was constantly followed. They saw me as a potential threat, they set my mother-in-law and my husband’s relatives against me, saying that I’d do the same as my husband [blow myself up], that I was getting ready to join my husband. But since he had gone [joined

the insurgency], I never had any contact with him or with those [other militants].

At first some people from various agencies came to my house every day, they interrogated me, from a criminal investigation, the investigative committee, FSB, district internal affairs office. The investigative committee, the district internal affairs office, they just questioned me, they had to have a report in the file. But the FSB guy wanted information from me [about militants, radicals, and other widows]. He pressured me, threatened, asked provocative questions, he rattled my entire nervous system. He said, 'If you're a militant's widow, you're also in jihad...you know everything...' He came several times a week, then two or three times a month. He was Russian. He said that he would follow me my entire life. 'You know everything, you chose this path yourself, you'll have problems your whole life, and your children will have problems too'... I was already in shock at that time, and then these guys came, piled on, and hounded me and my relatives. It was unbearable." — Satsita, Chechnya.

That same woman told how a security officer tried to recruit her a few months after her husband's death.

"A few months after I was widowed, one of them began bringing me flash drives, different photos connected with my husband. He came and empathized with his mother, but at the same time he tried to win my trust. This was the period when I was interested in everything about my husband, any information. He said, 'I can help you recover his body²⁷, you'll be able to reburial him.' He got my number from my mother-in-law and began texting. 'I was impressed by you at the interrogation, let's see each other, let's get together,' and he'd casually ask about this one or that one. He'd send photographs, 'Do you know him?'"

She said that several widows she knows encountered the same situation.

"And I know two or three women who experienced the same thing. After the husband's death a security officer tried to romance her, paid her a lot of attention, supported her, gave her gifts, and did his best to become intimate with her, but once he got what he wanted, he blackmailed her to get information. I feel very sorry for these women. It's the most vulnerable period for a widow, she's at a loss, she doesn't know that to do, if someone pays attention to her and is kind, she will follow such a person. And the security services were taking advantage of this." — Satsita, Chechnya.

The remaining interviewees in Chechnya did not complain of problems with law enforcement. As a result, it was impossible to identify any general trends in how security agencies in Chechnya treat different categories of widows. The women who talked about problems with law enforcement have nothing in common. One's husband was sentenced in 2001; the second in 2003; the third died in 2005; the fourth in 2012, and the fifth was slain in Syria in 2016. Identifying broader trends in law enforcement approaches requires surveying a larger number of women.

When planning the report, we assumed that the attitudes towards women whose husbands were slain at the beginning of the second war by federal security forces and whose husbands later fought against the Chechen police would differ. This assumption was

²⁷ According to Federal law 205 "On Fighting Terrorism" terrorists' bodies are not released to relatives for burial. They are buried in unmarked graves.

partially confirmed. Obviously, security forces are persecuting less severely the women whose husbands were slain or imprisoned in the 2000s. In this period, armed conflict was between federal and Chechen separatists, while the pro-Kremlin paramilitaries played a secondary role. In 2003 the Chechenization of conflict was launched, whereby the pro-Kremlin Chechen armed groups, such as the security service led by Ramzan Kadyrov, started to play a leading role in combat on the insurgency. This is when the collective responsibility principle started to be applied. By 2008 when nearly all security agencies and armed groups were under the control of people from Kadyrov's inner circle, the collective responsibility principle became the key approach to combatting the insurgency.

But by no means did all of the women whose husbands fought against federal forces evade the security agencies' "attention," and not all of the wives of militants who fought against Kadyrov's forces come under pressure. A woman whose husband and brother were detained and sentenced to long prison terms in 2001, during the active phase of Chechen separatists' opposition to federal forces, said that back then, whenever she turned onto her street to go home, she would have only one thought, "I hope their vehicles aren't here." But the security forces' vehicles showed up almost every day.

"Both locals and federal agents broke into the house. The local policeman came, investigators came and followed. They really made us nervous." — Safia, Chechnya.

One of the women we interviewed, who knew many widows, believes that the higher the husband's position in the underground hierarchy, the harsher were the methods applied to their widows. She believes that women who actively supported the jihadist insurgency experienced harsher repression:

"I know one woman, they knocked her head against the wall, then beat her and humiliated her, then kept her for six months at the sixth department [counter-extremism department], in a lockup, then in prison for another half a year. She was married for only a week, but she went to see her husband 'in the forest' [in the insurgency camp] and spent a week with him there. Now she has major mental health problems."

We were, however, unable to talk to such women.

We also came to the conclusions that much depends on the specific local official. According to a human rights defender from Chechnya,

"A lot depends on the municipal district head. One says, 'Take away their pensions, take away everything! We feed them and they're killing our guys!' but others take it in stride. The situation and decisions by minor local officials often determine a specific widow's life."

It is important to note that half of the women we interviewed in Chechnya did not complain of security forces' illegal actions. These women may have suffered less from the security forces because in Chechnya it was the men in the family who were victimized far more often.

In the last few years relatives of those who recently participated in attacks or, authorities believe, recruited residents to participate in terrorist attacks are usually subject to repression by the authorities in this republic. At present almost all of them are young people, sometimes even teenagers. While searching for respondents, we discovered that it was hard to find widows of men recently slain in Chechnya: almost none of them were married. Their families

face reprisals, but it is usually the men.

In Dagestan widows are under the most pressure because of the extensive use of the so-called “preventive watchlist”, or profuchet. The registration of citizens into the profuchet as “extremists” (or “religious extremists” or “followers of Wahhabism”) has been in practice since 2015, becoming a large-scale phenomenon when upwards of 16,000 people were placed on the list. According to Memorial Human Rights Center, most of the people registered adhere to the Salafi strand in Islam, but oftentimes individuals can be put on the list completely arbitrarily. The absolute majority of the registered individuals have never been charged with any criminal offences and security services do not accuse them of committing any crimes.

Preventive registration seriously affects the rights of the citizens: they are regularly called in or detained and brought to police stations, forced to write explanatory statements, they are fingerprinted, photographed, and their DNA, voice and gait tests taken. Police officers demand that the registered people inform them about their movements outside their settlement of residence or republic, and frequently detain them at checkpoints.

Moreover, according to Memorial, even after a local policeman has been informed about the trip, the registered individual can be taken off a plane or train anyway. Their houses are often visited and searched by the police and getting a job in the public sector and at times in private companies is nearly impossible. A citizen is registered to profuchet for an extended period of time (up to 50 years) and is not informed about the grounds for such registration or what can be done to be de-registered.

In 2016 the human rights community gave a strong public reaction to this practice and the citizens who found themselves registered massively appealed to courts, demanding explanations for the reason they were put on the registration lists. As a result, the head of the Interior Ministry of Dagestan, Abdulrasheed Magomedov in his response to a written inquiry by the Supreme Court of Dagestan stated that the preventive registration is no longer practiced in Dagestan. Human rights defenders and our respondents, however, claim that the list in de facto still exists²⁸.

According to one lawyer who works a great deal on cases involving militias and terrorism, *“They don’t leave them alone, they give them blood tests, saliva tests, and gait tests. ‘I won’t come!’ – ‘If you don’t come, I’ll send a police car and haul you into the station at night.’ This is the practice from the south of Dagestan to Khasavyurt. We make an official inquiry; they say that they don’t keep any watchlists. But they do, on the sly. At a checkpoint they can take you off the bus to another town. They try not to hire the ones who are covered [in hijabs] at government institutions. If they find out that a woman is on a watchlist, she loses her job. They put children – the most precious thing a mother has is her child – on the watchlist to take away parental rights. This is still going on, although they’ve let it up a little recently for some reason.”* – Israfil Gadadov, attorney, Dagestan.

The wife of a man who disappeared three years ago after detention by security agencies said:

“They put us on a watchlist. A week after my husband was abducted, they called me to the station and asked, ‘Where do you think your husband is.’ I was distraught, I wasn’t

²⁸ “Dagestan: illegal prevention registration and combat on it”, Memorial Human Rights Center, April 11, 2019. More materials can be found here: <https://memohrc.org/ru/tags/postanovka-na-profilakticheskiy-uchet>

thinking straight. He interrogated me; demanded to know the children's full names. They took pictures... A month later [after the husband disappeared] they conducted a search. Then they came once every three or four months. They called... They are impassive when they come. My mother-in-law yells at them, curses them for abducting her son. But they stay silent. I even ask them, 'How much valerian [tranquilizer] have you taken before you came here?' They come and check whether I'm at home. Or the district office calls my mother-in-law or father-in-law and asks where I am. Someone came, asked for my passport, checked it, and left. One came nearly every week. Once my mom found out that he was coming, she went to the head of the office and said, 'Why are you tormenting her, she's already a nervous wreck.' They told her, 'She should focus on her children, no one will torment her.' — Aida, Dagestan.

Almost all of the women we interviewed said that that there was no coordination among the police who were monitoring them:

"One time one invites me, another time another does. One day one calls, the next day another does. You can't figure out who is calling. They ask exactly the same questions." — Kamilla, Dagestan.

The widows report that their children are also on the watchlist:

"My children are also on the list. A juvenile inspector came, she called me to the office to come with documents and birth certificates. They [juvenile inspectors] sometimes come and ask, 'can we help you with anything'. Again, they called me to the administration and asked whether I need help. I told them that we don't need anything. If we'd take their help, they'd think that we were a problematic family and they'd always be checking on the children." — Zarema, Dagestan.

Many interviewees believe that their children are being watched so that, should the opportunity arise, they as mothers would lose parental rights. But we know of no cases when parental rights were taken away in these situations. In 2016, when the authorities in Dagestan and the Islamic Spiritual Board of Muslims announced the establishment of a boarding school for the socialization and adjustment of the children of slain militants²⁹, many mothers began to panic. They were afraid that their children would be taken away and forcibly placed in that institution. Fortunately, there were a lot of critics of the idea of establishing a boarding school³⁰ and it was dropped.

According to one official responsible for interacting with these families in southern Dagestan, since 2017 the authorities have been paying a lot of attention to making sure that the children of slain militants receive a secondary education. In northern Dagestan, the principal of one of the schools told us that municipal authorities are in recent years trying to assign the children of former militants to the district's best schools, where they will be given the requisite attention.

All the women say that they are nervous and angry about the continuous monitoring and surveillance by law enforcement. And attempts to identify and keep their children under surveillance makes them furious.

²⁹ "What to Do with Militants' Children?", *Kavkaz. Realii*, December 27, 2016.

³⁰ "Dagestan Is Opening an Orphanage for the Children of Slain Militants and Security Forces. Why?", *Meduza*, December 29, 2016.

“After my husband was killed, they put me on a watchlist but didn’t tell me at the time. At school a teacher told me, ‘You’re on a watch list.’ Then they started coming, they came every week. They came to school. They interviewed the neighbors, they shamed me. They came and searched every two months and tried to take a blood sample from me. All of the officers were in masks. Whenever they came, I got really nervous. I tell them, ‘You killed a person and now you are destroying me and my children mentally! You show up and I get nervous. We want to forget, to live quietly from now on!’ I sent my child to first grade on the first of September, and on the fifth of September a juvenile inspector went to the teacher and asked for a character reference for the child! The child had just started school! I rushed there and said, ‘You deprived the child of his father and now you’re depriving him of a peaceful life! My child does very well in class, he’s on the second or third grade level... what do you want from him?!” — Aisha, Dagestan.

Many widows and children endured serious psychological trauma during the searches and detentions of their men. The women said that during those searches the security offices pointed guns at the children, swore, and pushed the women; they also talked about the security officers’ verbal attacks:

“After they killed him, they did a search, my child was ten years old, and he still wets the bed. They stood and pointed their guns at the children. And after his death they often came to search. Half a year passed, and they came and asked, ‘Is he home?’ They come in with their shoes on, all in a jam. I told them, ‘Why don’t three people come in and check.’ They told me, ‘Shut your mouth, who are you to dictate to us.’ One of them said, ‘What are you doing here, go to your Syria!’ That was in 2015. I lost my temper and said to them, ‘Who gave you the right to come into my house, to behave rudely, and say all sorts of things?’ They looked around, the house was clean, there was nothing there, so they left. Then one held back and said, ‘Don’t react that way, don’t get upset. They’re provoking you on purpose!’” — Asiyat, Dagestan.

Another convict’s wife said that after her husband was convicted, they put her on a watchlist, she was put under constant surveillance, they didn’t even try to hide it and the vehicle’s presence was so obvious that even the neighbors noticed:

“Then they brought me to the police department. They took blood from my vein. They recorded my voice — they asked me to read some story about a good cop. I told them, ‘Are there also such cops?’ And they tapped my phone. I’ve been called in many times. No one ever talked about religious topics or ideology. The same questions: ‘what are you doing, where do you work? When is your husband getting out [of prison]?’ They ask, ‘How are your children behaving?’ They request information about the children as a pretext to come to see what’s going on in the house. They never offered me any help.” — Zura, Dagestan.

Many of the women interviewed in Dagestan said that the surveillance and monitoring were intense in the early years after their husbands’ death/arrest, but then attention diminished somewhat. Many respondents noted that things have quieted down in the last few years.

Security officers took all these steps to prevent radicalization and terrorist crimes.

However, without questioning the need to fight terrorism and do preventive work with vulnerable families, we conclude that such measures are counterproductive. They embitter the widows and wives and drive them to despair, making them even more vulnerable and creating an unfavorable environment for child-rearing.

Interestingly, only one of the women we interviewed said that the authorities tried to have a conversation about religion with her, but they did so in an extremely awkward way:

“Once at the administration they tried to talk to me about religion. They didn’t introduce themselves. They had anti-ISIS posters in the office. They asked, ‘Why do you walk around that way? [in a hijab]. You have a black dress on.’ By the way, I had a light pink scarf on me. I told them, ‘Our whole town is walking around in black.’ They answered, ‘Your mother has dark clothing, but she doesn’t put on a headscarf.’ Then one said that he had an acquaintance, and that because that acquaintance woke up his young girls for morning prayers, the girls were very skinny. Then he said, ‘Why do you walk around like that, you’re a beautiful girl. Did your husband tell you to?’ I didn’t answer. I just asked, ‘Am I free?’ And I left.”

When conversations on religious and ideological subjects are held on this level of professionalism, then the fact that they are extremely rare is good news. The goals of this report did not include evaluating the world views of the widows and wives of members of the armed underground in the North Caucasus. There probably are supporters of radical and ultra-radical ideology among the several tens of thousands of women. There is certainly a risk of terrorist acts by a widow. According to data from Kavkazsky Uzel, from 2000 through 2018, 50 female suicide bombers committed 29 terrorist acts in Russia³¹. The majority of them originated from Chechnya and Dagestan.

In Dagestan in 2010–2013, the underground’s female base of support was fairly strong. In 2014–2017 quite a few widows of militants moved to Syria and Iraq. But it is obvious that an absolute minority of women have taken the path of violence. Our studies show that wives often did not approve of their husbands’ decisions and sometimes did not even know about them, especially in the heyday of the Caucasian Emirate and ISIS, both organizations banned in Russia. Moreover, one might assume that the overwhelming majority of the radicalized widows never received rehabilitation support after their husbands’ deaths. The previous section showed how vulnerable the widows and wives were right after their husbands’ deaths or convictions. They themselves admitted that they were often incapable of rational and critical thinking, they saw no meaning in life and were in a state of extreme despair, in some cases receiving no support from their relatives. Obviously, this situation makes people vulnerable to manipulation. Under conditions of war in Chechnya it was probably impossible to provide these families with support, but since it has ended the situation is now different and new approaches can be devised.

Today the interaction of the state with militants’ wives and widows is mostly limited to law enforcement work by security offices with the primary goal of keeping them under control. A woman is automatically suspected at a minimum of radicalism, and in some cases of the intent to commit acts of terrorism. When it orders security officers to interact with

³¹ “Over 12 Years, 46 Female Suicide Bombers Committed 26 Terrorist Acts”, Kavkazsky Uzel, August 31, 2012. “Terrorist Acts Committed by Female Suicide Bombers in the RF”, Kavkazsky Uzel, August 22, 2018.

widows, the government can hardly count on any result other than pressure and repression, resulting in feelings of frustration, anger, and even hatred not only on the part of the women but also of their children. These feelings only foster radicalization. Work with families whom security agencies identify as at risk must be done strictly within the law, otherwise it will have the opposite effect. Respect for the human rights and freedoms of family members of fighters is a precondition for their successful rehabilitation.

The successful adaptation of families to the permanent or temporary loss of a breadwinner requires social, psychological, and public support for the family. From the viewpoint of preventing a situation when militants' family members might join armed jihadist groups, harsh treatment might have the temporary effect, but it will not lead to long-term stable solutions for a family to overcome a crisis, function successfully, and develop long-term resilience to radical ideologies. For these reasons, in many countries it is not the police but non-governmental organizations directly unrelated to the state that provide social and psychological assistance to the vulnerable families to help them solve everyday problems and address possible signs of radicalization. Work with youth on preventing radicalization should address their authentic interests, be modern, creative, forward looking, should encourage critical thinking and engage people whom young people respect. The Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center analyzed this in detail in one of its previous reports³².

This support must be transparent and comprehensible to the families and the local communities surrounding them. In the North Caucasus, a key role can be entrusted to local, especially women-led organizations, which have a deep understanding of the local context and enjoy the trust of the local people. In 2020 the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center will release a methodological guide which will discuss international best practices in working with vulnerable families for preventing radicalization.

³² *“Can new waves of radicalization in the North Caucasus be prevented?” Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center, February 2019.*

IV. EFFECT OF A FATHER'S LOSS OR LONG IMPRISONMENT ON CHILDREN

In this chapter we will analyze the interview data regarding how, according to mothers, the loss or long-term imprisonment of the father has impacted his children. Almost all of the interviewees had children. Only one widow in Dagestan had no children; she and her husband had been married for only a short time. This woman does not believe that her husband is dead; she thinks that he is missing, still lives with his parents, and is waiting for his return. Several respondents gave birth after their husbands' detention or death. One child was conceived at a conjugal visit.

Mental and physical health

A father's death or arrest affected children's mental state far more for older children who had a relationship with their fathers than for younger ones. Children born after the father's death or arrest suffered the least, but there are exceptions.

“My son suffers because he does not have a father. He often asks what his father said, how he behaved. My husband and I didn't spend all that much time together. Four months together, and the rest of the time were just odd moments, brief meetings. He couldn't live at home; they were searching for him. We were married just a little more than a year. My son sometimes says that he misses his father, although they have never even seen each other. He asks whether his father wanted to see him. But my husband did not want me to bring him. He was afraid that something might happen [a special forces operation]. My husband asked me who my son looked like, was he dark or light? I answered that he had black hair and light skin. He said, ‘So he looks like me.’ I told my son all this. He asked, ‘Tell me more about my father. And what can I tell him?’ (She weeps.)” — Zarina, Chechnya.

It was clear from the interviews that there are two categories of families: those where the father's imprisonment, death, or disappearance are discussed with the children and those where the issue is silenced. Some women said that they are very concerned about how to explain their fathers' histories to their children. They do not know how to deal with this in the right way.

“A stifling pain that can't be explained. The hardest thing is that I didn't know what to tell the children...this is what causes the greatest pain.” — Hadizha, Ingushetia.

Respondents from Ingushetia and Dagestan whose husbands are in prison most often tell their children that this is a mistake or that he was too good and that's why they imprisoned him. One woman in Ingushetia said that her nine-year-old son knows everything about his father from her. Once when he was at friend's place he said that he knows that his dad was in prison and was not ashamed of it (this is the only woman who worked with a psychologist).

Women who lost their husbands tell the children that he has returned to Allah or went

on a long business assignment or, for example, that he died in an accident. Some explain that he fought for his beliefs. In Dagestan one widow not only told her seven-year-old son that his dad was killed, but she also showed him a photo of his burned body.

“The older one knew his father, the younger one has forgotten everything; he was two years and eight months old. But he’s always asking about his father. ‘Why hasn’t daddy come for so long? Daddy will come, I’ll beat him up and I won’t let him out anymore. I’ll tie him to the radiator.’ So far, I haven’t told him the truth, he’s not ready. I showed the older one the photo [of her slain husband]. He said, ‘Who’s that, my dad? They burned him up?’” — Rasiyat, Makhachkala.

The situation in Chechnya is somewhat different. The children of men from Chechnya who are serving long prison sentences know everything about their fathers, the mothers assure us. They also know about the war and about their fathers’ involvement in it. In one family, they are always talking about the father at home. According to the mother, the children often ask about him, what kind of person he is. Relatives also tell them what he was like.

“Regarding what happened to his father, I tell my son that it was wartime. I would call everyone who was innocently given life sentences at that time - the prisoners of war. Even if we assume that they all fought, as I understand it, they are still prisoners of war. When they were detained, we all knew that they were beaten and forced to confess to something they hadn’t done. In general [in our family] we see everything as it is, and accordingly discuss it with my son.” — Hava, Chechnya.

Another respondent likewise explained everything to her children, moreover, their father and uncles are known in the village, and the children hear about them from neighbors:

“They ask me why did they imprison him? Why did he go to war? Sometimes they say that they are proud of their father. He wasn’t a coward, he wasn’t a traitor, he defended his homeland. For us Chechens, it’s like this: if he ended up in prison for theft or rape, that would have affected the children. People would be constantly be telling them: look at your father, he is so-and-so. But it’s different with them. The children tell me that when people in the village find out whose sons they are, they say, ‘Your father was a courageous man’.” — Safia, Chechnya.

In families that chose the strategy of silencing the issue, the children often found out the truth from other people or from the Internet.

“He’s always digging into what’s on the Internet, he reads, he’s been reading for a long time now. I think he knows everything he should know. He knows who he was, what his interests were, what he represents, what kind of person he is.” — Heda, Chechnya.

The loss of fathers and the subsequent family crisis had serious consequences for many children’s mental and physical health. For children who were witnesses of violence by the security services and to the threats against the lives of their close relatives, it takes a long to

recover from the deep psychological trauma of those events. A respondent in Ingushetia said that her uncle was killed by the security forces in a park and that he had three children. The security servicemen came to his house, bound his wife and forced him into the basement at gunpoint, demanding that he brought whoever was down there out, although there was no one there. Then they threw a grenade into the basement and blew up the house, after first plundering it. This happened in front of the children. They were not allowed to bury their father's mutilated corpse. After these events, one of the children of the victim stopped talking at all. The mother had to take him out of school. The child is still not speaking.

Another Ingush woman said that her son became very vulnerable and is permanently physically traumatized after his father was arrested. As soon as they returned from the hospital where the boy was being treated for a concussion, he fell and broke his arm, which did not heal properly, and he is now ashamed of it.

Another respondent said that her older sons, who were 9 and 11 years old when her husband was abducted and disappeared, were waiting for their father for a long time. The older son began doing worse in school, ran away from home, and was always hiding from people.

Two other respondents in Ingushetia said that their children were unable to sleep after what happened. Now they are sleeping better, but they miss their fathers a lot and are trying to support their mothers.

A respondent from Chechnya told about the children of her sister who, along with her husband, was abducted from her home in front of her children's eyes, both subsequently went missing. The sister's son developed epilepsy and later fell during a seizure, dying two days after.

In Ingushetia none of the respondents' children received psychological help. The mothers say that the children's biggest source of motivation comes when they hear something good about their fathers or have hope for his return.

One respondent said that the fact that there is space in the house for his father gives her child support; his father's things are in the cupboard, and his photographs and personal belongings are always in the room. Some women admitted that their children are supported by the belief that their father is in paradise and they will see him in the hereafter.

Only three women in Chechnya said that their children's psychological condition changed after their father's arrest or death. According to one, her older child was in court when they read his father's life sentence. Another widow said that her son was traumatized not so much by his father's death, but by the subsequent extreme jitteriness in the house and conflicts between relatives about the children.

"[After my husband's death] my mother-in-law tried to take my children away from me by force, she ripped my son out of my arms; it got to the point that we were physically pulling the children away, and he remembers this. Also when I was pregnant with him, I understood that my husband was involved [in the insurgency], and I was under tremendous stress. As a result, he has serious psychological problems. He can't interact with other children." — Satsita, Chechnya.

The child is currently outside Chechnya and a psychologist is working with him.

Another respondent whose husband was given a long sentence said that her younger son is entirely gray-haired at the age of 19, he has outbursts of uncontrollable anger and he

sometimes gets into fights for no reason.

When the fathers died, the children of the remaining interviewees in Chechnya were very small or not yet born. The respondents believe that the loss of their fathers did not have a significant impact on the children's psychological state, since they had no experience having both parents present.

The mothers of small children from Dagestan also emphasized that the little ones simply miss their fathers. One of them said this about her three- and four-year-old children:

"They know that their dad was abducted, but they don't know what happened to him. The younger one always asks, 'Where's dad? Daddy's not here? Is he at work? When will he be here?' The older one is silent, but psychologists have worked with him, he was in a serious condition. He also doesn't know that his dad is dead. A child psychologist from Makhachkala did some work with the older one, and after these sessions he got much better. My parents helped [pay for the psychologist]. After my husband's death it became clear to me that he needed a psychologist. He got irritable and aggressive, but it gradually ran its course, he relaxed." — Kamilla, Dagestan.

The widow of a missing man said that her younger boy, who was four months old when his father was abducted, often asks about his dad, 'When is papa coming?' He'd put a chocolate bar to his ear, as if making a telephone call: "Daddy, why is it taking you so long to come back from work?"

A woman from Dagestan whose husband was convicted for involvement in the insurgency said that the children were most upset when they saw her crying all the time "The first year they used to whisper, 'Mom is crying again.' They treated me with tenderness... they tried to be quiet, not to make noise, and I felt really sorry for them. The first two or three years were the hardest. But then the children got over it and focused on their own lives, they adjusted." — Zura, Dagestan.

It was harder for the more grown-up children. A woman who is raising the son of her brother, who was killed in a security operation, said that his children have not gotten over the trauma and that, in her opinion, it will be impossible to ever get over it.

"When the special forces operation began, my brother called us [from his surrounded house] and said goodbye to everyone. He told his boys, 'Listen to your mom, don't abandon one another.' He talked to his daughter and told her, 'You are your daddy's beauty, I love you so much.' We will all be gone one day, each one has their own time, but of course this is a deep wound for the children." — Asiyat, Dagestan.

Maturing children's interactions with law enforcement agencies

Several of our respondents in Chechnya and Dagestan said that their maturing sons are starting to have problems with law enforcement agencies.

"Once my children grew up and they finished school, a local police officer started coming to us every month. 'What are your sons doing, what are they up to?' He is from our village; he knows our family. He was embarrassed to come every time, so he told us, 'If someone [from the authorities] asks, tell them that I come to see you every month. I have to come, but I know your family, I won't bother you a lot.' But then they detained my nephew, the

son of my brother, who fought and got a long prison sentence. They picked up his older son because he had a beard. At the department, they told him about his father, they said, ‘You know, we’re always following you, we’re watching you to see if you want to do something wrong. They also picked up his second son. They beat him for a day and a half, then asked us for fifty thousand rubles (833 USD) and let him go. He was nineteen years old at that time. My children and nephews have to live very quietly. Some young chaps among those whose fathers died or were convicted do work with them [Kadyrov’s people], but the majority are against them. They pick them up and torture them because they think that the son will follow in his father’s steps, to prevent them for doing so. They have to put up with this for now. That’s why our young people so often die of stroke or heart attack.’ — Safia, Chechnya.

There was no war in Dagestan, but the attitude towards the children of the killed fighters is similar. The widow of a man slain in a security operation said that her 18-year-old son was detained and tortured, which turned him into a person with disabilities; he was later convicted of aiding and abetting the insurgency:

“Our families are permanently on the watch list. There is constant pressure on them. I’m worried about what will happen next. There is no joy in the fact that my boys have grown up, that they are grown men, just fear all the time. If the boys are delayed a little somewhere, we panic. We are always apprehensive of a provocation by the police. We expect some dirty trick from them, just like from gangsters.” — Sakinat, Dagestan.

Another respondent from Dagestan who is raising her deceased brother’s son, says that her brother’s children are under constant surveillance. This is also because the republic has a deep intra-confessional schism between Sufis and Salafis³³, and killed militants’ children are usually from Salafi families.

“At school they’re always trying to monitor the children. They start probing about their views. Now they have started to give extremism prevention lessons: they come from the Spiritual Directorate, child services, and a psychologist and start to ask questions. Sufis come from the Spiritual Directorate, there’s a division there [into Sufis and Salafis]. The children understand that they [the Spiritual Directorate] have their own program, and what’s at home isn’t the same. I’m not instilling either one in my children. I just explain that everyone is supposed to pray and fast, and not do anything bad. There is a technical college nearby and a mosque next to it. My boys went there. The mosque’s imam led prayers, but they didn’t join in. That’s why he called the police³⁴. The police came and started to intimidate them: ‘You’re Wahhabis, they called the parents in and admonished them. Is this a healthy situation?’ — Asiyat, Dagestan

In the previous report we detailed how security forces in Chechnya work with at risk

³³ Sufis (tarikats) consider themselves followers of their spiritual leaders, sheikhs whom they regard as saints. They respect the customs of their ancestors; their religious traditions have absorbed the ancient customary laws and beliefs of the peoples of Dagestan. Salafis do not recognize saints or teachers, believing their existence to be a violation of the principle of monotheism in Islam. They do not recognize the inclusion of folk traditions into religious practice and support the simplification of rites and a literal interpretation of the Koran.

³⁴ Salafis do not perform all the additional prayers that Sufis recite and leave the mosque after the mandatory ones are over. In this story, the imam at the mosque understood that the adolescents adhere to Salafi Islam on the basis of this attribute and called the police.

groups, which include the children of former militants³⁵. The Chechen police carry out “preventive” detentions. According to local sources, the number of detainees often reaches 150–200 people, especially after armed incidents. They are usually kept in custody at illegal detention locations without preparing an official report or initiating a criminal case³⁶.

According to Chechen activists only a small portion of the numerous detainees can actually be linked to radical networks, but they are still detained, sometimes for several weeks as a warning to prevent their involvement in the future. According to one activist,

“They ‘educate’ them for a time and then release them. There are special rooms for beatings in the lockups. They call this ‘prevention.’ And they believe that this is generosity on their part — ‘instead of putting them in a Russian prison, they given them a little education’ and let them go”³⁷.

Not infrequently, the children of former militants end up in this kind of detention. The traumatic loss of their fathers and the subsequent stigma and pressure on the family are thus superimposed on the trauma of detention and even violence, which certainly creates conditions for later animosity toward the authorities.

Interactions with fathers

In Chechnya the children of respondents whose husbands are serving a life sentence can have long visits with their fathers and get to know them more closely.

All the women say that their children take meetings with their fathers very hard.

“He doesn’t show it, but he feels bad. Especially after the trip [for a visit]. It’s been two years that my son has been going for long visits to his father. The prison has a hotel, and we take a room there. My son says that they don’t even sleep at night. They talk because they don’t want to lose the time. “For three days we sit and talk, we sleep for maybe an hour, and then we talk again”. Clearly, they have things to talk about. My son suffers more when he comes back from there. He misses his father and feels bad. It takes two-three months for him to get back to normal. This doesn’t mean that he completely recovers from it all. He just recovers a little. I support him most after these experiences. I talk, I explain that I’ll always help him, that we cannot do anything about what God has ordained, that all people have some kind of tragedy in their lives.” — Hava, Chechnya.

“They (the children) can’t even eat, we can’t even look at one another, because the spiritual anguish is very intense and it’s hard to communicate it,” — another respondent explains her family’s experiences. She said:

“On October 1, I came home from him [a visit with her husband]. It was the first time he’d seen his second son in a long meeting. When they saw their father, I really felt sorry for them... Their father told them, ‘Praise be Allah, I didn’t chase after other women, I wasn’t caught in the chicken coop, I didn’t steal, I fought. I responded to the call to let go of women’s

³⁵ “Will new waves of radicalization in the North Caucasus be prevented?”, Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre (CAPC), February 2019.

³⁶ CAPC interviews with activists, Grozny, February 2017.

³⁷ CAPC interviews with activists, attorneys, and former detainees, Grozny, February 2017.

skirts and go to war'. He told them, 'even if I'm not on this earth, you can walk proudly because I know my own worth'. He said that he knows that he never did anything that might shame them.

"These meetings are very hard on them. They bring him [my husband] in, and he is sitting ready when we come in. Through the bars — glass with a telephone. After our talk they take us away first, and then probably him. We take turns talking on the telephone... You see your loved one and can't speak your native language, and they feel uncomfortable speaking Russian... They are very saddened after the meeting, especially our sons. They probably regret that they can't do anything for their father. They want their father to be with them. They say that if he were with us, mom would be entirely different, but praise be Allah, without you mama, there would be nothing. They tell me, 'don't worry, we'll pray for him, if the law changes, maybe they'll let him out, there will be a retrial' — that's what they say." — Toita, Chechnya.

Not everyone, however, has good contact with their fathers. One wife of a prisoner said that, after a long visit with his father who was supposed to be released soon, her son said that when his father comes home, he won't live with the parents anymore. "I'm not used to this person," the young man explained.

"This is understandable, I am alone with them for so many years, we had no one else. They have no attachment to their father. We're a family without him, we can't yet imagine him among us," — explained the woman.

We nonetheless see that the majority of children have a profound need for a positive image of their fathers, especially in the Chechen context. They heroize and are proud of their warrior fathers; authorities' attempts to force a negative image of their fathers on them will hardly succeed and will be quietly ignored and rejected. We think that an appropriate evaluation of what happened in the years of armed conflict could be facilitated by open discussions and a scrutiny of post-Soviet Chechen history, in which independent witnesses and participants in these events and historians and experts could help young people develop a more balanced picture of the events of that time. A former teacher who spent many years in one of Chechnya's leading educational institutions believes that young people need heroes:

They need heroes. When you ask them who their heroes are, they might name Dudaev, Maskhadov, or Gelaev (Chechen separatist leaders). I tell them that I'm opposed to naming our streets in honor of Russian battlefield generals (as Kadyrov's government is doing). But I'm also against those people. I had to live in those times, and they caused our people a lot of grief. Young people mythologize these personalities, but those figures and events aren't discussed normally and openly with them.

An open discussion of history could be a start to the reconciliation process and lay a foundation for developing critical thinking in young people, both about their republic and about their family's history. They could therefore reconcile their need for a positive image of their fathers with an understanding of Chechen history at that time as complex, intricate, and deeply tragic and analyze the mistakes and crimes committed by both sides in the armed conflict. Unfortunately, in contemporary Chechnya and Russia organizing such

open discussions is nearly impossible, however, they will have to take place in the future, as without debate and mutual recognition of guilt, neither reconciliation nor sustainable peace will be possible. Promoting the values of non-violence and antiwar initiatives would make an important contribution to supporting a culture of non-violent conflict resolution. Engaging young people in public activism that is aimed at helping people, volunteering, and human rights will help divert their energy towards something constructive and create an opportunity for them to strive for justice.

Education and development

The majority of women we interviewed noted that their children had not experienced bullying, isolation, or conflicts because of what happened to their fathers. But one woman in Ingushetia said that the parents in the courtyard of the building where she lives do not allow their children to interact with her children:

“I see that parents don’t let their daughters to interact with mine. They turn away.” — Jannat, Ingushetia.

Two widows in Ingushetia admitted that their children were bullied and their fathers were called militants. In Dagestan one woman complained of this.

A woman who is raising the son of her brother killed in a special forces operation said that when her brother’s older son went to school, a teacher in the hallway pointed at him, “Look his father was killed,” which caused shame and embarrassment to the boy. The respondent complained to the vice-principal. The teacher was reprimanded and it did not happen again. But teachers are prejudiced against these children, according to the aunt.

Only two women in Ingushetia, two in Chechnya, and two in Dagestan are able to support the development of their children the way they want to. In Ingushetia these respondents have one child each and they are the only ones who have their own small businesses. In Dagestan both women are receiving financial help from their parents (one has two children, the other has three).

The rest cannot send their children to the extra-curricular courses and activities that they’d like to attend. This is because the women cannot afford to pay for them or they are too busy and there is no one else to take the children to such activities. One respondent in Ingushetia said that her children really want to go to preschool, but she could not afford it. She was promised a discount on the fee but did not get one. It is also hard for her to prepare her children for school since she cannot afford to buy books.

In Ingushetia 93% of the women said that their children are doing well or not badly in school. The picture is about the same in Dagestan. One respondent said that, after their father was abducted, her boys did not get very good grades, but her girls did.

In Chechnya mothers also rated their children’s performance in school as good. One of them has a son who is getting A’s and loves to write verses.

“He writes verses (she laughs). But he gets no praise from me. Sometimes he comes, ‘Mom, listen I wrote this poem... I don’t know, to each his own, but I’m not a fan. I don’t take to it. Especially when a boy [writes verses], I don’t especially like it. If I’d praise him a little more, he’d be, well [encouraged]. Right now, our goal is to prepare to take the general national examination. He’s taking extra school courses and I’m separately hiring a tutor for

all four subjects. And in the future, we're planning to enroll him in university. I don't exactly know where his fate will take him, but I'm thinking of software programming. If he really wants [to develop his interest in poetry], I'd support him, I wouldn't make an issue of it." — Hava, Chechnya.

Another respondent whose husband is serving a long sentence has sons who are serious about sports. The children of a third are all doing well at school, and the older son was studying concurrently at two universities.

Need for rehabilitation programs for former fighters' families

Based on the earlier analysis, it becomes clear that the death or long-term incarceration of men who joined the insurgency in the North Caucasus leaves deep scars on the lives of their family, affecting each member differently. Having faced such a tragedy and all of its social consequences, not all women and children reported having sufficient psychological resources to overcome these traumas and either return to their previous situation in life or find a new way to live and thrive. Programs of comprehensive rehabilitation could help solve this problem.

All the women interviewed in Chechnya are convinced that they need a support program, but they see the help that they might get under this program differently. One believes that social and financial support, help with getting a job, and greater understanding on the part of society would support her most. Very many of the interviewees named programs to provide opportunities for their children as priorities. Almost all of the mothers interviewed were extremely concerned that their children have equal opportunities with their peers to develop in sports, studies, and careers. For others, housing is the most acute problem. Almost all the women talked about the acute need for psychological help.

"Of course, we need programs. Absolutely. First and foremost, it would be good to have a job with a salary. I don't know what kind, if there is work and a salary – that's enough for people. If you work, you get up in the morning, come home in the evening, get your legal salary, what else do you need?"

Another respondent said:

At that time, I needed four things: support from close relatives, sympathy from the people around me, a good qualified psychologist, and a job, something to distract me". — Satsita, Chechnya

In Chechnya the question that has perplexed the women the most is: how to provide the most effective help, so as to do no harm, and to really support the family? Not one of the women could answer this question. Only one woman said that help would be the most effective if the authorities didn't know about it.

When talking about the future, almost all of the interviewees emphasized how important it is to them that their children do not grow up with a feeling of deprivation and have the same opportunities as others. Some still dream of personal fulfillment; in Dagestan, one-third of respondents had aspirations beyond their current condition. Several women noted that they'd like to leave Russia and live in another country.

“I’d like to be successful and that my child wouldn’t feel different in any way, wouldn’t be in need, that he didn’t feel his father’s absence, that I had substituted his father. I’d like to visit other cities, as a matter of fact I’d like to live in Turkey.” – Zaira, Dagestan

“I’d like to study. To study languages. To give my children an education. To raise the children so that they are well off in life. To do this I have to get myself together [psychologically], but I still can’t. And I need to make money. Without money we’re nothing. The pension is barely enough for two weeks of food.” – Rasiyat, Dagestan.

Several women who don’t have their “their own corner”, dreamed of their own homes.

We consider programs that support families in crisis situations in the North Caucasus as vitally important. Such programs will be most effective if they approach the problems of vulnerable families in a comprehensive way and offer psychological, legal, medical and social support, including help in generating income or finding employment. Such programs should also support other families affected by armed conflict, including widows and children of killed policemen and other vulnerable families who found themselves in a situation of acute life crisis, to be defined by specific criteria. The most effective implementors of such programs could be NGOs, especially women’s NGOs that understand the traditions and nuances of the local communities, know the needs of the vulnerable families and have trust in the society. It is important to involve authoritative local religious and public leaders, activists and pedagogues.

IV. FAMILIES OF RETURNEES FROM THE CONFLICT ZONE IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The children of returnees from the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq have a lot in common with the children of militants who fought in Russia, but they also have important differences. Specifically, returning children and mothers from the conflict zone in the Middle East have more severe mental trauma, some are physically wounded, and they generally have more serious health and adaptation problems. Younger children speak Russian poorly, and older ones have serious gaps in their school education. In Chechnya, families where returning children were born from marriages with non-Chechens sometimes have problems with their extended family who do not accept them because inter-ethnic marriages are condemned there, especially when a Chechen woman marries an outsider. Society is also likely to be sympathetic to the widows of people who fought in the Caucasus, but they explicitly condemn women who went to the Middle East. All three of the widows we interviewed say that almost no one except close relatives interacts with them. In the majority of cases, grandmothers take on the care of the returning children, which creates a whole new set of challenges.

We interviewed seven families in Chechnya and Dagestan to which children and women returned from Syria and Iraq. In three cases it was returning widows with children, in another three grandmothers took in the children, and in one case a young aunt.

Overall, we discussed the condition of 20 children who were returned from the conflict zone. This section summarizes our main observations. Given the extreme sensitivity of the subject, we are not naming the towns, republics, or the respondents.

War-time traumas and their consequences

Almost all of the children lived through bombings; two were wounded, and half of them lost both parents. The children themselves speak of what they experienced, or their relatives find out from different sources, including from other returnees from the conflict zone.

The experiences of children in Syria and Iraq varied depending on where they were. According to one of the grandmothers,

“My children are pretty grown up, they themselves talk about what happened there. There was no heavy fighting in Iraq, the bombings were along the peripheries, there were no bombings where they lived. They said it was a clean town, that they didn’t see any violence. The most traumatic thing for them was the death of their father, when they were left alone, and the entire period of returning home. They knew about their fathers’ death: someone came to their house, gave them his things, and said that their father had died.”

Another grandmother, of a nine-year-old girl, said:

“They [with their mother] have been through everything, but I don’t ask too much, to avoid traumatizing her. The famine, and the cold, and the heat. When they were escaping, they went a week without water. They fell down, women died, they were in the desert in the heat. They were bombed. Airplanes were dropping bombs; drones were flying. They lived in a basement when the airplanes came.”

According to a returning widow,

“I call my girl a test pilot. Bombs, shrapnel. She was wounded, and more than once. I myself pulled all the shrapnel out of her. She was under rubble. She saw the fighting; she saw it many times. There was no famine, but there was limited food, sometimes there really wasn't enough. Then the locals would give us something. She survived a chemical attack. She was completely covered in pus, she was dying. This was the most terrible thing in my life.”

Another five-year-old boy whom we visited told his aunt about how his mother was killed before his eyes:

“I went up to mom, she was lying on the bed. She was wounded in the leg. I picked up her arm, but it fell back. She died,” — she repeated the child's words.

These traumas affected the children's health. Almost all of the returnees have more or less serious health problems that require treatment. Almost all of their guardians said that they do not have the money to have these children examined and treated or to buy medicines for them.

“The girl gets sick often, I take her to the doctors at the hospital or call an ambulance. She has intestinal problems. They called us in, connected the clinic's chief physician and said, ‘we'll help as much as we can’. But they prescribe treatment and I have money problems; I can't buy the pills. There were also psychological problems in the beginning — she took the medications, the neurologist and psychiatrist prescribed treatment. But I'm having trouble combining treatment and her educational needs. We are all in a flu-like [condition] now, but she was very seriously ill. I called the ambulance; the district pediatrician came and gave me a prescription. They have other health problems: both children have toothaches. My little boy has poor vision, he was injured, once a shell exploded next to him, he has a scar from shrapnel. I'd like to have his head examined at a good place. A nurse comes to our village medical point twice a week, but what can she do? For every vaccination I have to take a taxi into town. I'm dragging all this out; it needs to be done on time, but there's no money. I can't go take care of my own problems, we don't have enough to solve theirs.”

Social and psychological problems

In terms of life necessities, the problems of orphans are a serious burden on the budgets of retired grandmothers and grandfathers. The grandmothers we interviewed were usually around 70 years old, all except one had their own homes, but their pensions were disastrously inadequate for supporting children.

“We have our own home, grandpa and I live on a pension. I won't say that we have enough money. Now I have to pay the utilities — electricity and gas, especially in winter. But we all have relatives here who can help. Right when the children arrived, we took them to a private school because they were behind in their education. But we had to pay seven and a half thousand rubles a month, and we had to take them out. What help [are we getting]? An old age pension, we're not getting any more help. Grandpa and I try to stretch things to make the pension last.”

The grandmothers are also having a hard time coping psychologically with the situation.

Many have serious health problems. They themselves are traumatized by the loss of a son or daughter, and they do not know how to deal with the orphans who survived war.

“I’m old, I have no other helpers. They sometimes listen, they sometimes act up. When they first arrived, they were so mistrustful. It was hard for me, I had to ask, consult. I asked psychologists, juvenile officers, they helped me, they advised me, I found good, understanding specialists. A psychologist worked with them; I took them to see him.”

Another girl’s grandmother said.

“I have a pension of eleven thousand (185 USD), to be honest it’s not enough. It was enough for me, I made a little money on the side, but I have to take the girl to school and pick her up. I’m afraid of letting her out alone, even in the courtyard. The child has gone through so much; I can’t earn extra money with her here, and we don’t have enough. And I have to buy her everything for the school. The greatest needs? We have a shortage of everything at the moment. The child needs clothing and shoes. People helped with meat, food, the district ... administration did. Her father’s relatives sometimes came at first. They came once or twice a month. Her uncle calls her. But they’re also not in a good situation, they don’t have the money to come, to treat her. They might help once or twice, but you can’t live on this. I’m not even mentioning my own personal problems.”

The state allocates support to permanent guardians, but several of our interviewees were granted temporary custody without pay. One grandmother said that, after getting temporary custody, she prepared the documents for permanent custody, but they gave her temporary again. The problem is that law enforcement agencies often do not have proof of the parents’ death in the Middle East, so permanent custody is not granted automatically. It takes a court one year to establish that someone is missing.

One grandmother does not have her own home; she lives in a summer house that belongs to a relative, with four children on a 15-thousand-ruble (250 USD) pension and 800 rubles in benefits for the four children (200 rubles/3,5 USD per child).

“This income is enough for a maximum of two weeks. Sometimes a week. You pay for the utilities, and nothing is left. In winter we have no place to bathe. There is no bathroom. I used to live here in the summer, and in winter I lived with my older daughter in town. After the children came, I put in heating and windows. I did everything on installment, I saved and borrowed. We still aren’t getting paid custody.”

The aid that does come to these families is usually insignificant, from municipalities, “good people,” and in Chechnya there were lump-sum payments from Kadyrov’s fund. Most often, grandmothers’ children (the aunts and uncles of the orphans) and other relatives help occasionally but they are not able to provide them with the significant and sustained help they need. One grandmother from Chechnya said that social services employees also helped her:

“They came and washed the windows and begged us, how else can we help. I told them that I’m managing.”

In addition to health problems, widows and guardians name psychological problems as the most serious conditions affecting the children. It is very hard for children to cope with the grief from the loss of or separation from their parents.

A grandmother said this about her granddaughter, whose mother is in prison in Iraq:

“She remembers her father and mother, especially her mom. When we go to bed, she starts to cry. One day I scolded her: ‘Do your homework, why are you sitting there.’ She went to school and left me a note, ‘Grandma, forgive me, I won’t do it again, I’ll listen to you, I just really miss my mom.’ Recently her school was preparing a concert for the mothers and invited all the moms on mother’s day. I went too. I was standing out in the hallway, there were all young mothers there. I went in a little later. I came and the mothers said, ‘She was so worried that you weren’t coming. She asked everyone who came in, ‘Is my grandma out there? Did my grandma come?’ At the end all the children congratulated their own mother, and she did it to me (she cries) ... and it was very painful (she cries) ...”

But all the guardians say that the children’s condition is changing for the better. Children’s psyche is flexible and with support from their relatives they make progress quite quickly.

“Now they are very good, smart, and calm children. But when they returned — they looked like vultures because of the famine, they snatched food from one another and eyed one another nervously. But now you give some food to one and he says, ‘Give some to Ahmed, give some to Zelimkhan. They don’t talk about what they’d endured there. They remember their parents. They’ve forgotten the bad parts and remember only the good. But they are starting to get disassociated from their parents. Only the third one, he was their favorite, at night he cries for his mother. He tells me, ‘I dreamed that mama was making pizza. Grandma, did they kill her? Is she in captivity?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘She’ll come soon.’ ‘Grandma, when will this ‘soon’ end?’“

In Chechnya children whose fathers were not Chechen may have problems with relatives. Some do not recognize these children and do not want to help them. It is hard for these children to grow up in a village; they need to move to a bigger city. Aside from the guardians of these children, the remaining interviewees said that their children did not experience prejudiced attitudes after their return.

Problems with education

Problems with education arise because the children did not go to school while they were living in Syria or Iraq. It is hard for grandmothers to help them with homework and fill in the gaps, and there is no money for tutors:

“I’m illiterate, but the boy is in the fifth grade — he has different subjects and he needs to do homework; I would like to get help. In addition, I’d like the boy to have a tutor so that he can study. I can’t support their hobbies either. I can’t be like young parents. I’m not educated, I don’t know what’s good for children.”

All the grandmothers of school-age children that we interviewed spoke of the need for help of tutors:

“She needs to study extra to catch up in school. Extra-curriculum programs like the environmental studies offered by school, when all the kids are together, are not enough. I’d want a tutor to work with her one-on-one, but I don’t have enough money. At first relatives helped a little once in a while. Then I took her to a Russian woman nearby. But now there’s

no money.”

Right after her arrival they put one girl in second grade based on her age, but she had missed a year and a half of schooling. She had big knowledge gaps compared to her peers.

Some grandmothers said that the children have not developed any interests outside of school:

“What interests does she have? She hasn’t outgrown playing with dolls. She plays with dolls all the time. War games? What are you talking about! She trembles even when a firecracker goes off.”

Another grandmother admits that her boys ask her to buy toy guns:

“But I say: no guns. It’s better to buy blocks.”

The children in another family are interested in art:

“They love drawing, cutting things out, clay, we have clay models all over the house.”

The children are not getting any systematic psychological help, although one Chechen NGO sends a psychologist to see some families once a month. School psychologists try to give special attention to these families:

“The school psychologist helps. The teacher, the principal, the school social pedagogue – Natasha – came to the house. A young school psychologist came.”

The issues of preventing extremist ideologies came up in only one of the cases in Chechnya that we analyzed:

“They have a spiritual advisor in school. I’m in touch with him. He talks with them. Someone from juvenile department comes, a local policeman comes.”

Everyone except one interviewee said that programs to support returnees’ families are very much needed:

“I need a specialist who will support me. Until the children are completely rehabilitated, they need help. They don’t talk about it, but they keep everything they’ve endured inside. These children still need special support” – said one grandmother.

All the grandmothers mentioned an acute need for help from teachers.

Only one returning widow said that there is no need for programs for returnees:

“The time will come when women who don’t appreciate anything will return. Women who won’t understand this kindness will return. They condemned me for leaving, for coming back.”

However, she eagerly supported a program for children and said that her little daughter primarily needs survivor benefits and a psychologist’s help.

CONCLUSION

As the armed conflict in the North Caucasus has ceased, there is an opportunity to reassess old approaches to long-standing problems and develop and test new ones. Tens of thousands of women and children who had their husbands and fathers killed or imprisoned due to their involvement in the armed conflict in Chechnya or with illegal armed groups, and children returnees from the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq, currently reside in the North Caucasus. They have been struggling with an acute personal crisis while receiving virtually no help from the government or NGOs.

Our interviews show that all the widows and wives were severely traumatized by the killing, enforced disappearance, or long prison term of their husband; many still remain in this state of psychological trauma which has affected their health severely. Most of the children who have the experience of living with their fathers have also been psychologically affected, with medical consequences for some. Several of the children we interviewed experienced prejudiced attitudes in the community and educational institutions; however, most did not come across any significant difficulties. In many cases, the children's issues rather stemmed from the built-up psychological and emotional stress, social and financial problems of their family, pressure by the law enforcement authorities, and lack of equal opportunities for learning and development. The children who returned from Syria and Iraq have been traumatized more severely; their health and adaptation issues are graver. Their guardians—usually grandparents—desperately lack knowledge, opportunities and money to solve these problems, especially because not all of them manage to get permanent custody over the orphans.

For the rehabilitation of the former fighters' families to be successful, they need support from counselors, social workers, schools, NGOs, charitable organizations and community leaders. Such targeted assistance can be partly funded through various government-run extremism prevention programs in the North Caucasus and through non-government funds. Helping families to create safe and comfortable conditions for their children's development, overcome traumatic experiences and foster successful learning will be much more effective as a counter radicalization strategy than the multiple, often formal and tedious, lectures and events about the dangers of extremism that are currently being held³⁸.

Lasting peace in the North Caucasus depends considerably on how successful, psychologically resilient and socially included such children feel. However, any work with children from the vulnerable families should be very discreet. Children need to grow up knowing that their society is helping them because it wants them to be happy and successful rather than because it is afraid of their radicalization.

³⁸ "Will new waves of radicalization in the North Caucasus be prevented?", *Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center*, February 2019.