

Introduction

The forcible separation of children from their mother is a common practice in the regions of Northern Caucasus. It amounts to forcibly removing the children from their mother's physical custody in the event of divorce or the father's death¹. Such separation can take the form of parental abduction or non-compliance with the family court's decision regarding the mother's visitation rights. In the Caucasus region the public opinion and the traditional norms are skewed heavily towards the father and his family and the custody of the child reverts to the father's family by default in the event of divorce or the father's death. Even the court decisions are frequently based on "regional traditions."² Forced separation of mothers and children is a region-specific Caucasus problem, along with female genital mutilation and forced marriage. It is yet another form of gender discrimination in which everyone is complicit to a varying degree – the society, the law enforcement agencies and the religious institutions.

If one is look at the incidence of child abductions in general, the Russian Federation occupies a reasonably low 44th spot.³ But this is not evidence of the rarity of the occurrence as much as it is evidence of problems with data gathering and legal loopholes. There is data that indicates that in 90% of cases the parent is responsible for the abduction while strangers account for less than one percent.⁴

Russian lawyers and human rights activists are unanimous in their opinion that Russian law does not provide effective mechanisms to protect parents' rights in the realm of child custody and visitation. Violations of custody and visitation orders are considered administrative and are punished by fine of up to five thousand rubles or home-based detention for up to five days.⁵

In the Northern Caucasus regions this is further compounded by the fact that traditional norms and customs hold that the child is the property of their father's clan and the father usually gets custody after divorce/separation. Even the courts factor "regional traditions" into their decisionmaking.⁶ The effectiveness of Russian law and law enforcement in the sphere of family abduction, not so high across the country, is even lower in this region. This is proven through human rights and investigative reporting, as well academic articles by lawyers and law enforcement professionals.

The goal of the study was to place forced maternal separations under a microscope, make this problem visible and shine a light on where it fits in the larger system. We strove to describe the situation of separation and its consequences for mothers and children, the actions women take to regain custody or visitation and the difficulties they encounter, to reflect on the insufficiency of the current legal tools available. The study showed that the practice of forced maternal separation leads to nothing but negative consequences for the children's health and development. Very often the children are labeled as "belonging to the father's clan", but in reality no-one wants to care for them as much as their mother does. After the separation the father transfers caregiving responsibilities to other adults (grandparents, aunts, stepmothers), who may or may not have the desire or resources to care of the child. Children are separated from their mother physically and psychologically, live in a situation of threats and pressure for attempts at contact, and grow up in an environment where their mother is portrayed as the ultimate villain.

¹Спецпроект: Нарушение права детей и родителя на общение друг с другом. Семейное похищение.[Электронный ресурс] // АНО «Правовое содействие — Астрейя». Проект «Правовая инициатива». <https://ano-astreya.ru/opeka> (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

²Л. Михальченко, Л. Жукова. «Если с ними что-то случится — будешь отвечать кровью» У женщин на Кавказе отбирают детей. Почему им не могут помочь ни родственники, ни законы? [Электронный ресурс] // Lenta.ru <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/08/06/liana/> (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

³Kidnapping rate — Country rankings // The global economy.com. [Электронный ресурс] 2017. <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com>.

[com/rankings/kidnapping/](https://www.safesite.com/rankings/kidnapping/) (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

⁴The Truth About Child Abduction Statistics in 2022.[Электронный ресурс] // Safeatlast, Best Home Security Systems & Safety Guides. <https://safeatlast.co/blog/child-abduction-statistics/#gref> (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

⁵А. Саранов. Похищение ребенка вторым родителем: «слабое звено» закона [Электронный ресурс] / Адвокатская газета. // Орган Федеральной палаты адвокатов РФ. 2020. <https://www.advgazeta.ru/mneniya/pokhishchenie-rebenka-vtorym-roditelem-slaboe-zveno-zakona/> (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

⁶Спецпроект: Нарушение права детей и родителя на общение друг с другом. Семейное похищение.[Электронный ресурс] // АНО «Правовое содействие — Астрея». Проект «Правовая инициатива». <https://ano-astreya.ru/opeka> (дата обращения: 29.03.2022).

The women themselves, many of whom are victims of domestic violence, the fight to see their children is connected to further danger and places them in a situations where the very institutions charged with protecting them (relatives, elders, Islamic courts, the secular courts, the police) fail them or antagonize them. The most effective (though dangerous at initial stages) strategy proved to be a combination of media and online exposure, peer support on social networks and pro bono help from NGO volunteer specialists. What remains of these women's lives is forever overshadowed by the forced separation. The majority of them cannot or do not wish to remarry, having been traumatized and ostracized by the public opinion.

International law, Russian law and Caucasus specific aspects of the problem

Violating a woman's parental rights always involves more than one victim, as children suffer invariably in such a situation. Moreover, children are used as tools to pressure the woman.

Removing children from their mother is used as a tool of blackmail, coercion, extortion of money or other material benefits, or as revenge for refusing to submit to beatings and other ill treatment or to turn a blind eye to the husband cheating or taking a second wife.

The forced separation involves complete or almost complete separation when the mother is kept away from the children and the children are pressured and threatened into refusing to see her or punished physically and emotionally for any attempt to contact her. Then the ultimate proof of the mother's unfitness makes an appearance – “the children don't want to go to her.” The reality is that the children in this situation are mere hostages and no-one cares about their wishes or their best interest.

According the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents is inalienable and must be provided for by State Parties.⁷ The legal and academic vocabulary includes terms such as “parental abduction”, “child stealing”, “parental kidnapping” and “international child abduction”, when one of the parents takes the child into another country. Russian authorities are notoriously uncooperative in these areas.⁸ In international practice abduction of a child by a parent is viewed as part of the dynamic of family violence⁹ and child abuse¹⁰. In the Russian context the Caucasus custom of forced separation of children from their mother in case of divorce or widowhood can be viewed as a factor aggravating the bigger picture of family violence.

The level of domestic violence in Russia is rather high. According to the Interior Ministry data in 2018 21,390 suffered a crime in the hands of their family member.¹¹ The experts have serious doubts of this statistic because they know that many complaints do not result in opening case and never make it into the statistic.¹² The experts place domestic violence statistics at much higher number than government agencies.

⁷«Конвенция о правах ребенка» (одобрена Генеральной Ассамблеей ООН 20.11.1989) (вступила в силу для СССР 15.09.1990) [Электронный ресурс] // КонсультантПлюс http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_9959/ (дата обращения: 30.03.2022).

⁸ International child abductions. Factsheet – International child abductions. // European court of human rights. 2021 https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Child_abductions_ENG.pdf (дата обращения: 31.03.2022)

⁹J. Alanan. When human rights conflict: mediating international parental kidnapping disputes involving the domestic violence defense. // The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Fall, 2008), pp. 49–108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40176777> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹⁰Nancy Faulkner, Ph. D. Presented to the United Nations Convention on Child Rights in Special Session, June 9, 1999 https://canadiancrc.com/Nancy_Faulkner_Parental_abduction_is_child_abuse_1999.aspx (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹¹В МВД назвали число пострадавших от домашнего насилия женщин. // РБК jп 25.11.2019 [Электронный ресурс]. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreeneews/5dd6844f9a794787117e082d> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹² Не попали в статистику. Почему МВД не считает пострадавших от домашнего насилия, даже если они убиты [Электронный ресурс]. <https://takiedela.ru/news/2020/08/27/ne-popali-v-statistiku/> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

According to data collected by human rights activists about 6.5 million cases of domestic violence occur in Russia every year. Based on the data from Russian Statistical Bureau some experts and journalists place this number at as high as sixteen million cases per year. The same experts opine that most frequent victims of domestic violence are women with children.

Northern Caucasus provinces are especially prone to underreporting domestic violence¹³, while experts are of the opinion that domestic violence in these regions is widespread and very much a part of traditional way of life¹⁴. According to human rights activists and journalists, the Caucasus is a cesspool of domestic violence, female genital mutilation¹⁵, and honor killings¹⁶. In this context forced separation of mothers from their children can be viewed as yet another discriminatory practice, further worsening the conditions for women in the region.

.Results of sociological study “Caucasus without mother”

This study is a result of work of team of specialists from a project bearing the same name. It was conceived as compilation and interpretation of the results of interviews of 45 women, residents of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, who were forcibly separated from their children.

Object of the study and target audience

The object of the study are mothers who are all citizens of the Russian Federation and residents of Chechnya, Ingushetia or Dagestan who were forcibly separated from their children after divorce, spousal separation or the husband’s death.

The target audience is is comprised not only of women who currently live in the Northern Caucasus, but also from women living in other regions, hiding in shelters, and those who have emigrated. But all respondents are originally from Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

Goal of the study

To investigate how and why mothers are forcibly separated from children

Aims of the study

1. To describe the phenomenon of forced separation, make it visible and highlight its prevalence.
2. To highlight reasons and causes of why so many mothers remain separated and why attempts at return fail
3. To show the lack and weakness of legal and law enforcement mechanisms to address the situation
4. To highlight how this phenomenon fits into a larger system of gender oppression

Methodology

The study was conducted via semi-structured interviews. The data was collected in personal conversations, as well as via messengers and phone calls. The audience was built using a “snowball” method. Since these women are not very reachable because of safety concerns, one respondent brought another to the project and the cycle repeated itself.

¹³Алгоритм Света <https://readymag.com/u3045877410/algoritmsveta/> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹⁴К.Меркурьева, А. Волкова. Убить и забыть: как повлияла пандемия на домашнее насилие на Северном Кавказе // Кавказ. Реалии. Права человека. 2020 [Электронный ресурс] <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/30749326.html> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹⁵Ю.А. Антонова, С. В. Сиражудинова. Практики калечащих операций в республиках Северного Кавказа: стратегии преодоления. 2018 [Электронный ресурс]. <https://www.srji.org/about/annual/strategii-protivodeystviya-FGM-proizvodstvo-kalechashchikh-operatsiy-sji/> (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

¹⁶Убийства по мотивам «чести» на Северном Кавказе. // <https://убийствачести.рф>. 2020 [Электронный ресурс]. (дата обращения: 31.03.2022).

Timeline and geography of the study

The study was conducted from December 2020 to June 2021 on several trips to Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. 45 interviews were conducted – 21 with current or former residents of Chechnya, 11 with current or former residents of Dagestan and 13 with current or former residents of Ingushetia.

Notes on methodology

The uniqueness of this study is due to the fact that other than analysis of interviews proper, it includes observations and conclusions of the investigative journalist Lidia Mikhalchenko made outside the scope of the interviews proper.

These observations and conclusions are a result of an immersive and prolonged work in the region: conversations with village elders, Muslim clerics, law enforcement officials, juvenile justice system personnel, government bureaucrats, the male relatives of the women involved (fathers, brothers), as well as female relatives, their children's teachers and two female practicing psychologists, one from Ingushetia, one from Chechnya. Altogether, about a hundred conversations took place and these make abundantly clear how a society condones forced separation of children from their mother. Also, there were many conversations with Chechen, Dagestani and Ingush women who were forcibly separated from their children that did not make it into the study sample. These women related how their children were removed from them, the circumstances of separation, their attempts to regain custody, the reaction of government agencies, as well as the reaction of their families and communities to such attempts.

Direct comment from the investigative journalist: “As we were preparing the study, we did not focus exclusively on the victims. We rode around towns and villages of the Caucasus for several months to discuss child custody issues with everyone involved. We spoke to psychologists, sociologists, religious figures, lawyers and government bureaucrats.”

In a certain sense, methodologically, all these conversations are the results of non-participant observation and many interviews with representatives of local communities. Within the study, the conclusions are presented as expert sidebars and comments and serve to enrich the material and provide a deeper immersion into the topic.

Most of the interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity, which is especially important given the subject matter, but there are also women who are now openly fighting for the right to see their children. Hence the formatting of names within the report: in some quotes only the region where the respondent is from is indicated, in other cases names will be given.

The report contains graphs for ease of perception; they are intended to reflect trends and reflect the life circumstances of the study participants, but do not pretend to be quantitatively impeccable, since the study was qualitative in nature. Thus, the graphs below serve illustrative purposes, characterize trends and do not reflect exact quantitative relationships of the general population.

Summary of findings

The women involved in this study are a diverse group. They are aged from 18 to 50 and come from different ethnic groups: 21 Chechen, 10 Ingush, 8 Dagestani, three Russians, one each Bashkir, Kabardinian and Mari. These women are not initially marginalized. 22 of 45 have a college degree and another 17 have a trade school degree. The vast majority (38 of 45) grew up with both parents. The four raised by a single mother were not separated from her. Only three grew up in the same circumstances as their children – they were raised by grandparents and other relatives or by their father and stepmother. With such positive childhood experience the majority (28 of 45) did not even entertain the thought that someone could take away their children post-divorce. Many (7 of 45) knew that such a custom existed, but never expected it from their husbands and thought they had the situation under control. About a quarter of the respondents (10) were prepared for the possibility that it may happen to them. The common factor with all these women is that after they got married (10 participants before they turned eighteen) and then divorced, their children were taken away from them. The length of the marriage had no bearing on the forced separation. The median length of marriage pre-separation is eight years, but the range is from two months to 26 years.

Marriage customs vary slightly by region and ethnicity. In Dagestan marriages between cousins are common, which exacerbates the situation in case of forced separation, since the spouses come from the same family and the extended family supports the children's father. The previously mentioned early marriages also contribute since some of the mothers were married off as teenagers, against their will and did not have awareness that they have rights or life experience they could lean on.

As a result out of 111 children of these 45 mothers, 90 children are separated from their mothers. In the case of 12 mothers some children were not taken away or were promptly returned and some were permanently separated. Most women have two (15 participants) or three (12 participants) children. The average number of children per woman in this study is 2.5 children while the number of separated children is two per woman. That means that in many cases even if the mother managed to reunite with one of her children, she did not reunite with another.

The child's age has little bearing on the probability of forced separation. Babies under six months (six out of 92) and teenagers over fifteen (only two) are slightly less likely to be victims of forced separation. Children between two and four are separated slightly more often (19 children altogether). The average age for forced separation is six years old, the median one is five years old. It's an age where the child requires a little less attention, is a little more aware of his surroundings and at the same time it's an age where the child's behavior can be modified by threats and pressure. For example a preschooler and beyond can be conditioned to tell his mother to go away and to say the right things to child welfare workers.

The participants are (or were in the event they managed to regain physical custody) separated from their child or children for a duration of one month to sixteen years. The average time length of separation is 4.1 years. The most frequent duration of separation is one to four years and in almost half of the cases (21 women) the respondents have not seen their children for that period of time.

Separation from children frequently happens within the framework of family violence. The majority of participants (31 out of 45) recounted that they suffered physical violence from their husbands while married. Sometimes a woman so disenfranchised that the separation from the children also means a loss of a place to live. The husband or his family simply kick the woman out of the home. That happened with half the respondents (18 cases). In seven cases the husband did it just because, in six cases he did because he wished to take another wife and in the remaining cases the woman was kicked out of the house by her husband's relatives. In the event children don't remain in the father's home and the mother manages to take them along, the children are removed from the mother at a later time. This is accomplished either by not returning them after family visits, vacation, etc. (20 cases) or forcibly abducting them (10 cases). In some instances (10 cases) the mother is pressured into surrendering the children by the society around her (family, village elders, Muslim clerics). In rare instances the court awards the custody to the father (4 cases) and the police removes the children to the father's home (1 case) and in those cases the decisions are based not to Russian family law, but on regional traditions that define the children as the property of their father's clan.

This motive (children belong to their father's clan) is the leading one for the decision to forcibly separate the children from their mother. In a third of cases (14) this is the motive cited. The children's emotional health and welfare are not important compared to their father's clan's standing in the community and that standing is largely tied to compliance with traditions.

The second motive appears to be classic family violence. It is cited as the primary one in twelve cases. The children are used to settle scores, to cause pain, to show the ex-wife "her place". Sometimes the father is instigated by his relatives, usually female (mother, sisters, aunts) who have an ax to grind with the children's mother. This occurred in seven cases.

Also, the father acquiring a new wife is an important factor in forced separations. In ten cases the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the father had a mistress or wished to bring home a second wife (which is allowed in Islam and condoned by local traditions) and the mother of the children did not like this arrangement one bit. The potential stepmother is usually not told that the duty to raise these children would be foisted upon her and doesn't exactly welcome those responsibilities. Thus this woman becomes the next link in the chain of disenfranchisement and family violence. Financial motives and economic abuse also occur. In six cases the mother was pressured into giving up her parental rights so that the father gains access to the child's government benefits or the father attempted to evict the mother from her own property. The cases exist where the desire to enrich oneself trumps religious norms and customs. According to the Sharia law, in the event of a man's death his family must support his widow and her minor children. In reality the dead man's family often kicks the widow out of her family home and abducts her children. In essence, religious decrees are only enforced when they benefit the father ("the child stays with the father's clan after the divorce") and are ignored when they would have benefited the mother ("children under seven belong to their mother" "the dead man's family must care for his widow and his children")

In a situation of forced separation of children from their mother it quickly becomes apparent that the father has no interest in actually raising these children. Only in two cases these children were being in classic "single father" model. The circumstances in which these children are raised are far from comfortable. In the majority of cases the children are raised by their grandparents and aunts (17 cases), a father+stepmother combination (14 cases) and in 8 cases these children were raised by a stepmother alone, i.e. a unrelated adult. Often this responsibility is too much for the grandparents because of their age or unwelcome by stepmothers and aunts. The mothers do everything in their power to maintain connection to the children from whom they were separated. They try to reason with the father and his family, wait by the schools, and do their best to call and to write messages. Two thirds of the women (26 of 45) began the struggle to reunite with their children immediately after the separation. But more than half of the participants (24 of 45) are denied the opportunity to see their children and a third (14 cases) can see them only on rare occasions. At the same time two thirds of the mothers (31 of 45) get at least partial updates on their children, while a third (14 of 45) are kept completely in the dark. Only one sixth of the mothers in the sample (7 women) can see their children on a regular basis. The fight for the opportunity to see one's children usually subjects the women to threats and pressure – only 6 of 45 did not encounter that. The children themselves are subjected to threats and pressure. Two thirds of the mothers (32 of 45) report this. Seven more mothers say that their children are too young. This hostile environment, punishments and labeling the mother as an "unworthy woman" who abandoned her children all contribute to a climate where only a quarter of the mothers (13 of 45) report that their children are willing and available for contact. In the rest of the cases the children refuse all contact with the mother or are physically unavailable.

The children's physical and emotional health deteriorates as a result of separation and their welfare is under threat. Of the 32 mothers who know what's going on with their children, 31 report changes for the worse. The children's health may have deteriorate because of neglect. Their development may slow down or regress and the trauma of separation can manifest itself through aggression or apathy and withdrawal.

In the struggle to reunite with their children many women begin with appealing to traditional institutions (the elders, the Islamic clerics) and only if that does not work, they appeal to the secular government institutions (courts, police, child welfare agencies). Here we have observed that without exposure in the media and online these appeals are generally not effective. The elders usually side with the father and the acquisition of children by his clan – only 5 out of 27 appeals resulted in the children being reunited with their mother. Even when a secular court finds for the mother in a custody dispute or rules the child's removal unlawful, these decisions are rarely enforced – 21 out of 27 cases were decided for the mother, but only in six the children were actually returned to the mother. The bailiffs seem largely incapable of enforcing these orders. In the majority of successful reunifications (14 of 19 cases) media exposure and the following public outcry were a crucial factor.

The woman's own family offers at best partial support with mixed results. More than half of the participants (23 of 45) said the only a part of the family supported them in their quest to reunite with the children (for example, mother or sister supported while father or brother opposed). That lead to the women feeling betrayed by their relatives (21 out of 45 respondents) and many are not prepared to forgive them. 21 women report receiving support from friends and fellow survivors online, as well as volunteer professionals in NGO's. Ten women report that they have not received support from anyone.

It is clear that the forced separation from the children has a defining influence on these women, on their state of mind and vision of their future lives. Two thirds of the women do not plan to remarry or have more children, because their lives revolve around attempts to regain contact with children from the first marriage. Of those who remarried (often due to pressure from their families), almost half later divorced.

Thus we see that forced separation has a crushing effect on both mothers and children, compromising their welfare and thwarting the progress of their lives.

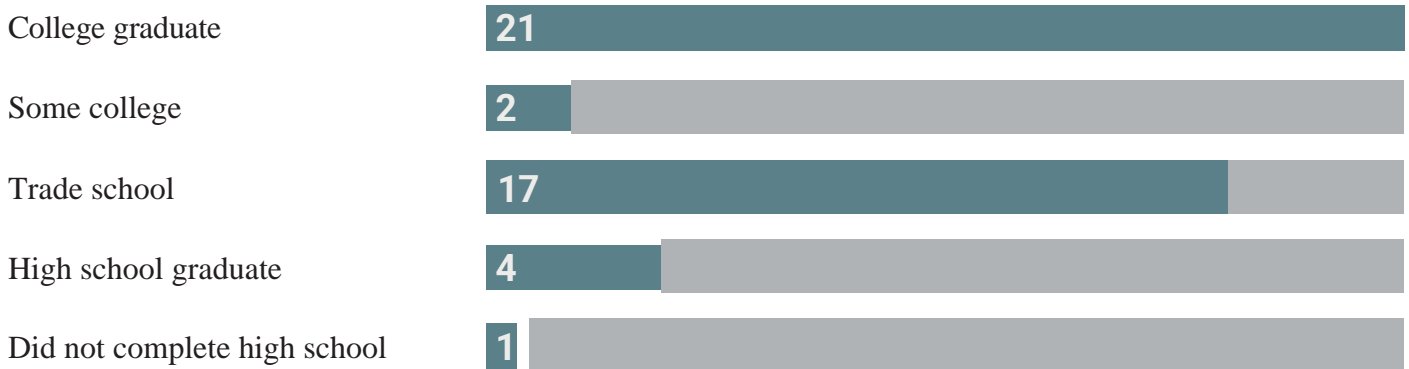
Demographic overview of women separated from their children.

Let's start with some demographic characteristics.

The study participants are aged from 18 to 50, the average age being 35. Their ethnic background is diverse: 21 Chechen, 10 Ingush, 8 Dagestani, three Russians, one each Bashkir, Mari and Kabardinian.

Mothers' education level

(out of 45)



So the women in this sample are pretty educated. Out of 45 respondents half (21) are college graduates, two more have some college education and more than a third (17 women) have specialized professional education. Only four participants have no education beyond high school and one did not graduate high school.

Some respondents specified what exactly they studied. The college graduates mentioned law, medicine, economics, teaching, design while trade school graduates mentioned accounting, child care, design, hairdressing.

The mothers' families of origin

The overwhelming majority (38 out of 45 women) grew up in two-parent families, with both biological parents. They spoke of those families as normal. Alas, this did not protect the respondents from abuse and forced separation from children in their own marriages.

One tenth of the respondents (4 women) grew up without a father. Each was raised by her biological mother and no-one attempted to separate them.

Altogether, only three respondents were raised in circumstances resembling those in which their children found themselves.

- Two were raised by grandparents with the participation of other relatives and shuffled between households.
- One respondent was raised by father/stepmother combination. According to her, that led to an unfair division of property. The respondent inherited an apartment from her father, but the stepmother transferred the ownership to one of her own biological children. The respondent found herself without a place to go to post-divorce.

Some respondents recounted that the atmosphere in their birth families was violent and they saw marriage as a means to escape from the situation, only to encounter more abuse from their own husbands.

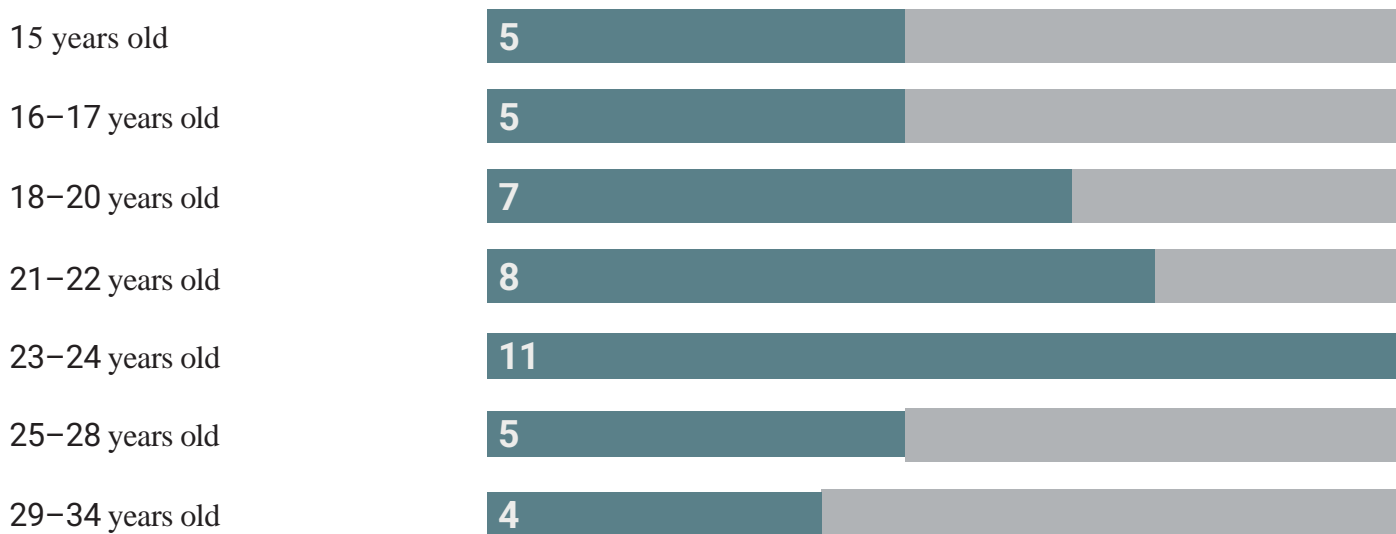
For my father and brother being physically violent is the norm. My father hit his wife and children, so my brother does the same. Everyone is very concerned with appearances, especially when unmarried girls are involved. My sister got physically punished for dancing at a school function – that was considered immodest. From early youth I wanted to leave my father's house and be spared all this drama. I rejoiced at the opportunity to get married and leave. (respondent, Ingushetia)

Circumstances of marriage

Age when married

Age when married

(out of 45)



Respondents are characterized by a relatively early age at first marriage. Russia's official average first marriage age for women moved from 25 to 34 years old, but the average age at which our respondents got married (21.6 years old) is more typical of their region. Out of 45 respondents 10 got married before they turned eighteen, so they were underage under Russian law.

- Five women were fifteen years old when they were “abducted to get married.” Three of those reported that they were simply not equipped to weigh all the risk connected with getting married in general and the risk of forcible separation from their children in particular.
- Five more married when they were sixteen and seventeen years old:
 - One of the 16-year-olds did not know who the groom would be until the wedding. The parents arranged everything.
 - Two of the seventeen-year-olds married by mutual consent and more or less on their own free will.

Arranged marriage frequently occurs and the woman sees her future husband for the first time only at the wedding ceremony or shortly before. Sometimes the woman is reluctant to get married under these circumstances, but the relatives pressure her.

I worked as a cashier in the store back then. An unknown man came in and said “Hi, it's me.” “Do I know you?” – I asked. He replied – “I am your future husband.” (respondent, Ingushetia)

He acted all weird and said that I will be his wife no matter what. I went to college back then and escaped to live with my aunt. My parents insisted I come home and married me off, I had to forget about college. (respondent, Dagestan)

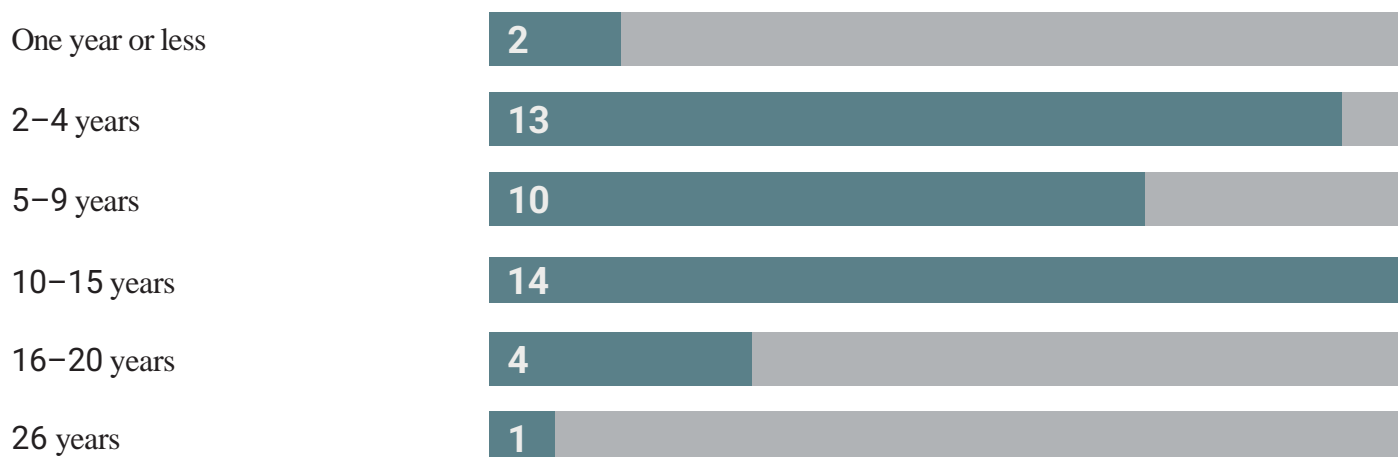
Length of marriage

There is no guarantee whatsoever that if you live with your husband for X amount of years, you would be immune from forced separation from you children. A year and two months, two years, seven years, eleven or fifteen years of marriage – no length of time is a guarantee against that happening.

The participants of the study lived in marriage to their husbands from two months to 26 years. Average length of marriage before separation from children – 8.3 years

Length of marriage prior to separation

(out of 45)



- A third of women (13 respondents) were married 2-4 years prior to divorce/separation and forced separation from children. A quarter (10 respondents) were married for a period of 5-8 years and another third (14 respondents) for 10 to 15 years.
- Two women were married for a less than a year prior to separation. One was married for mere two months. She was forcible married off at age fifteen and when she gave birth to a baby girl, the baby was taken away from her. This respondent has not seen her daughter for fifteen years.
- A tenth of respondents (4 women) were married for a long time prior to separation (16 to 20 years) and one was married for 26 years.

Parents' names on the birth certificate

The presence or absence of the father's name on the birth certificate has no bearing on the possibility of forced separation. 42 out of 45 women in our sample had their children's father's name denoted on the birth certificate, but even in cases where the father's name does not appear on the birth certificate, the child can be removed by force and a new birth certificate can be issued after the fact. The government officials in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan often side with the father and act according to custom rather than law. In all 45 cases the mother's name appears on the children's birth certificate. Nevertheless, three women were pressured into giving up custody of their children and two more women experienced such pressure, but resisted.

The investigative journalist's comment: The absence or presence of the father's name on the birth certificate is not an important factor to government agencies and their employees in the northern Caucasus region. We are familiar with cases where a woman bore a child abroad or in a different Russian region, and did not put the father's name on the birth certificate in the mistaken belief that this would protect her parental rights while in Chechnya. But when she got to Chechnya, the child was removed by force and the father's name was placed on the birth certificate after the fact due to the pressure of the father's relatives. No formalities would stop the Chechen authorities from removing the child from the mother's custody if the father's family is insistent enough.

Seven-year-old Aisha Azhigova had to have her hand amputated in 2019 due to the abuse she suffered from her father's relatives. The father's name was not even on Aisha's birth certificate. Her parents did not have an official marriage, just a religious ceremony in the mosque. When the couple divorced according to the Sharia law, the father's sister took physical custody of Aisha. The aunt treated the little girl as property and the mother felt powerless to return the child. Even though Aisha had her mother's last name and the parents were not married in the eyes of the Russian law, that did not help the situation one bit. In every one of the 45 cases in this study the children had their mother's name on the birth certificate, but that never stopped the father or his family from denying this very mother to the children or the authorities from condoning this very practice.

We have encountered several cases where data was entered into the children’s ID documents without the mother’s knowledge and against her will. This is evidence that in the Caucasus region neither Russian law, nor women’s rights are given much respect. For all the talk about “heaven is under the feet of the mother”, reality turns out to be quiet different.

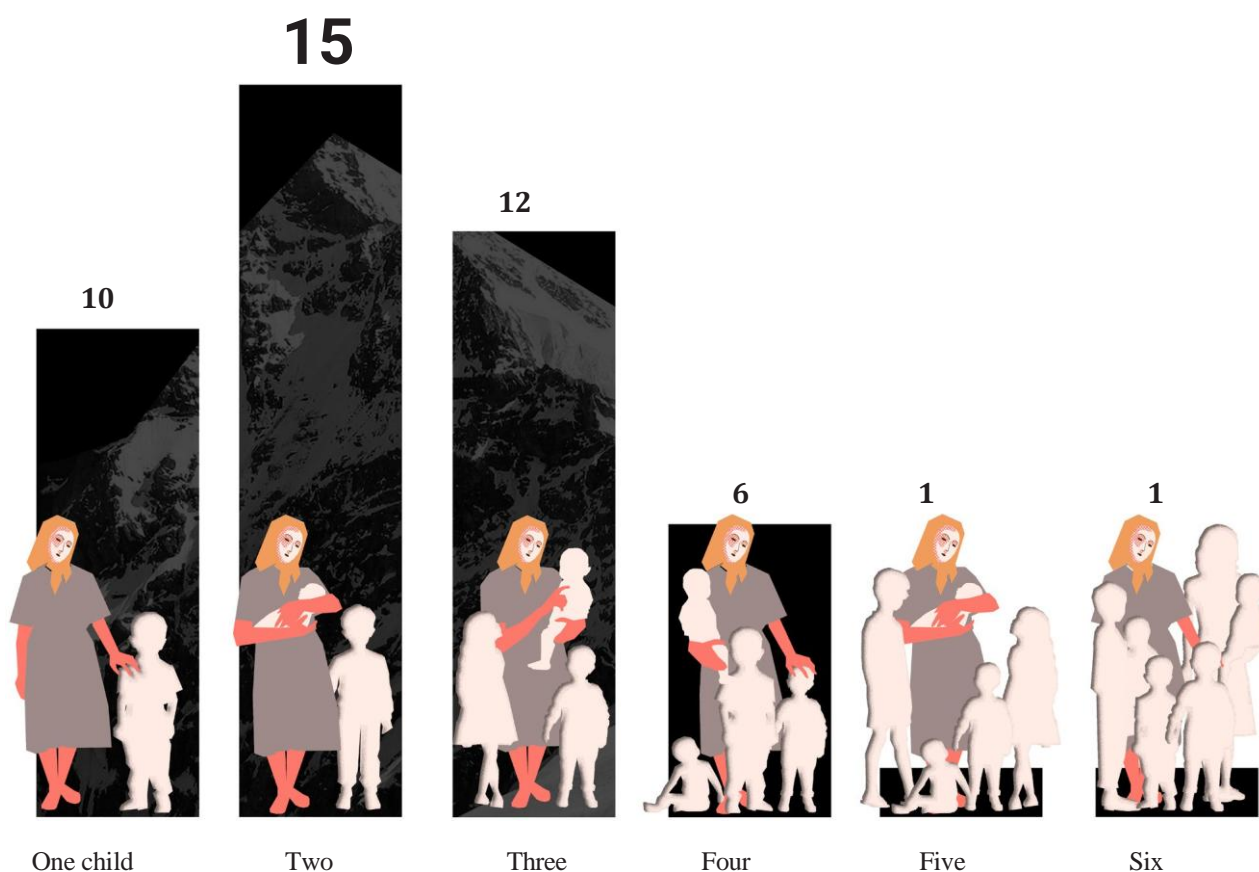
- **Malika Hamzatova, who told her story to the Legal Initiative project and participated in our study, had her 18-month-old daughter sold to a childless couple. The Chechnya residents we spoke to attest to the fact that childless people buy themselves children to adopt and raise. Officially, Chechnya has no orphanages and the culture frowns on open adoption. People would rather buy someone else’s child and pass them off as their own.**

Malika Hamzatova’s daughter has ID documents with inaccurate data that were procured illegally. Nobody answered for this crime and the girl grew up separated from her mother, with total strangers. The names of these strangers appear on the girl’s birth certificate. According to Malika, this whole operation cost twenty thousand US dollars.

- Another one of our respondents said that she does not know what appears on her son’s identification paperwork. After the respondent’s husband died, his parents took her son to raise as their own son, as a sort of exchange. It is possible that the boy’s mother does not even appear on his documents.

Number of children

(out of 45)

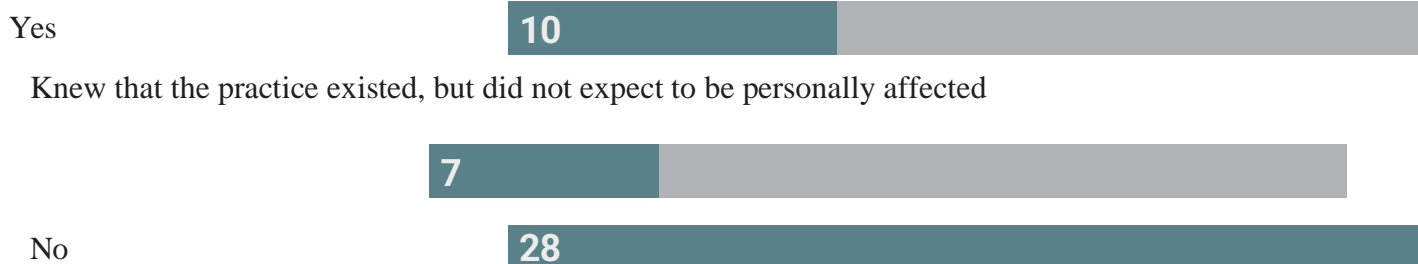


45 participants of our study have 111 children between them. Most women have two (15 participants) or three (12 participants) children. A little less than a quarter (10 participants) had one child, about one eighth (6 participants) had four, one had five and one had six. The average number of children per woman is 2.5 and the average number of separated children is slightly less – two per woman.

The women's awareness of the dangers of forced separation

Did you know that forced separation from your children was possible?

(out of 45)



More than half of the study participants (28 women) indicated that the thought of forced separation never occurred to them.

- Some respondents said that the thought never occurred to them, some said that no-one in their family had it happen to them, some lived outside the northern Caucasus region and some never heard of such a custom.

I was fifteen years old when I got married. I grew up in the middle of the war and it did not occur to me that peaceful life would have its own risks. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I never heard of such a thing, everyone in our village divorces in a civilized way. (respondent, Dagestan)

Nearly a quarter of the participants indicated that they knew it could happen to them.

- were directly and repeatedly threatened by their husband or his relatives, some had female relatives of their own forcibly separated from the children and some knew that in the event of forced separation the courts and the religious authorities take the father's side.

From the time I had my first child, the threat of forced separation was made at every fight. When my husband had his drug addiction episodes, his mother blamed me, but I could not leave. I was afraid I would never see my children again if I did leave. (respondent, Ingushetia)

One sixth of the number of participants (7 women) knew about the existence of the tradition of separating the children from their mother, **but did not think it would affect them personally:**

- Some of the women feel the traditions are not the problem, the problem is ignoring the traditions (the Sharia law mandates that children under 7 years old must stay with their mother)
- Some women felt that only "a tyrant and a monster" is capable of taking the children away from their mother and did not think of their husband or his family in that way.
- Some women felt knowledgeable and equipped enough to handle the situation. One woman took her children away from the Northern Caucasus and only then filed for divorce, while another did not succeed with the same scheme.

I heard of things like this, but did not think it applied to me (respondent, Ingushetia, ethnic Russian)

It never occurred to me. I knew it existed in Chechen families, but no-one in my family ever lived through it. I was abused in marriage and put up with it (respondent, Chechnya)

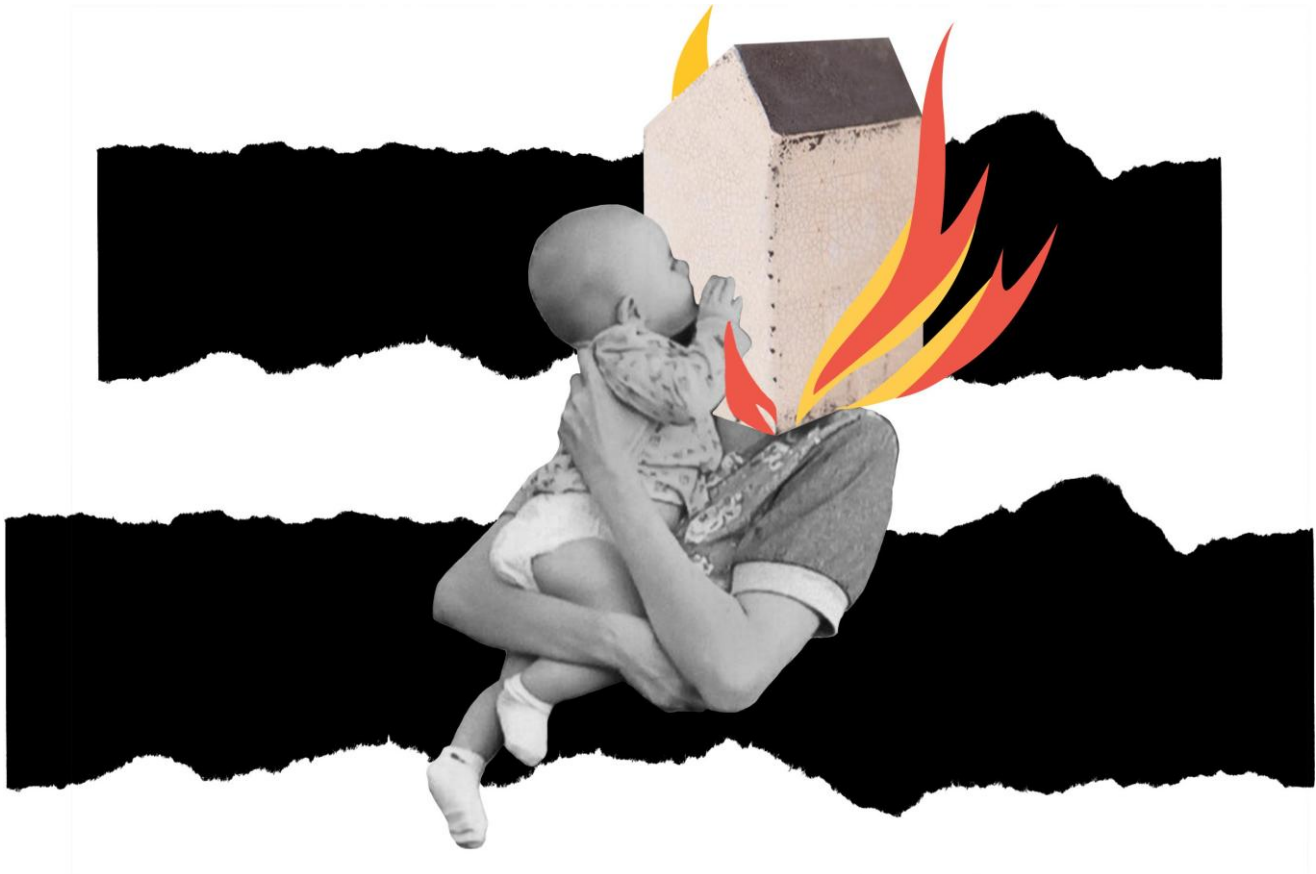
I had two children and I realized that they will separate me from them if I don't act quickly. I waited for the opportunity to take both of them out of Chechnya and only then declared my intent to end the marriage (respondent, Chechnya)

The number of removed children

Between them the respondents have 111 children. 90 of these were removed from their mothers

permanently. 21 children of twelve mothers were not removed or were promptly returned.

- If more than one child is involved, it frequently happens that not all children are removed from the mother, or, if all are removed, she manages to return one or more.



Examples of such situations:

The ex-husband took two boys and left the girl with the mother. He showed to interest in the girl and did not pay child support.

The mother managed to return her daughter with the help of the authorities, but not her son.

The father abducted the older boy and sued for custody of the younger one.

The mother of the five abducted children managed to return three of them and then another daughter. Even though the fathers and their families show more interest in boys than in girls (one respondent actually got kicked out of the house for bearing only daughters), children of both genders are at risk of forced separation and whether or not the child is separated from the mother does not appear to depend on the child's gender.

One mother had to return to her abusive husband for the sake of the children. She found that her youngest daughter was missing, given up for adoption and the father's family pocketed the adoption fee.

One mother managed to return all four of her children immediately.

One mother managed to return two boys promptly after the separation, but did not get to reunite with her daughter until a year later, when the girl landed in the hospital because of the abuse she suffered from paternal relatives. (More on treatment of abducted children below)

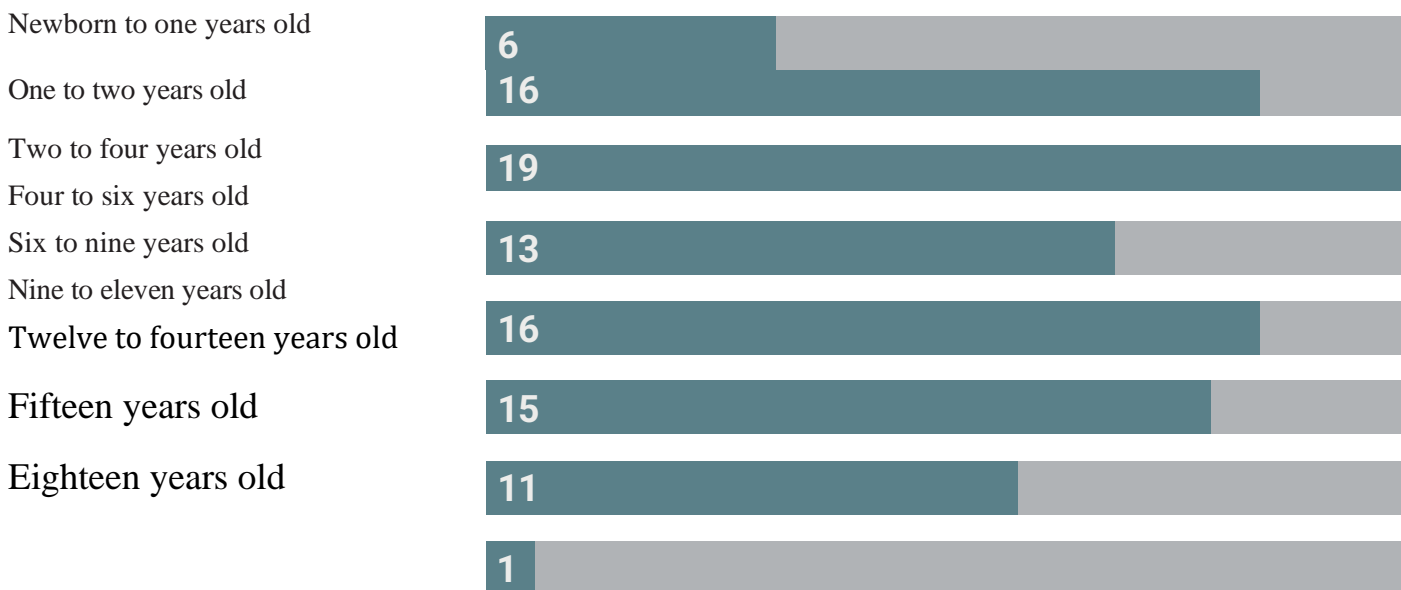
My daughter and sons were taken by my ex-husband's sister. She returned the boys the same day, but my daughter lived with those relatives for more than a year. They would not let me see her until she landed in the hospital because of the abuse. (respondent, Ingushetia)

After the divorce I was ill and stayed at my parent's house with my baby daughter. Two older children, boys, were taken by my in-laws – who refused to surrender them. (respondent, Chechnya)

I asked – where is the youngest? My mother- and sisters-in-law said – two girls are enough, you don't need a third one. They fed me stories that a German couple adopted my little girl. I appealed to the DA's office, but my husband's family threatened me. I got scared for my other kids and withdrew my complaint (respondent, Ingushetia)

Children's age at the moment of separation

(number of children)



The study participants indicated the age of 92 children at the time of their forced separation. The conclusion that can be drawn from their responses is as follows: children are separated from their mothers at all ages. It happens slightly less with infants under six months (6 of 92) or teenagers after fifteen years old (only two). The average age for separation is six years old, the median age is five years old.

If we are talking about children under two years old, it should be noted that the majority of them were still being breastfed, but that did not stop the separation.

Investigative journalist's comment:

More on the age at separation.

The age of the children involved is very diverse. No age is too low for someone to say with confidence: the child is too little to be separated. One of our participants had a child removed from her who was barely a month old and still being breastfed. There is no upper limit either. Our study is limited to cases under eighteen years old, but we encountered another woman, a widow, who told the following story: her daughter, a 23-year-old woman, is being pressured by her paternal uncles to move into their household! The girl cried and hid, but did not dare to openly defy older male relatives.

But there is the average age, about six years. At this age the child is usually aware enough to be influenced, to be lied to about the mother and to be taught the necessary words to say to child welfare professionals. The can be scared and intimidated into behaving in a way beneficial to the kidnappers. For example, a child that age can be taught to say "go away" to the mother.

These children don't have to be watched every waking moment, they don't need to be bottle fed eight times a day or have their diapers changed. They can be trained to be self-sufficient and even useful around the household.

Also, the separation allows the father's family to pocket various government payments to which the child is entitled. With that goal in mind the mother is frequently forced to sign away her parental rights.

We know of cases where the mother is forced to sign away government payments in exchange for the opportunity to see the child. After being allowed to see the child, the next condition comes – sign away your parental rights.

Regional quirks and traditions

In Dagestan we frequently observed the situation described above. The prevalence of marriage inside the clan contributes to this. As we were working on the study, we encountered a number of cases where a father married off his teenage daughter to his cousin, his nephew or some other relative.

In such cases women spoke to us on a condition of total anonymity. However difficult it may be to defy your ex-husband and his clan, it's still easier than defying your own clan, which also happens to be your husband's clan.

+This is a major difference between Dagestan and two other northern Caucasus regions – Ingushetia and Chechnya. While traditions there are equally oppressive and the authorities are equally biased against mothers, in those regions the woman at least has a chance to get emotional and material support from her parents and siblings. Within clan marriages are unknown in these parts.

But if, in Dagestan, the ex-husband's family is also the woman's family, all relatives invariably take the man's side both inside the clan and during official court hearings.

This is not the situation when two clans confront each other. On the contrary, the whole corpus of relatives exerts pressure on the woman. When the husband and wife share the same clan, it is easier for the clan to intimidate the victim, to make her feel crazy and helpless, to make her question her own rights to the children and to make her submit to whatever demands that are presented.



Some separated mothers were married off very young, against their will and really were not aware that they had rights. If they live far away from town, they have few opportunities to find lawyers and human rights activists and seek help. The mountain villages of Dagestan don't have their own clinics or police precincts and even transportation can be a problem. All this presents logistical challenges in the even the woman actually decides to grab her child and run for it.

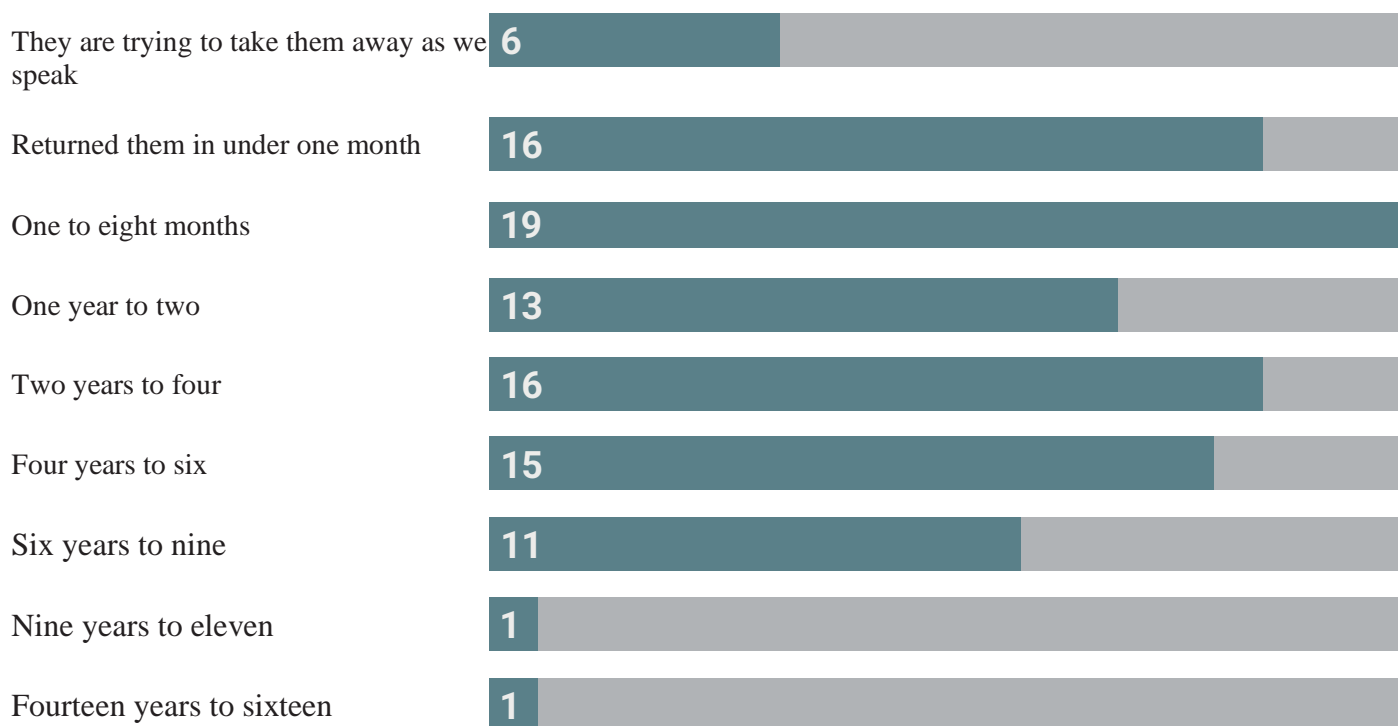
Here we see “might makes right” in full force. Even those relatives who are not physically or financially dependent on the father would do everything in the power to sabotage the mother, to malign her, to prevent her from seeing the children or winning in court, or to physically hinder the execution of the court decision awarding custody to the mother.

Law enforcement officials are frequently complicit in this. We are aware of cases when the police physically attacked the mother (Nina Zeretilova) or the mother’s lawyer (Oksana Sadchikova representing Aminat Mahmudova)

Length of separation

How long did you spend apart from your children

(Number of women)



** The number exceeds the number of women in the study (51 vs. 45) because in some cases the length of separation may be different for each child for those mother who have multiple children.*

The study participants are (or were in case they managed to return their children) separated from their children or child from one month to sixteen years. The average length of separation is 4.1 years.

The most frequent length of separation among the study participants is one to four years. In almost half the cases (21) the respondents have not seen their child for that length of time.

In one seventh of the cases (7 women) the women indicate that they were separated from their children for a period from one to eight month, the same number indicated four to six years and six respondents have not seen their children for six to eleven years.

The shortest separation we heard of lasted less than a week (on the graph it is represented as “returned under one month”) The father tried to abduct the children immediately after the divorce, but the woman managed to thwart him.

The most frequent length of separation is one year to four years. In almost half the cases (21) that’s how long the women did not see the children for.

In one seventh of the cases (7 women) the women indicate that they were separated from their children for a

period from one to eight month, the same number indicated four to six years and six respondents have not seen their children for six to eleven years.

The investigative journalist's comment:

The longest separation happened in the case of Malika Hamzatova. Malika has not seen her daughter for sixteen years. The girl was eighteen months old when she was taken away. Malika's husband was alive, but incompetent due to illness. His relatives kicked Malika out of the family home, but would not let her take her three small daughters with her. Some time later they invited Malika back because her mother-in-law became ill and needed care. Malika returned for the sake of the children, only to find that the youngest one is missing. When she started asking, the husband's relatives said "two is enough for you". According to her, she found out that the little girl was sold for adoption to a childless couple in an adjacent region. Returning the girl proved impossible, even with the help of qualified lawyers.

Many of these separations are likely to become permanent. The children grew up thinking that their mothers abandoned them. Many were separated while very young, they don't remember their mothers, and spend most of their lives with strangers. Zeliha Magomadova's daughters grew up convinced that not only did Zeliha abandon them, but she "brought shame on the family" by dating other men after her husband's death.

The accusation itself is absurd, but Zeliha's husband's family had some very self-serving motives for what they did. Zeliha was forced into marriage at age fifteen. Her husband was a law enforcement officer. When he died in the line of duty, the government paid his widow and children a lump sum and gave them a monthly pension. The dead man's brothers forced Zeliha into signing a power of attorney and received her money. She never saw a penny of it.

Zeliha and her children lived in the home that her husband built for them.

The brothers-in-law kicked Zeliha out of the home, taking away her place to live, in addition to taking away her money and her children.

Zeliha's children were clearly poisoned against her and really intimidated. They testified against their mother in court and afterwards could relate to her at all.

It is clear that the forced separation left lasting psychological scars on Zeliha's children. According to her, one of the daughters would sometimes correspond with her on messenger and sometimes block her. It is also possible that Zeliha's daughter (herself a grown married woman by now) was prohibited from talking to her mother. That's the kind of power uncles and brothers have even over adult Chechen women.

In short, when children are separated from their mothers, the lives of everyone involved are cruelly disrupted, the effects are lasting and painful and the whole practice is criminal and abusive.

Did the father of the children beat you?

(out of 45)

Yes

31

No

14

Two thirds of the study participants (31 of 45) recounted experiencing physical violence in marriage.

- The violence involved slapping, hitting with fists and kicking, as well as hitting with objects on the head, face and stomach (while the woman was pregnant). The women also reported being slammed into the wall and
- In some cases the violence was triggered by the alcohol and/or drug addiction of the husband and/or his relatives.
- One woman from Dagestan reported that her husband repeatedly beat her, stabbed her with a knife and then buried her alive, essentially trying to kill her.



He beat me with a stool. He beat me with an iron. He punched in the face with his fist. Whenever he went to Volgograd, I had a normal peaceful life. He returned – and the drinking and the beatings start again. I would grab my little child and run to his cousin's house. They sheltered me and then persuaded me to return. (respondent, Dagestan)

For seven years I lived in hell. It turned that my father-in-law was an alcoholic and my husband was a drug addict (he used marijuana). I had to live with my husband's family and do all the household chores and take care of everyone, including his sisters' children. My husband showed me no affection. He just beat me, prohibited me from visiting my mother and scared away all my friends. (respondent, Dagestan)

I was pregnant when I first saw him under the influence of drugs. I found drugs in the bathroom and I found my husband's online correspondence about buying substances. I threw a hissy-fit and wanted to leave right then. My father-in-law begged me to stay and promised to drum some sense into my husband, if only I gave him time. Divorce is frowned upon, I agreed to give the family another chance. Three months passed and they were filled with recriminations, accusations and mind games. Then they graduated to threats to separate me from my son if I tried to leave. (respondent, Chechnya)

| Kicked the woman out of the family home | 18 | Took by trickery | 20 | Took by force | 10 | Pressured the woman into giving up | 8 | The court took custody away from the woman | 4 |
|---|----|--|----|------------------------|----|---|---|---|---|
| The husband himself for no reason | 7 | The father himself, including two cases of removing to another region and two cases of removing to another country | 12 | The father himself | 9 | The father's relatives | 3 | The Russian secular court awarded custody to the father, taking "traditions" into account | 2 |
| The husband because he took a second wife | 6 | The father's relatives | 8 | The father's relatives | 1 | The village elders or Muslim clerics | 2 | The Islamic court in the process of a religious divorce | 1 |
| The husband's relatives | 5 | | | | | The father's relatives | 1 | The court in Germany awarded joint custody | 1 |
| | | | | | | The mother's own parents or other relatives | 2 | | |

**The number of methods of forced separation (60) exceeds the number of study participants since the methods were frequently combined. For example, a woman was kicked out of the house, then the court awarded custody of the children to her, then the child is removed by trickery or force, or, in case of multiple children various methods are used to separate each of the children from the mother.*

Often a woman is so powerless that her separation from her children simultaneously means the loss of her home: the woman is simply kicked out either by her husband or his relatives. If the children did not stay at home and the mother was able to leave with them, then the children are kidnapped, taken away either by deception or by force. There are also situations when pressure is put on the mother, and under the pressure of threats and public opinion about the power of traditions, she herself gives away the children. In rare cases the court awards custody in the father.

We can identify several ways in which forced separation is accomplished.

The mother is kicked out of the house. That happened in about a third of the cases (18 women). This is part and parcel of the system where a woman is viewed not as a human being with rights, but as a function of service to the husband and his family as well as childbearing and childrearing. In that worldview a woman can be easily replaced with another, like one replaces a washing machine or a microwave. After marriage the woman usually lives in her husband's home, but her property rights to it are not registered anywhere officially.

- In the majority of cases it is **the husband who kicks the woman out of the house** (13 of 18 cases). This is accompanied by physical violence and emotional pressure. One fifteen-year-old was forcibly married and then kicked out of the house because her husband said her legs weren't straight enough. Later she was separated from her newborn daughter by force.
- In half the cases the kicking out **occurs out of the blue** (7 of 13 cases) and the rest (6 of 13) are connected to the fact that **the man brings a second wife home** (whether before or after the divorce in a secular court). This leads to a situation when the first wife wants to leave and take her children but is prevented from doing so, or, alternatively, she is willing to stay to remain with the children, but is kicked out without them.
- In more than a quarter of the cases (5 of 18) it is **the man's relatives who kick the woman out of the house**, whether a man is alive or deceased. It could be the husband's mother, sister or aunt, or, more rarely, his male relatives, like a brother. In that case the brother-in-law kicked the woman out of the apartment she co-owned with her deceased husband because he wanted the apartment.

My husband brought home a second wife and kicked me out. I begged to be allowed to stay with the

children, but got kicked out anyway (respondent, Chechnya)

“Брак продлился всего два месяца, а потом он меня выгнал, сказал, ноги кривые. А когда я родила, у меня забрали грудную девочку, мне было 16 лет, и с тех пор я дочь не видела” The marriage lasted about two months and then he kicked me out and said my legs weren't straight enough. When I gave birth, my baby girl was taken away from me and I have not seen her for sixteen years. (respondent, Chechnya)

My mother-in-law and sister-in-law kicked me out of the house and my husband did not object. I took my son with me, but when my husband's relatives came to collect my little boy, my own parents forced me to surrender him. (respondent, Dagestan)

I went to visit my ailing mother and came back the same day. At home my brother-in-law beat me up, saying I don't watch the children. I was not allowed to return home. (respondent, Chechnya)

- **Children are removed by deceit** — in a third of cases (20) the children were taken away under the pretext of spending time with their father or visiting relatives and not returned to the mother.
 - More often than not the father himself removes the children (12 of 20 cases)
 - Sometimes his relatives do it for him (8 of 20 cases)

In essence, I myself surrendered the children to their father, when he asked if he could have them for one day to visit their grandmother. My ex swore to my father that he would return the children on time. I remember my little boy didn't want to go, so I had to cajole him. The same evening they were off to Ingushetia. The bad feeling would not let me sleep and I rushed to their Moscow apartment in the morning. Children's clothes and toys were scattered all around – they left in a hurry. For a long time after I was haunted by the feeling that I am carrying my daughter in my arms. It was like phantom pains. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The investigative journalist's comment: This usually happens post-divorce. The father or his relatives took the children for vacation, holiday visits or a stroll in the park and disappeared along with them.

In several cases the father abducted the children from school or day care. In one case, according to the custody arrangement the father was entitled to spend the whole day with the children, while they slept in their mother's residence. The father signed the children up for all kinds of after school activities to last into late evenings, to preclude them from socializing with their mother during the day.

At the same time he imbued the children with the belief that their mother is not interested in them. As a result, the children testified against the mother in court and refused to return to her.

- **Children are taken away by force** — this happened in one sixth of the cases (10 of 60). Usually the father himself does it (9 of 10 cases), sometimes a relative, like a brother-in-law from the example above. In every one of these cases, a physical barrier was erected between the mother and the children – a locked door, a car driving away with the children, etc.

I left with my child, unable to bear the beatings any longer. My ex and his father accosted me while I was taking my son for a walk and grabbed him. (respondent, Ingushetia)

After he beat me yet again, I grabbed my baby and ran. Soon my husband found me and took the baby, beating me once again. (respondent, Dagestan)

- The mother is pressured to leave and/or abandon the children — in about one eighth of cases (8 of 60) the women were pressured by **the husband's parents and relatives** (3 instances), **the elders and Muslim clerics** got involved (2 instances), **the husband himself** exerted pressure (the woman was afraid of his connections), or **the woman's own parents** pressured her (in one case it was a cousin marriage, in another the parents just pressured the daughter to give up her children and remarry).

After my husband beat me up, I took my daughter and ran away to my parents. My parents started pressuring me to return to my husband and not embarrass them, they are his relatives too... I left my daughter with them and ran and my husband demanded the welfare payments I received (respondent, Dagestan)

My husband beat me frequently, choked me in front of the children and made my life miserable. He threatened to burn me and the children. He forced me to sign a paper giving up my parental rights. And now,

after the divorce, he is threatening that if I remarry he will produce that paper and I will never see my children again. (respondent, Dagestan)

- Sometimes the **court takes custody away** from the mother (4 instances)
 - The Russian court reaches the decision to award custody to the father based on “regional traditions” (3 instances)
 - The Islamic court reaches the decision to award custody to the father (1 instance)

The investigative journalist’s comment: One of the separations happened with the help of Dagestan’s Islamic clerics council. The woman, who lived outside of Dagestan was summoned to appear before the religious court along with her children. The Sharia court ruled in favor of the father and the woman

- Even if foreign countries the authorities sometimes are not aware that the father’s goal is to shut the mother out of the children’s lives.

The investigative journalist’s comment: In one of our cases – a Chechen family residing in Germany – the father used the local police and courts to take the children away from the woman. The woman ran away along with the children, fleeing domestic violence and the husband reported them missing. The police executed a warrant on the woman very unceremoniously. This is one of the two cases in the study where the father used the authorities to remove the children from the mother.

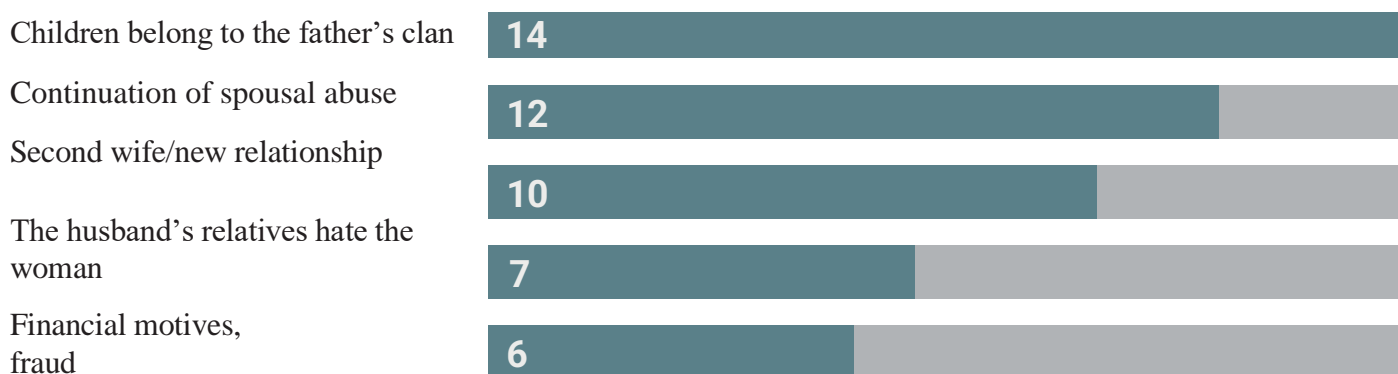
Luckily, the situation in Germany resolved itself since the laws in Germany actually work to protect the vulnerable. Several months later the court awarded 50/50 custody and two years later, after several court hearing, the woman restored full custody to herself, having proven that the father used physical punishment on the boys.

Motives from removal of the children by the father’s clan

The investigative journalist’s: The reason for the deliberate and systematic violation of women’s rights in the studied regions is, by and large, impunity, patriarchal attitudes, discriminatory practices and criminal actions, or the inaction of local law enforcement and judicial authorities, as well as the ineffective system of management and civil administration in

Motives for the removal of the children

(Number of cases)



The whole number exceeds the number of participants in the study (49 vs. 45) since some cases have more than one motive.

As part of the study, it was possible to identify five main motives for removing the children, to which the study participants referred in one way or another.

“The children belong to the clan” – the primacy of tradition over the interests of children and mothers

In a third of cases (14) it is said that the father’s family must raise the children post-divorce or father’s death because doing otherwise would damage the reputation of the father’s family and people will gossip.

The children's welfare is not a factor anyone is considering and the children are viewed as property of their father's family. The man's parents view the children as theirs, trying to remove the mother out of the child's life and even instructing the children to call their paternal grandmother "mother".

Women who remarry post-divorce are especially at risk of having their children removed.

We divorced because of the pressure from my husband's family. I took my daughter and returned to my parents. When the child turned two, my husband's relatives came along with the village elders and demanded my ex be allowed to have visitation with his daughter. During one of these visits they simply did not return my daughter, saying she should be raised by her father's family. (respondent, Chechnya)

My ex-husband's parents took my baby son. They pressured me psychologically, as if it was my fault that their son is wanted for murder and is hiding from the police. They said – you owe it to us to give up his child to us. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The investigative journalist's comment: Here both traditional and religious Islamic guidelines are in agreement that a woman has no right to keep her children with her if she has a new husband. This would supposedly bring shame on their father and their father's family.

Continuation of spousal abuse

In about a third of cases (12) the removal of children fit into the general dynamic of family violence, as one of multiple ways to inflict pain on the woman and the children were used as a tool for revenge.

In these cases the children were manipulated emotionally to make them reject their mother.

When we divorced, we agreed that the children will alternate between me and my ex, but my ex took them to his relatives' home in Ingushetia. I was not allowed to see my children. My ex' relatives kept saying I have to move to their house. But that's absurd: I divorced their son! My son and daughter became instruments of revenge. I was pressured to sign a paper consenting to them living with their father. (respondent, Chechnya)

The investigative journalist's comment:

In one case a man persuaded the woman to marry him for a second time, after they have been divorced. He promised to let her raise the children who were previously removed from her. When she returned to her ex, all she got was beatings, strangulation and threats to have her committed to a psychiatric asylum. In the Caucasus region one can not only get away with it, citing religious and local traditions which condone male violence against woman, but also to get tacit approval of society and government agencies.

The children's father takes a second wife or begins a relationship with another woman.

In the fifth of cases (10 instances) the father cheated on the mother, or wished to bring another wife to the home (potentially permitted in the traditional framework) to which the children's mother objected, or kidnapped the children post-divorced, to be raised by the subsequent wife.

We were married and my husband entered into an Islamic marriage with his best friend's widow who had two children from previous marriages. I took my daughters and ran, but was returned to my husband by deceit. He took the children, hid them at his friend's apartment and then brought them to live with his new family. His new wife's son is a teenager. It's not proper for girls to live in the same house with a teenage boy who is not related to them. (respondent, Chechnya)

The new wife becomes a part of the system of the same violence. One of the respondents indicated that it was the second wife who secretly passed her the information about the children. The second wife also suffered domestic violence from the same man, losing two pregnancies due to his beatings.

Conflict with the man's family

Sometimes the man's relatives (mother, sister, aunt) instigate the conflict which leads to the woman being kicked out of the home and losing physical custody of the children. Sometimes even the woman's

own parents can encourage the abuse of their daughter.

We fought throughout the marriage and my husband's sister poured oil into the fire. We got a divorce, I took the children. They were taken from me under the pretext of visiting with their father's family and not returned. (respondent, Chechnya)

husband's family didn't like the fact that I bore only girls. I was kicked out and they would not let me take my daughters with me. A year later my mother-in-law fell ill and required care, so my brothers-in-law invited me back in. I discovered that my youngest was missing, that she was sold for adoption. My husband's mother and sisters said – two girls are enough, you don't need a third one. (respondent, Chechnya)

When I separated from my husband, we agreed that the children would stay with me. They attended a good day care. In two years I remarried and my husband's family took the children under the pretext of visitation – and did not return them. My ex's parents were hoping that we would reconcile and when they realized that we won't – they took the children. Their family is well-connected. My ex's sister is in charge of the municipal education department and his brother is on the municipal council. (respondent, Dagestan)

Fraud, financial motives

Шесть (6) женщин, принявших участие в опросе, сообщили, что их лишили детей ради денег. Sometimes children are separated from their mothers because the father or the father's family want to acquire control over the children's property or government benefits. Six women participating in our study indicated that there was a financial motive behind their forced separation from their children.

- Mothers were forced to surrender government benefits in exchange for the opportunity to see the children, or the widow was simply kicked out of the home she co-owned with her husband, while the children were retained as a way to control the property.

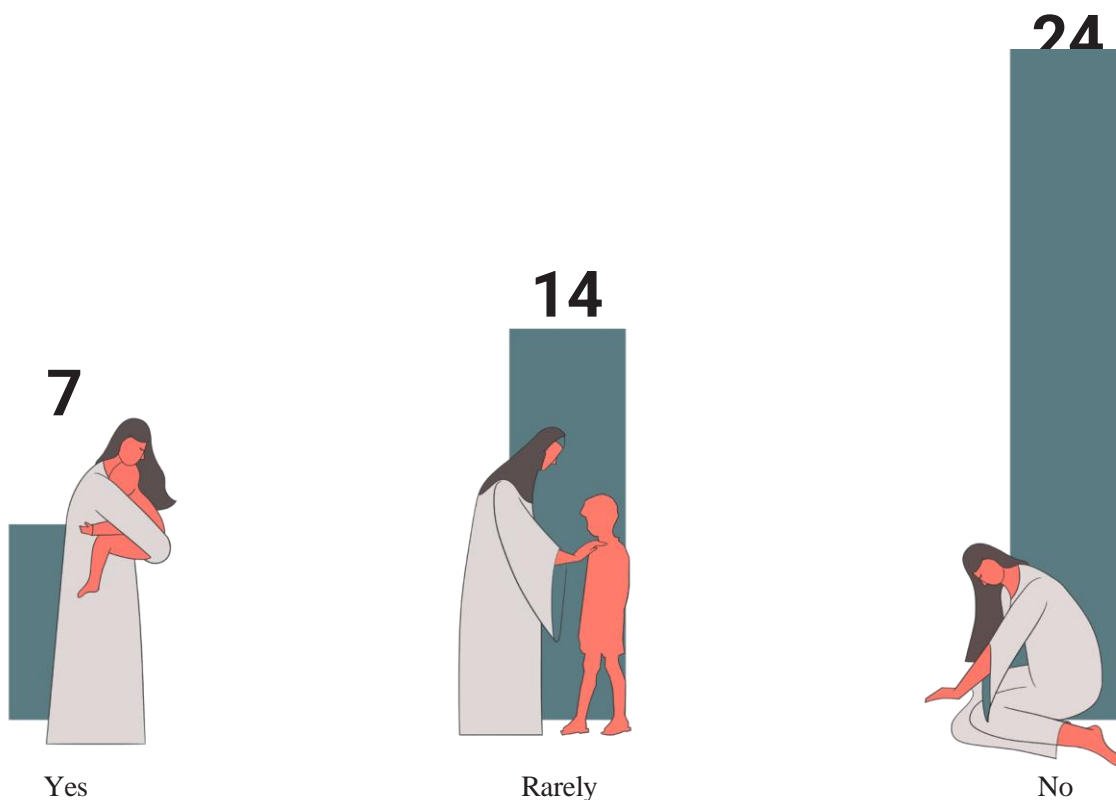
My ex got a voucher for real estate, 900 thousand rubles per family member. He never took the children for visitation before and all of a sudden decided to borrow them for a week. It all felt very strange... Soon the children starting calling me and saying that Dad bought a new car and a new furniture. When I asked where the money came from, he said he won the lottery. I told him to return the children since they have to be prepared for the academic year and it turned out that he transferred them from a school in Grozny to a school in Ingushetia. I found out that he used the children to get the certificate. He needed them to get a larger sum than he would otherwise. (respondent, Ingushetia)

Soon after my husband's death, his brothers took the one-time payment, 2.5 million rubles, and forced me to sign a power of attorney to receive orphan payments (10000 rubles per month per child) (respondent, Chechnya)

My brother-in-law persuaded me to sell the apartment and promised to build a home in Grozny, where I would live with my children. I sold the apartment and gave him the money without any promissory note. He really did build the house, but I was forced to live their with him, his son and the son's family. Once, when I was out doing my business, they changed the locks. It turned out I had no legal property interest in that house and I was left with nothing. And when they took my children from me by deceit, the house lost its' importance. (respondent, Chechnya)

The investigative journalist's comment: Here we see the hypocrisy of those who like to appeal to religion and tradition. According to tradition, the brother's widow and his children are entitled to care and support from surviving brothers. But the cases in our study reveal a scenario where the "care and support" was limited to taking away the woman's property and her children and slandering her to the extent of the relatives' capabilities.

The opportunity to see the children post-separation



More than half of the participants of the study (24 women) are completely denied the opportunity to see their children. Some of them could not return their children, or have been denied contact with them for many years.

A third of the participants (14 women) can see their children rarely and on a very irregular basis.

- Some of the mother had temporary opportunities to see their children (while the woman's father who protected her was alive; right after the decision by the court or until the father's family took the child to another region)
- Children are frequently poisoned against the mother and are punished for socializing with her. It could lead to the situation where the woman is only in contact with the youngest child while the older ones refuse.

Only about one eighth of the participants (7 women) indicate that they can see their children on the regular basis.

- The mothers visit the children at school, enlist the help of sympathetic relatives or have the resources to insist on executing the court custody decisions.
- Some of the mothers see their children in secret. Older children sometimes secretly see their mother at her home or workplace, call or write.

I rarely see the children, only when the teachers agree to take them to see me. But they are very much intimidated by my ex. (respondent, Chechnya)

How children are poisoned against their mother and are prohibited from talking to her

The influence of the husband's relatives

the father's relatives have a say in how often the mother gets to see the children. Often they insist that the mother has no claim to them. Sometimes this psychological pressure is exerted without the father's participation. Instead they appeal to morals, religion, customs and public opinion. "What would people think" is a powerful argument in the Caucasus, sometimes the strongest one.

When talking to the father, the relatives appeal to his “traditional masculinity” and insist that any compromise with the mother re child custody and visitation removes the man from his rightful place in the family hierarchy.

The father’s influence

The study participants reported that their chance of contact with the children heavily depends on the father’s mood. The women have to flatter, cajole, bribe the men into allowing such meetings, sometimes they have to put up with insults and mockery or fork over some material benefits in order to be allowed to see their children.

The influence of the woman’s relatives

It has to be mentioned that situations regularly occur, where the woman’s own family discourages her contact with her own children after the divorce. “*Leave them alone, they are someone else’s children*” – that’s what women in our study routinely quoted their relatives saying, when describing the moral climate in their own families.

- In two of the cases known to us the woman’s own brothers forced her into signing a paper giving up custody, giving the brothers a reason to tell the children and everyone else “*the mother abandoned them*”.
- mothers received the following threats when attempting to arrange the children to visit them for holidays or vacations: if something were to happen to these children during these visits, the mother or her family would be subject to vendetta under “the laws of the mountains”, since technically the mother or her clan harmed representatives of another clan.

How children are brainwashed against the mother

The father and his family often brainwash the child against the mother, which makes further contact difficult, if not impossible. Older children and children are usually prohibited from contacting their mother. Their cell phone and internet traffic is monitored. Children are punished for attempting at such contact by a variety of ways from having their privileges (like cell phones) taken away to physical abuse.

- The sixteen year old daughter of one of our respondents was beaten by her father for contacting her mother and referring to the respondent as “mom” and not “whore”, as the father instructed her to do.
- Some children are removed to different regions or countries. Often fathers instruct the children what to say to the mother in the event the mother calls or to refuse to speak to her, if the call is mandated by a court decision.
- Sometimes the fathers manage to convince directors of schools and day care establishments to not allow the mother to visit the children in those establishments, if she tried to do so.

The day the bailiffs came, I had my son till midnight. He hugged and kissed me, cried, would not let me go, said that he loved me and begged to stay. But after that time my five-year-old was brainwashed against me. Two months later when I saw him, he would not let me hug him and appeared frightened. I know that his grandparents tell him that I abandoned him and moved “to live with another man”. They say to him that my gifts to him are “from another man”. My son believes it. He calls his grandmother “mom”. As soon as I approach the gate, he becomes nervous and starts calling for his grandparents to come. He was brainwashed into thinking that I would take him away and his life with me would be awful. I rarely see my son, he barely knows me now. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I know that my daughter was sent to her aunt in Grozny for New Year vacation and I think she was intimidated there. Her attitude changed. Besides, she and my son lost a lot of weight on that vacation. When I came after New Year, my daughter avoided me. I was shocked. So I asked my son – let’s go visit her together, maybe you can help me reach out to her. We entered the classroom, my son began speaking to his sister. She approached me and gave me a hug. She said she loved me, but is afraid: the other adults in her life are angry at her for loving me. (respondent, Chechnya)

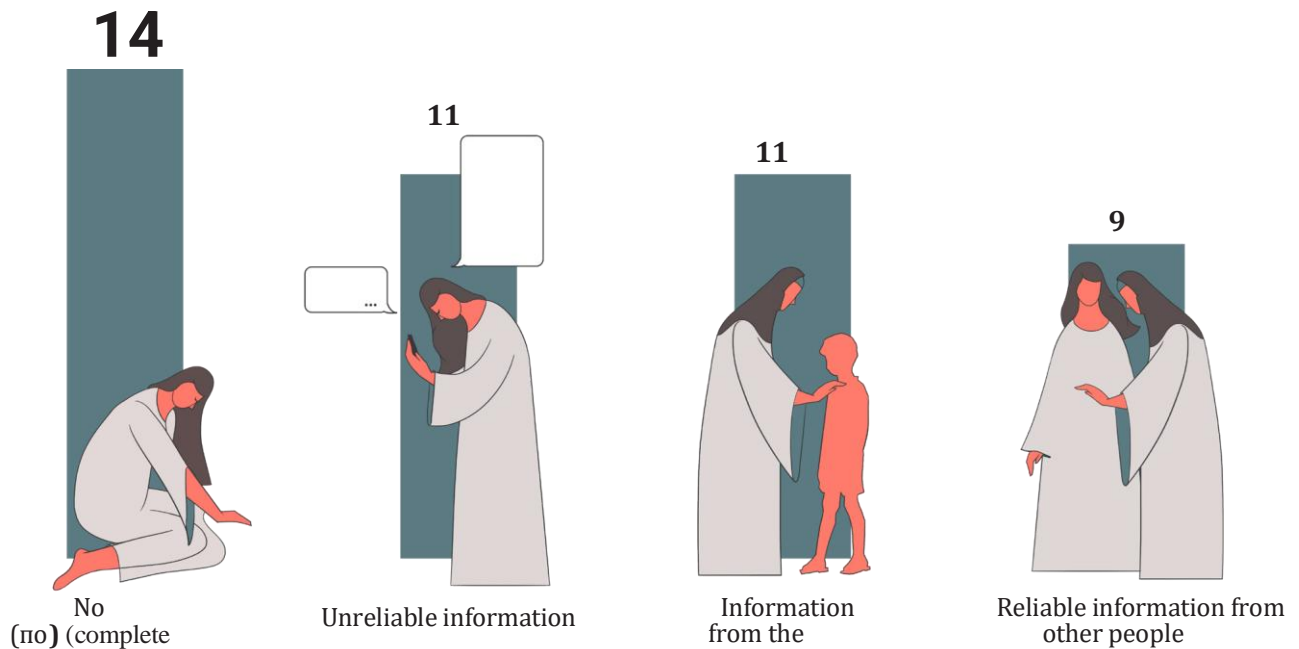
”I make attempt to reestablish contact with my son, but to no avail so far. The school personnel is prejudiced against me. I can’t just come in and talk to my son. This is Ingushetia, everyone has their nose in everyone else’s business. I am hated because I stood up for my parental rights and

fought for them in court. According to these people, the children are their father's property and I am a thief. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The opportunity to receive information about the children from whom they are separated

How is the information obtained

(out of 45)



Unfortunately, **about a third of the participants** (14 women) are in **complete information isolation** from their children and know nothing of them. A **quarter of participants** (11 women) **have bits and pieces of unreliable information** that cannot be independently verified.

- It is worth noting, that having contact with the child, especially conducted sporadically and in secret, is not a guarantee that the mother would be fully appraised of the child's health and academic progress. The child can be intimidated or instructed what not to say to the mother. Or the child him(her)self can withhold information in order not to cause the mother further anguish in an already difficult family situation. Besides, the secret communication channel via telephone can be severed any time for a number of reasons. That is why **it is justified to say that in cases of forced separation almost none of the mothers have complete and reliable information about their children.** This prevents the mothers from meaningfully participating in their children's upbringing.

For a whole year I had no information about my daughter, save for the photos my husband's second wife sent me in secret (respondent, Chechnya)

My little girl refers to her grandmother as mom, and to her grandfather was dad. I can't even get a photo of my daughter, I don't know what school she goes to and I did not get to see her off on the first day of school in her life. Her father remarried and now my daughter has two younger half-sisters. I tried to get in touch with him directly, but the only response I get is insults. (respondent, Ingushetia)

Another quarter of the participants (11 women) find out about the children from the children themselves.

- Some of the mothers see the children with the father's permission (on weekends, etc.), for some the contact is limited to phone calls and correspondence. Some women use the school space to see their children in secret.

Last year my oldest son's teacher called me and said she noticed bruises on him. He said that his stepmother beat him and also broke his cell phone against the wall. The cell phone was a present from me. I filed a complaint with the police, but the teacher refused to confirm my words because she was afraid of antagonizing my ex. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I only find things out when I visit the school – whenever I have the time and the money to do that. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The cohort of women who received information from their children includes **those who have sporadic communications with their grown children.** The latter were removed from their mothers when still very

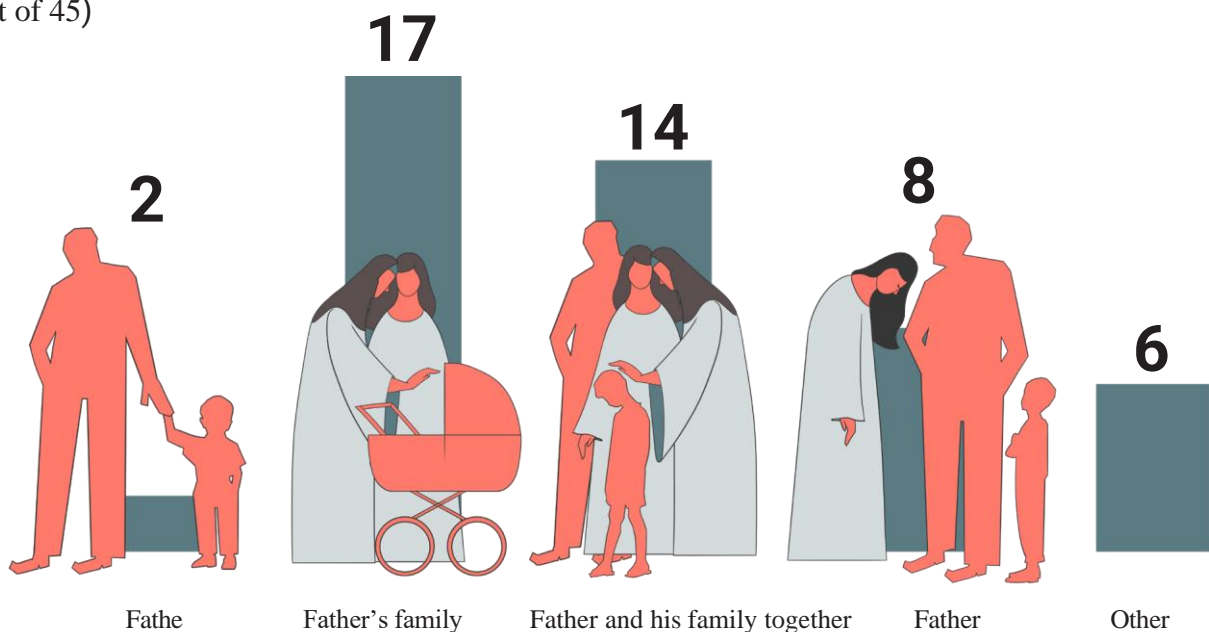
young and raised by other people. While they were young, they were forbidden from establishing contact with their mother. This mother-child connection can only be formed when the child is small and cannot be restored once it has been cruelly and artificially severed.

- In the case of Zeliha Magomadova from Chechnya, her daughters are grown married women, but they still don't have regular contact with her. According to Zeliha "sometimes they block me on all social network apps and sometimes they write to me." These young women are traumatized and wrecked with guilt. Their father forced them to testify against their mother in court and to run away from her when she came to visit them in school.
- Another Chechen woman, whose son was forcibly kept and raised by her ex-husband's clan told us about her son who is eighteen years old and clearly wants to reestablish contact with the mother. But the reality is very much hostile to this wish. As for information about her son, this woman received it on those rare occasions when the young man needs someone to talk to. The father still controls, still forbids contact with the mother and the youth is afraid to defy his father openly.

The investigative journalist's comment: Even grown children, male as well female, remain under the control of their father's clan after reaching the age of majority and the mother has no rights or claims to them. We got a call from one Chechen woman with the following story. The relatives of her deceased husband pressured her 23-year-old daughter to move in to their house, to submit to their authority and to marry the candidate that they select! The girl wept and did all she could to sabotage those plans, but did not dare to defy the older male relatives openly. The mother did not call us again and we don't know how the story ended. But for many mothers across Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan the situation remains such that they have to obtain information on their children from third parties, in bits and pieces or resign to not knowing anything of their children and living in hope that the situation would change.

Who raises the children forcibly separated from their mothers

(out of 45)



In the event where the father removes the child from the mother in the vast majority of instances the father is not raising these children by himself. In the event where the affidavit is required for court or child welfare to the effect that the father is raising the children by himself, his family lies on those affidavits.

Only in **two** cases out of 45 the father raised the abducted children by himself.

- In one of the cases, the mother (Iraida Smirnova) sent her husband money for the children's upkeep for a long time. She had almost no opportunities to see them and exchanged phone calls with the oldest daughter in secret. Later, in Dagestan, the father who was from Dagestan, started sexually abusing the oldest daughter. Several years prior he did the same to the oldest daughter of his other wife, i.e. his stepdaughter. When Iraida managed to retrieve her

children, she immediately filed a criminal complaint on behalf of her daughter re sexual violence.

- In another case from our study the respondent related how her ex husband took their four children (aged 6 to 15) and settled in another region of Russia with them. He teamed with the woman's own relatives and together they forced her to sign a document giving up her parental rights. She felt powerless not sign because of the power the older male relatives held according to local traditions.

The oldest daughter kept up secret communication with the mother and her father beat her when he found out. He also made girl insult her mother out loud. The second separation still continues, albeit with regular phone and mail contact.

The most frequent scenario amounts to the father's relatives raising the child: this happens in more than a third of the cases (17 of 45). In other words, when the father kidnaps the children through force or deceit (see above), he has now plans to raise them by himself.

- In some cases the abduction can be the idea of the father's relatives who view the child as a resource.
 - In case of Aisha Azhigova from Ingushetia who spend more than a year with her paternal aunt's family, the girl was taken away from her divorced mother with the reasoning "the children belong to their father's clan." The father himself had zero interest in the children, so the aunt took the little girl. Due to the aunt's abuse Aisha lost her arm and will remain disabled for the rest of her life.

My ex's sister showed up. She threatened me with her police connections and led away my sons and daughter. I managed to return the sons, but not the daughter. The children's father had zero interest in them, even though according to the traditions, he should have been the one raising them. Later he didn't even pretend to be interested what's going on with his daughter. He didn't look for her, didn't visit her, didn't ask about her health. He visited the investigator because you don't ignore a subpoena and considered this parental duties fulfilled. (respondent, Ingushetia)

- In other cases the **burden of raising the children falls on the relatives who are not prepared for it.**
 - one of the cases the burden of caring for the children fell on their 75-year-old grandmother. The woman is elderly and very unhealthy. She can't possibly care for multiple children. The children have to be taken to after school activities, their homework needs to be supervised, their school supplies need to be purchased, they have to be taken to medical appointment, in some cases they have to be administered medications. All this doubly difficult when the family lives in the countryside – transportation issues come into play. All this is too much of a burden on an elderly woman, but no-one asked her opinion when foisting the children upon her. Not to mention that even the most willing, healthy and available grandmother cannot replace a mother.
 - In another case a drug-addicted father was absent from the children's lives for months on end. He even lived and worked in another region. The children's health and welfare were trusted to some relatives who weren't even official guardians.
 - There is also case where a child is being raised by his father's stepmother, i.e. his grandfather's second wife. The father was probably separated from his mother as a child and now he is forcing his own children to go through the same.

They are raised by their father's family, but he himself doesn't even live there. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I know that the children are being shuttled from relative to another. I am the only one who is interested in them, and yet I am the one who is not allowed to raise them. (respondent, Dagestan)

They are being raised by their father's relatives, but they actually live in a shed in the yard. The shed is unfit for human habitation (respondent, Chechnya)

Another common occurrence is when the father and his family are ostensibly raising the children together (nearly a third of cases, 14 women). But it often happens that the father merely lives in the same residence and the actual childrearing is performed by his parents, sisters, etc. Often the respondents aren't sure what is the degree of participation of the father in their children's upbringing.

- For example, Nina Tzeretilova's children lived with their paternal grandparents after abduction.

The investigative journalist's comment: After spending some time in their father's family compound, the abducted children are socialized into believing themselves first and foremost a part of their father's clan. For many this becomes their primary identity, member of the clan so-and-so. Besides intimidation, this also serves as a reason for the children's refusal to return to their mother, even after a short time with the father's family.

It should be noted that everyone in the father's clan has input into his children's lives while his own participation may very well be perfunctory. In such a situation the children's education and socializing can and does suffer setbacks. The clan cannot replace a mother.

In about one fifth of cases (8 women) the children were raised by their father and his new wife, i.e. the children's stepmother. Here it also often happens where the man foists his parental duties onto his new wife, so we have two disenfranchised women in this scenario – the mother and the stepmother. The mother was children were taken away from her and the stepmother who was not even told that raising these children would be her responsibility. Sometimes older children are saddled with parenting responsibilities – for their full siblings and for their half-siblings as well.

- **Sometimes the existence of the children from wife #1 is hidden from wife #2 and wife #2 cannot seek a divorce in such a situation without harming her own reputation.**
 - Since the bride does not usually visit the groom in his home in the northern Caucasus region, the bride can expect some life-changing surprises. For example she is told that she is marrying a divorced or single man, only to find out that the man has a very pregnant wife or that the "ex" is preparing to marry that same man and knows nothing of their supposed separation. The woman is told to put up with being lied to, as "Islam approves of it" (i.e. having multiple wives).
 - The woman does not have the opportunity to escape since a quick divorce after the wedding would be a blemish on her reputation and her own worth on the marriage market would be significantly lowered.
- **The entire burden of childrearing falls on the stepmother.** If the stepmother lashes out on the stepchildren everyone **blames her – the children's father, their mother, the family and the larger society.** Her own predicament is entirely ignored.
 - One of the study participants ended up being a third wife. She had to care for the four of her husband's children from two previous marriages. All of the children were severely neglected and behind in their development. The younger ones (age 5 and 6) didn't know how to wash themselves or use a fork. They lived in a shed and ran around in the yard all day (except when the older children were in school). They ate whenever their paternal aunt got around to feeding them.
- **Besides the stepmother, the older children are often saddles with the responsibility for the younger ones.**

In the cases of Olga Markova (the children are abducted and live in Chechnya) and Heda Patzaeva (the mother and the children live in Ingushetia) the older children found themselves in caretaking role for younger siblings. They are being told that under the traditions the older sibling is responsible for younger ones and they are sometimes held responsible for the younger ones misbehavior.

- In the case of Heda Patzaeva, her son was not only forced to tell her to go away when she came for court-ordered visitation, but also to leave her voicemails telling her to stop writing about the custody battle online and in the media.

My two sons are being raised by my ex's mother and his second wife (respondent, Chechnya)

In different times my children were raised by my husband's different relatives, different aunts, etc. Then my ex remarried and his second wife started raising them. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The investigative journalist's comment: In any case, if the man comes with the baggage of abducted children from his previous marriage, the burden of raising those children falls largely on the stepmother regardless of her knowledge or wishes. The children are frequently neglected and troubled, resulting from the unstable situation their father put them in.

Under those circumstances there is nothing surprising that the woman whose consent nobody sought and whose wishes were disregarded lashes out on the children – the constant source of stress and extra work. Women are expected to full serving roles to begin with and with that come responsibilities of raising the children of another woman, who wants to raise them, but is prevented from it.

The whole situation appears cruel and illogical. Sometimes, as a way to hurt the first wife, some man force the children to refer to the second wife as “mom”.

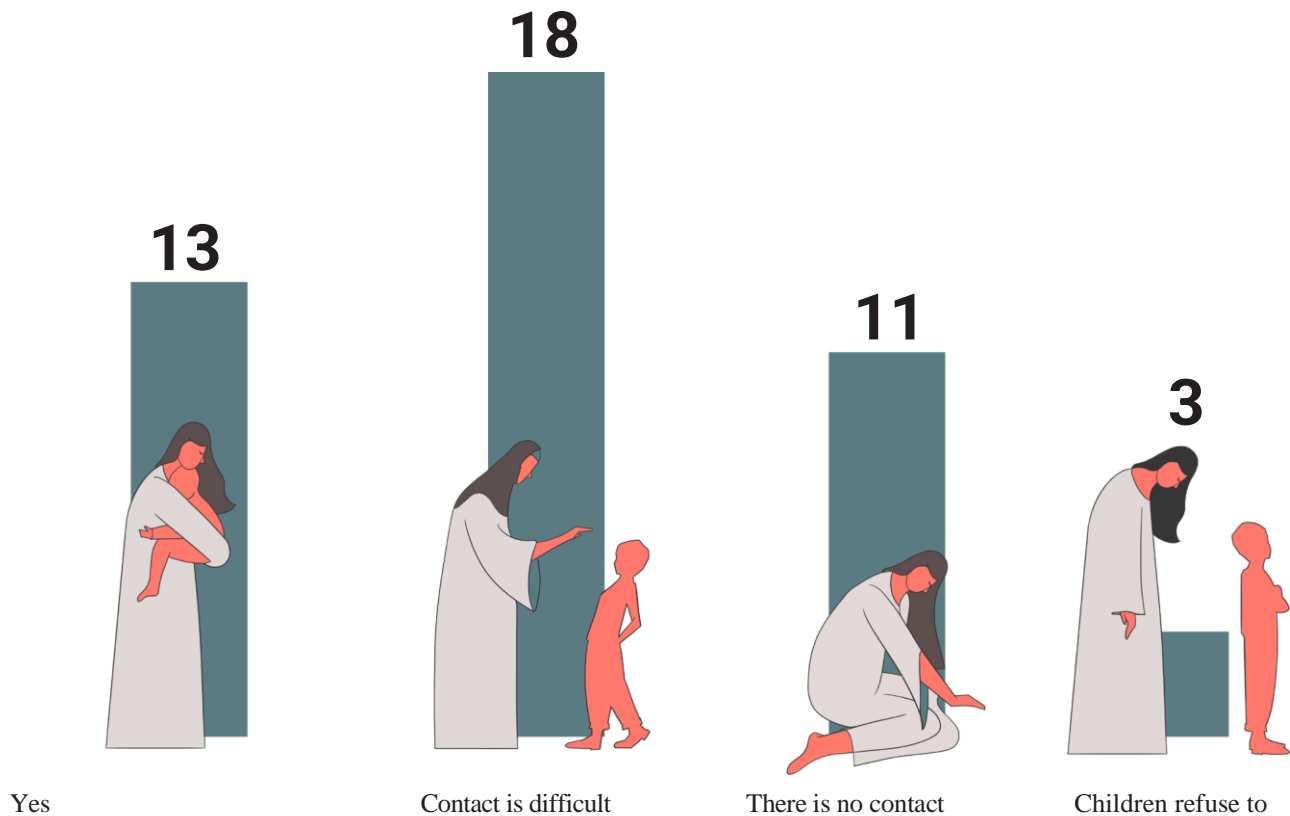
The option “other” refers to unique arrangements of raising the children and comprises about one eighth of cases (6 women)

- Two women reported having actual joint custody with their exes. In one case it is court-enforced and in another it is an informal arrangement. In the latter case the woman is afraid every time her daughter leaves with her father that she will not be returned.
- One respondent indicated that she doesn't know who is raising her abducted child.
- Malika Hamzatova's daughter is being raised by her adoptive parents, the very people Malika's husband's family sold her to.
- One of the respondents said that she is raising the children alone because she managed to return them soon after the divorce.

Contact with the children

Are the children willing to have contact with the mother

(out of 45)



A **third of participants** in our study (13 women) **have regular and voluntary contact with their children.**

- The children of these women miss their moms and sometimes ask when the mom can take them home.
- Sometimes it is the very existence of this contact that keeps the woman from being more proactive in the custody battle – the women are afraid that if they involve the courts, the communication link will be severed.

The children always missed me, wrote letters and tried to visit. (respondent, Chechnya)

The children I returned talk to me just fine. The son who remained with his father also talks to me just fine, when his father's relatives aren't around. My son begged to be taken when they released the other two to me, but they forced him to stay. (respondent, Dagestan)

Contact with the children is difficult for more than a third of study participants (18 respondents).

- Among the reasons: the prohibitions from the father and his relatives, fear of punishments for attempting to contact the mother, alienation and being convinced that mom is the one who abandoned them. Whether or not the contact is successful very much depends on the circumstances and the degree to which the children are intimidated.
- Also in this statistic are included the cases where the children are willing to have contact with the mother, but only in secret from the father and his relatives.
- Also included are those who had multiple children abducted from them and retained contact with only one.

Every time I asked my son a question, he could not answer without looking at his father first. It could have been fear of saying something wrong or he wasn't sure that he is allowed to respond. I tried to hug him and it appeared that he wanted to hug me back, but could not. He was five years old when he was taken away, so he remember me well. The younger one doesn't remember me so well. I am convinced that the children are brainwashed against me. In these conditions they cannot possible say do they want to go back to me or not. (respondent, Dagestan)

A **quarter of the participants (11 women) indicated that they have no contact with their children.**

(11 женщин). Most of the time that happens because the children's fathers or paternal relatives made such contact physically impossible.

- The children may be taken to another region or even another country, the mother loses track of them and does not know where they are.
 - In one case the woman feels guilty for her husband's death and that's why she gave up her son to his paternal grandparents in a sort of a quid pro quo – I took your son, now you can take mine.
 - . Some women's children are too small to visit in school or to correspondent with via WhatsApp.

I have no contact with my older son because his father forbids it. I find things out about my son after the fact. (respondent, Chechnya)

Three respondents indicated that even **when they meet with their children, the children avoid contact**, run away, turn away and are unresponsive.

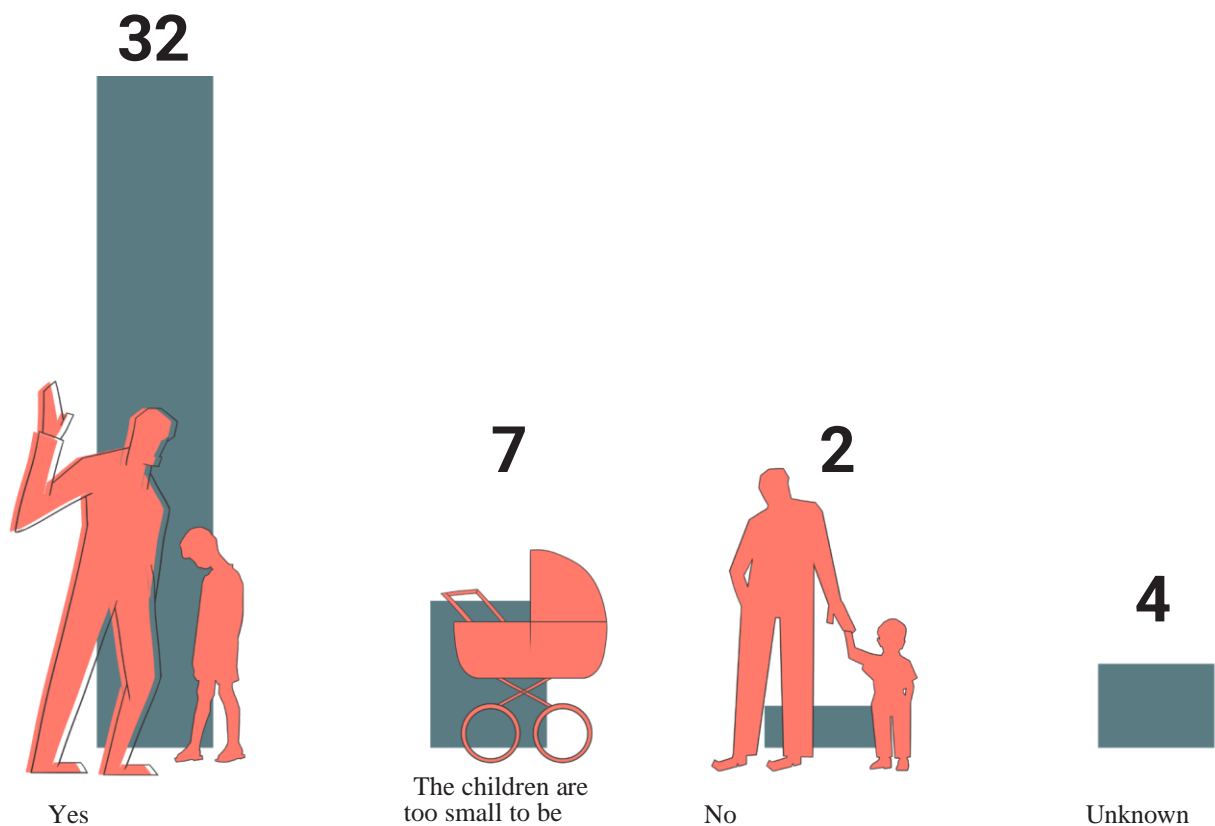
- The respondents themselves say that this happens out of fear of punishment and problems in the father's new family, out of conviction that mom is a bad person. Also, it can be connected to fear or trusting and having this trust violated (to be taken away from mom again or have her disappear again).
 - Nina Tzeretilova's children were told that their mother is a bad person because she left Islam.

She is almost sixteen years old. She doesn't initiate contact with me. They say she has academic problems. God only knows what her father's family is doing to her. The children who live with me don't seem to be having academic problems and pass all the school tests very well. (respondent, Chechnya)

Pressure on the children

Are the children being pressured

(out of 45)



majority of kidnapped children are under enormous pressure and have to deal with things way above their age and development level. Two thirds of the participants (32 of 45) report different varieties of physical and psychological pressure on the children separated from them. It takes the form of **violence and forced alienation from the mother, physical as well as psychological.**

One sixth of the respondents (7 of 45) indicated that their children are too small and that is the only

reason their father or his relatives are not pressuring them. They are either not allowed to see their children at all, or have only sporadic opportunities to see them. Two participants said their children were not being pressured. One tenth of the participants (4 women) have no credible information on how their children are being treated.

- The children can be physically punished for attempts to contact their mother (including letters and phone calls), threatened with violence to the mother as in “threatens the children to lock me up in the basement if I dare to visit”, or the father can be violent towards the mother in front of the children as a way to intimidate the children.
- The main method of pressure is forming a negative image of the mother in the child’s mind. The usual accusations are “she abandoned you”, “she is out having fun”, “she is out drinking”, “she married a Russian man”, “she is a slut”, “she joined the jihad”, “her career is more important to her than her family”, etc.
- The children can be kept confined in the house or the yard, there whereabouts can be hidden from courts and social services, their residence registration can be changed without the mother’s knowledge – all in the effort to hide them from the mother.
- If the mother visits the children in school, the father’s side can withdraw them from school and home-school them or deny them an education entirely.
- In an effort to make the alienation permanent the children are sometimes taken abroad.
- Twice the father won a court battle to take the parental rights away from the mother. Both times these decisions were overturned on appeal – one by the European Court of Human Rights and another by the Austrian court (the children were born in Austria and abducted from there).

The investigative journalist’s comment: In almost all cases the kidnapers lie to the children about their mother on a regular basis.

For example, the gifts the mother sends to the children can be given to them with the refrain that some strange man has sent them.

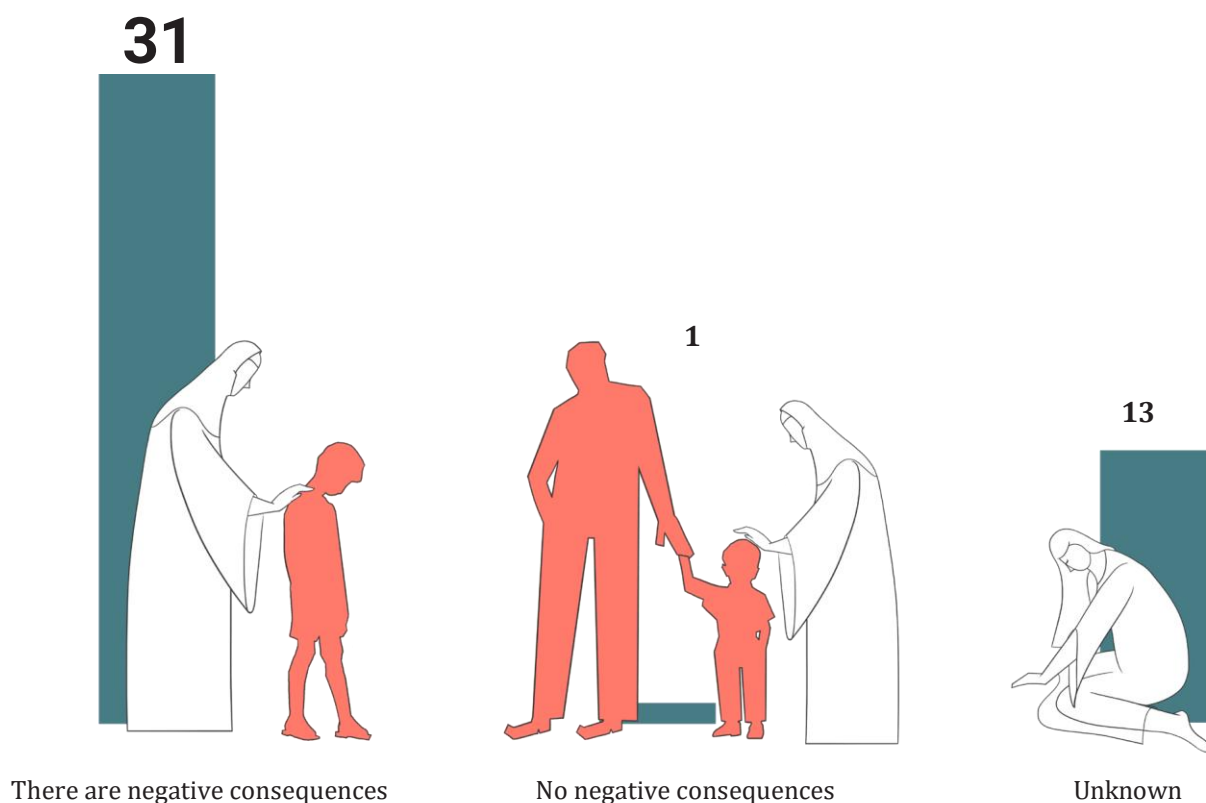
If the mother seeks contact with the child and looks for opportunity to get in touch, the child is being told that the mother lost interest, that she left or even died.

Besides parental alienation, the child grows up with a distorted notion of reality where the closest people are liars and traitors.

How forced separation from the mother affects the children

Are the negative effects on the children from the separation?

(out of 45)



The vast majority of women (31 of 45) who could appraise their children's condition are convinced that the condition worsened as a result of separation. The children's development and psychological state took a blow because of the separation.

This has to do with sudden change in the home environment and/or abrupt removal of children to another region or another country (that happened to the children of Zhaneta Tuhaeva, Olga Markova, Patimat Mahmudova). The children lose their habitual circle of friends and teachers, their routine of eating, studying, playing, the whole cocoon of comfort that their mother created for them. Several traumatizing factors – sudden separation from the most important adult (mom), considerable worsening of living conditions, finding themselves in an unfamiliar, often hostile environment – cause considerable stress for the children and leads to psychological and psychiatric disorders. The side responsible for the abduction of the children is usually not interested in have a professional objective evaluation of their condition.

More than a quarter of respondents (13 women) cannot adequately appraise their children's condition. Eight of them see their children only sporadically and the rest have zero opportunities to see their children and receive information about them. Only one of 45 respondents said the separation did not affect her child negatively because the separation did not last long. The child spent about a week in his father's home post-divorce and the woman managed to get him back promptly, overcoming considerable resistance from the relatives.

The worsening of the children's condition due to separation comes in three forms

- **Worsening of the physical condition**
 - The separation from the mother can lead to development of a chronic illness or a previous chronic illness can take an acute form, because nobody bothers to stay on top of the children's medical care like their mother did.
 - Дети могут быть измождены, иметь следы побоев. The children's hygiene can be neglected, they can be undernourished or live in substandard conditions (like a shed in the yard). Some children display scars from physical abuse.
- **Worsening of the children's mental development**

- As a result of stress, the children can regress mentally and lose previously developed skills such as self-care.
- **Worsening of the children's psychological state**
 - After a long separation the children either be aggressive towards the mother or listless and uninterested.

My daughter didn't eat for three days after she returned. I called a psychologist. It turned out that my little girl was told that if she would eat Russian food (they also told her I was Russian), her brother would die. She addressed me as "hey" whenever she addressed me at all. She wouldn't touch anything. Three and a half years of separation ruined her sanity. At age five and a half she has a development of a two-year-old. My daughter was diagnosed with anxiety disorder, neurological disorders, chronic bronchitis, nearsightedness, academic neglect, flat-footedness and lice infestation. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I found out what school the children were enrolled in and made a bee-line for that school. They sobbed, complained about their uncle, who beats them over the head with the spoon and begged me to take them with me. My brother-in-law previously beat my son to the point of being hospitalized. The children are a dangerous situation. They live with their uncle who has a long rap sheet of convictions for illegal storage of weapons, sale of drugs and hooliganism. My son gets hit every time he says "I love my mom". I appealed to the authorities to remove the children from that dangerous environment and transfer them to me, but the authorities do nothing. (respondent, Chechnya)

Many participants reported that once they got the opportunity to see their children, they were appalled at the children's condition. Below are a few examples from women who allowed us to openly share their stories:

- Olga Markova's children have been growing up in the shed in their paternal grandparents' yard for seven years. According to the people familiar with the situation the children don't know what the home appliances are for, don't have a regular change of clothes and their hygiene is very poor. Leila Muruzheva, who won all her custody cases all the up to the European Court of Human Rights can only get one child back with the help of the Legal Initiative Project. The girl showed signs of severe neglect.
- Asya Gazhaeva's children (his father abducted them while Asya was at work) spent several months with their father and her youngest son developed a stomach ulcer which required prolonged treatment. The father did not take preschool-age children to day care, did not change their clothes, did not clip their fingernails and did not provide them with regular meals.
- In case of a Chechen woman named Lina her grown son is still under the influence of his father's family. The boy reached the age of majority, but he is still afraid to defy his father's prohibition to contact his mother. The only time he does contact her is when things are going bad in his life.
- Nina Tzeretilova's children spend about a year with the father. They have been ripped away from their habitual routine of school and after-school activities. As a result they developed a range of symptoms and conditions and fell behind on their development.
- Lidia Azhigova, mom of Aisha Azhigova (the girl who had her arm amputated) was herself taken away from her own mother because her parents divorced and her mother remarried. All her childhood Lidia was lied to that her mother has died. She was shuttled between relatives and no-one bothered to ask her who she wants to live with. Even as an adult, Lidia has trouble displaying agency. Luckily, she managed to regain custody of her daughter.

How soon the mothers start actively trying to return the children after the moment of separation

Actions to restore the children

Number of women

At once



Some time later



Did not initiate action



Two thirds of the study participants (26 respondents) started acting to return their children immediately after they discovered the abduction. **There is a certain pattern to these actions: first the women appeal to the family members, then to the elders and Islamic clerics and only then to official government agencies.**

- Of those 26 that acted immediately, 11 appealed to relatives, 7 to village elders/Islamic clerics and 8 to government agencies.
- Of those who began acting later (7 respondents), five first appealed to the relatives and another two to village elders. These women began taking action several weeks to several months after the abduction.
- Another sixth of the respondents (7 women) did not take any action because they were afraid to lose what little contact with the children they had or thought those actions would be useless.

One of the study participants notified the authorities a year after her ex abducted their children.

- Лидия Ажигова, мама Аиши Ажиговой из Ингушетии. Lidia Azhigova, mom of Aisha Azhigova from Ingushetia. The girl's case became known in 2019 when she landed in the hospital due to abuse and her arm had to be amputated.²⁰. The only reason the abuse happened is because the father's family felt entitled to take the girl. Lidia herself did initiated the process of getting her daughter back – she was too depleted of resources, too unaware of her rights and she had two other small children to care for. The activists from the Legal Initiative Project found her and offered help. With that help Aisha was restored to her mother.

I don't want them "to come visit". I want them to grow up with their mother's love and care and start their lives with that and nothing else. While they are a little, they must be with me and I want to fulfill my parental duties. The law is on my side. Religious and ethical norms are on my side was well. (respondent, Ingushetia)

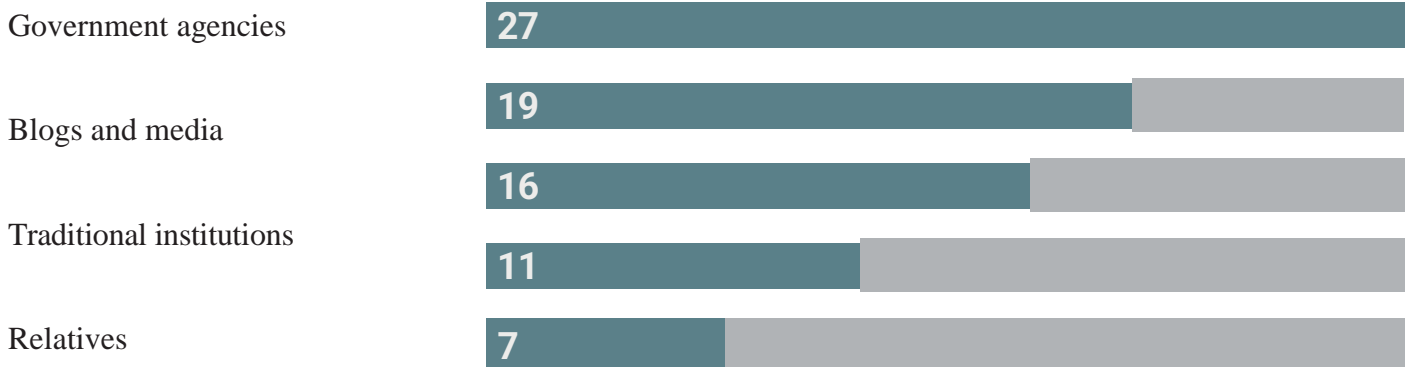
When the woman has the objective to return her children, she fears nothing. She risks, falls, gets up again and keeps walking. (respondent, Dagestan)

²⁰А. Пейсахова. «Наступает зима, а мы без дома». Как в Ингушетии живет семья пострадавшей от избиений Аиши Ажиговой. 2020 // Кавказ. Реалии

<https://www.kavkazr.com/a/30908571.html> (дата обращения: 04.04..2022).

Where women appeal to tell their stories

Number of women



Did not appeal to anyone

Many participants used more than one method in their struggle. 14 respondents used one of those options, 15 respondents used two, six respondents used three, three respondents used four. Seven participants did not avail themselves to any listed options.

- **A third of the women** appealed to the official government agencies – the courts, the child welfare services, the children rights ombudsmen, etc.
- **In a quarter of the cases** women sought exposure of their plight **through the media and blogs with large audiences**.
- In a **fifth of the cases** the women appealed to **traditional institutions** such as village/town elders, Muslim clerics and experts in Islamic law.
- More rarely, in tenth of the cases the women relied on **the mediation of relatives**, theirs or the children's father's (in Dagestan it could very well be the same people)
- Seven women did not appeal to anyone.

“Что я только не предпринимала! Старики и прочие авторитеты ходили к бывшим свекрам, просили о свиданиях с ребенком для меня. Их уговаривали родственники, увещевали, напоминали нормы ислама, по которым дети живут с матерью как минимум до семи лет. Но на них ничего не действовало I left no stone unturned! The elders and other people in authority went to my ex-in-laws and begged them to not stand in the way of me seeing my children. They were talked to, and preached to ad nauseum, about Islamic norms that mandate children to live with their mother up to their seventh birthday. But nothing moved them. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I filed a petition with the regular court and they decided in my favor. But the law enforcement officials insisted that I straighten things out with my husband according to the mandates of the Sharia law. I replied – what about the laws of the Russian Federation, aren't you government employees? In response they trashed me and my parents. (respondent, Ingushetia)

The investigative journalist's comment:

encountered a situation where they are forcibly separated from their children, women in the northern Caucasus approach it in various ways. The crucial difference from a garden-variety Russian child custody case is that the woman acknowledges the power of traditions and local rules that give the father preference in custody arrangements and the right of the clan elders to make decisions on her fate and her children's fate. Besides, the authority of the woman's male relatives such as a father or brother carries a weight in Russia's Muslim regions.

Once the woman decides to fight, she appeals to those traditional institutions first rather than official ones because she feels that the verdict of the former would carry more weight. That would allow to resolve the crisis without involving Russian state courts that are not bound by the Sharia law.

Some women do not even insist on having physical custody fully restored to them. All they seek from the extended family and other traditional institutions is to be allowed to remain involved in the child's life and upbringing,

to take him or her to medical appointments and after school activities, to control their academic progress, to take some vacations together and be allowed to be available to the child when the child needs his or her mother.

In the event the family is not supportive for traditional reasons (“these children belong to their father’s clan”, “he is responsible for them now”, “when they grow up, they will find you”), the woman is compelled to look for alternatives.

Beyond the scope of our study we received numerous appeals for help which we may analyze on some later date. A large portion of them concerned asking for advice, information, emotional support, a place to hide with the child, etc.

More and more women rely on taking their problems to the court of public opinion, realizing that those very problems are created with social norms that benefit a particular class of people. **Shaming and imposing a feeling of guilt are frequent and favorite tools to control and subjugate women and they need a very serious motive and a very high sense of motivation to take their problems outside the family circle. Even in defense of their children’s interests not all mothers are capable of such a step.**

The women that do decide to go public feel like they have tried everything else and found no other way to ensure the safety of their children and restore justice other than to go public with the story of how their rights and their children’s rights have been trampled upon. The more women go public, the more successful outcomes occur, the more women learn of those outcomes online and try this method themselves, creating a circle of virtue.

No matter how strong the shame and the fear, the desire to save the children is stronger and then it’s the abuser’s turn to be afraid of public shaming, people talking, administrative or criminal consequences.

women whose children were victims of international child abductions (one from Estonia and one from Austria) won their cases in foreign courts. Olga Markova won her case in Austria where she was held to be the sole guardian while Patimat Mahmudova won in the European Court of Human Rights. Neither one got the opportunity to reunite with their children.

It is worth noting that even when the woman appeals to official agencies such as Child Welfare, or Children’s rights Ombudsman, she frequently hears the same things she hears in the mosque – go make peace with your husband. The participants in our study frequently indicated that even government bureaucrats often mention “traditions” as a factor. The women then have to ground them saying that if I wanted to resolve this under Sharia law, I would have gone to the mosque, but I want to resolve this according to the laws of the Russian Federation, so how about you start doing your job.

Some of the participants of our study indicated that whenever they attempt to contact their children, their ex’ relatives or second wives come up with the idea that the woman is trying to win her ex back and the children are just a pretext. What is this if not cruel mockery of the mother’s anguish from separation.

Some women on our list fight for their children openly and publicly. They have blogs on Instagram in order to look for abducted children, to read the friends’ and relatives’ accounts and fish for information that way.

Zhaneta Tuhaeva located her son through an Instagram blog. Olga Markova found her children’s school on Instagram and located them that way. Heda Patzaeva is an active blogger on Instagram. Nina Tzeretilova is the most well-known Caucasus blogger on the abduction problem. Her children were abducted and she managed to regain them. Thousands of mothers with a similar problem followed her stories. On her blog she wrote about her son was abducted, returned to her, abducted for a second time and found again.

The mother’s opponents realize the danger of online exposure and move to counter it.

Tuhaeva’s ex obtained a court order to close her Instagram account (overturned on appeal)

Patzaeva's ex forced their son to send her messages that she is embarrassing the family and to demand that she stop publishing. Nina Tzeretilova's children's father did nothing but involve the minors in the fight with their mother. Karina Karmokova's ex husband was well as Olga Markova objected against the publishing of the abduction story in the media. Olga Markova's ex arranged for bots to attack the Instagram account that exposed him.

In the course of studying the blogs of abducted children's mothers we found a collection of audio recordings from a home where the woman's seven-year-old daughter was being held. She posted those audio recordings on Instagram and described what was going on. The girl requires therapy and continual medical information. Neither the girl's father, nor her grandmother are willing to provide it. Instead they yell and curse at the child all the time and wish her dead out loud. No child should be in such a hostile environment.

The wide online exposure attracted the attention of the local Muslim clerics' council. They summoned the father and ordered him to return the girl to her mother. It is the only case known to us where the Muslim clerics' intervention actually helped the mother and the child.

Our project gets numerous requests for media exposure and some of those requests concern improving the children's situation rather than restoring them to their mother. One woman from Ingushetia told us that the father of her four children isolates them, refuses to let them go to school, beats them from attempting to contact her and exploits their labor (the children make woolen shoes, which he later sells). She implored to not let anyone know that she complained or that her children complained.

We had to contact the child welfare authorities on her behalf and explain things.

It is important to remember that in Chechnya the government and traditional structures and institutions are largely fused together. Municipal authorities and local children's rights ombudsmen frequently consult the Muslim clergy, involve them in the decisionmaking or refer the women to them. This is official policy formulated by the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who openly insists that fathers have priority in custody post-divorce and did everything to discourage women from appealing to the government for help.

As for the women who gave up actively trying to return their children either immediately or after several unsuccessful attempts, their motives can vary. But in numerous conversations we have had both with women in this study and outside its scope, we did not find a single separated mother who is indifferent to the well-being of her children.

They stop fighting because their families convince them they have no rights; they are afraid that the abusive ex-husband might take his anger out on the children; they are afraid that the children would be poisoned against the mother or denied the meager opportunities for contact that exist.

Family, society and individual men have a large tool-kit to pressure women in all spheres of life. Anyone who hatches a plot to destroy the woman by taking away her children can do so without fear of consequences by provoking a quarrel and then accusing the woman of failing to preserve the family or by accusing the woman of cheating.

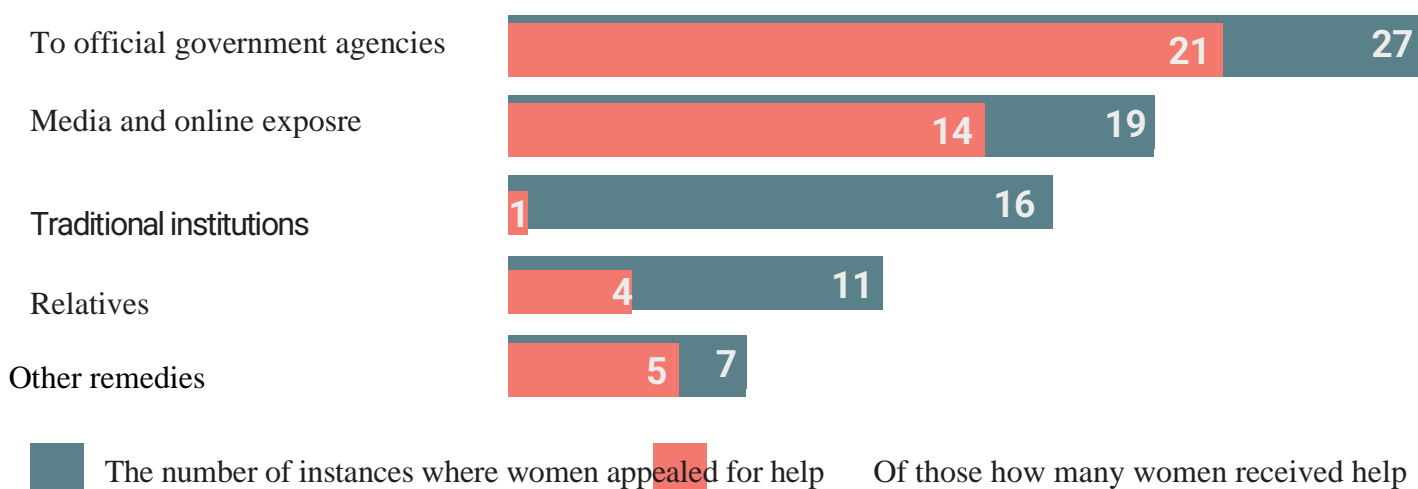
Apologists of Caucasus traditions like to wax poetic about how “nowhere is woman more protected than in the Caucasus”. But when the woman actually needs help and protection from her family, the relatives frequently resort to “they will grow up and find you” and “they belong to their father”, essentially abdicating their responsibility to help and support a member of their own clan.

“They will grow up and find you” – is a hurtful and irresponsible thing to say, yet many mother report hearing it. These words are called to justify the speakers' inaction, but are no help to the suffering mothers. Nobody knows what consequences the separation would have. Will they have their limbs amputated, like Lidia Azhigova's daughter? Will they disappear in a foreign country like the children of Olga Markova, Zhaneta Tuhaeva and Patimat Mahmudova? Will the kidnappers forge a decision denying parental rights and then force the children to testify against their mother in court, like it happened to the children of Zeliha Magomadova? Will they forge a brand new

The people who thoughtlessly repeat this mantra cannot guarantee that none of these things will happen. Taken in context, those words sound like a soundbite called to devalue and mock the mothers' claims to have a right to participate in their children's lives.

Results of appeals

Where the women appealed to (out of 45)



As part of the study, women assessed not only the assistance of authorities or organizations that led to the return of children to their care, or provided the opportunity to see their children, but also simply the actions of officials, public figures, journalists, or the results of covering the problem in their own blogs who helped somehow make progress in protecting their rights and interests of their children.

Both study participants and women outside the scope of the study consider the following to be a good result: the opportunity to communicate with their children online regularly, to have video phone calls, to send gifts, to meet with their children in person and to spend at least some extended time with them, such as holidays and vacations. Especially if the children live far away the mothers appreciated every opportunity for contact. They are happy to communicate in secret, in the event that he child fears being punished.

В попытках вернуть себе детей \ возможность общения с ними к какой-либо помощи обращались 38 респонденток. При этом самой эффективной мерой оказалось освещение случаев в СМИ и блогах, а наиболее частый способ — обращение в инстанции — обладает очень неоднозначной эффективностью. In attempts to return their children or win some contact opportunities 35 respondent sought help. The most effective way turned out to be media and online exposure, while the most frequent method (appealing to official institutions) offered mixed results.

Of those that appealed to official institutions (the court, the police, the children's rights ombudsman, the child welfare authorities) **the majority (21 of 27) got some positive result.**

- 16 women got joined custody via the courts and five got full custody.
- However, several women indicated that the police stonewalled them and refused to accept their complaints because it sided with the father.

- Regional courts were sometimes inclined to give the father custody and the mother visitation based on Chechen/Dagestani/Ingush traditions. Even if the woman had court-ordered visitation the bailiff were unable or unwilling to enforce it.

In the majority of cases the court's decisions are not enforced. It often happens when the woman wins custody in the courts of different levels, but cannot take physical custody of the children. The five women who won full custody were only able to get back some children, but not all, with at least one child remaining in the custody of the father in violation of the court order.

- Leila Muruzheva managed to return her daughter with the help of the bailiffs and The Legal Initiative Project. Her son remains with his father and has no contact with his mother or his sister.
- Fariza Merzhoeva won custody of her sons in the highest court in Ingushetia, but their father refuses to return them. That same man shows no interest in his daughter, does not have contact with her and pays no child support.
- Like Leila Muruzheva and Fariza Merzhoeva, is separated from her older son and lives in constant fear that the younger one will be abducted as well.
- Asya Gazhaeva failed to get her older son back. Older children are especially susceptible to the instilling the feelings of duty and guilt, the feeling of belonging to clan X and the idea that any contact with the mother constituted treason to your clan.

Of those sixteen women who got joined custody and/or visitation via the courts, not a single one could realize those rights in practice.

- In Chechnya or Ingushetia this can lead to a blood feud between the father's clan and the bailiff's clan. **Nobody cares that restoring the children to the mother is a legal requirement, is something the court of Russian Federation has ordered.** Rather it is seen as a violation of local customs, where women and children are 100% under the control of men and no exceptions are allowed.

My ex-father-in-law said to me: "You will lose every official action against us, so don't bother. That's exactly what happened. The court was biased and dragged its feet. I saw the children only sporadically, it was stressful for them and for me. The bailiffs are passive, the court is sitting with its thumb up its ass, the children are still without their mother. I am left with writing appeals. I think the system sides with my opponents because they are well-connected. Our agencies are rife with corruption and biased in favor of men. I am really suffering because I am denied the opportunity to feed my children, to bathe them, to put them to bed at night. The meetings were too short. And now they stopped completely. (respondent, Chechnya)

I was tricked in the end. The bailiff wrote affidavits to the effect that I did not show up. God save anyone from this child welfare woman! (respondent, Chechnya)

Every time the bailiffs bring me to the home where my child lives, they have pleasant chats with his grandfather. The grandfather refuses to surrender the boy and we leave. I spend maybe a few minutes with my son. Everybody smiles pleasantly, says "salam" and part ways. The child's father doesn't live at this address and his parents would not say where he is. During informal conversations with me the bailiffs suggested that I should just grab my son and run. (respondent, Ingushetia)

I went to the children's school and to all official agencies, but my children were poisoned against me that I shamed the family and ruined my daughters' chances of securing good marriages. The girls ran away from me in school. The children and the teachers testified against me in court. All the while I won in the European Court of Human Rights. (respondent, Chechnya)

Two women managed to return their children after a favorable decision from the court, but the decision itself was not a decisive factor in this success. The decisive factor was the media exposure and help from independent human rights activists.

- It took Nina Tzeretilova from Dagestan nearly a year, a strong PR campaign and several attempts before bailiffs and bureaucrats exerted enough pressure on her ex to surrender the children to her.
- На момент возвращения мальчику было пять лет. Yekaterina Krasnova, whose husband abducted their son and registered his residence in both Ingushetia and Chechnya in an attempt to cover his tracks, regained her child after several court decisions. After her case got enough media

exposure and assistance from The Legal Initiative pro bono lawyers, Yekaterina reunited with her son after four years of separation. The child was five years old when he reunited with his mother.

Having their plight reported by the media and gathering enough attention through online exposure is one of the most effective ways to get support. Many mothers managed to regain custody as a result of their stories receiving a degree of publicity.

- In the cases of Yekaterina Krasnova and Miryam (a Chechen refugee living in Germany) the media exposure helped in obtaining a favorable decision of the court. In many other cases it helped women to gain a voice, to speak out loud about their plight and the injustice that they suffered. Some women used political publications, some started their own blogs, some told their story in theme-focused online communities and some combined these methods.
- Nina Tzeretilova's Instagram did not only attract a large audience, but became an information and support hub for many Caucasus mothers who found themselves in a situation similar to Nina's. Nina continues receiving dozens of letters from these women per month. They ask for advice what to do if their children are abducted and she advises based on her experience.

Initially Nina Tzeretilova managed to get an audio recording that proved her daughter was being abused in her paternal grandmother's home. Nina made a public post of these recordings and explained that a chronically ill seven-year-old is not getting the medical support necessary in her condition, that she is not taken to massages and other treatments and not fed the diet that the doctors prescribed. According to Nina, the online exposure created enough noise to attract the authorities' attention. **But the solution came not from the secular authorities. It came from the council of Islamic clerics. The latter held a hearing and ordered the girl be returned to her mother.** We often recommend taking the initiative and working independently.

Media exposure proves time and again to be one of the most effective instruments of returning the children. **The oppressive system that enables these atrocities fears exposure and does everything in its power to shut it down.** The women who bring their stories to the media are threatened by the elders, the government officials and even their own family members. Also, the very act of retelling their story can be traumatizing. As a result, a large part of the women (even those who agreed to answer our questionnaire anonymously) refuse to bring their stories to the media. Sometimes, having shared their stories with the media once and received no help, they get disappointed and decide against further media exposure.

- The women indicate that the interviews themselves take up a lot of emotional resources. Retraumatization makes their already precarious emotional state even worse.
- Some Chechen women, having attempted media exposure once, received an avalanche of threats from their families and authorities figures and fell silent. Open defiance would have made their situation worse.

- Liana Sorsukaeva's lawyer (in Chechnya) started an online petition for Liana's children to be returned to her. **This is also a form of reporting the case and disseminating information and at the same time a form of public support. The petition got a wide resonance on social media. However, due to pressure from Chechen authorities, the petition disappeared**

Some women appealed to the European Court of Human Rights and won. But that alone did not help them reunite with their children.

Zeliha Magomadova, Asya Gubasheva, Aminat Mahmudova, Leila Muruzheva and Louisa Topaeva won in the European Court of Human Rights (далее кусок текста пропущен)

- The lack of real support and help for abducted children and their mothers places both in a desperate situation.

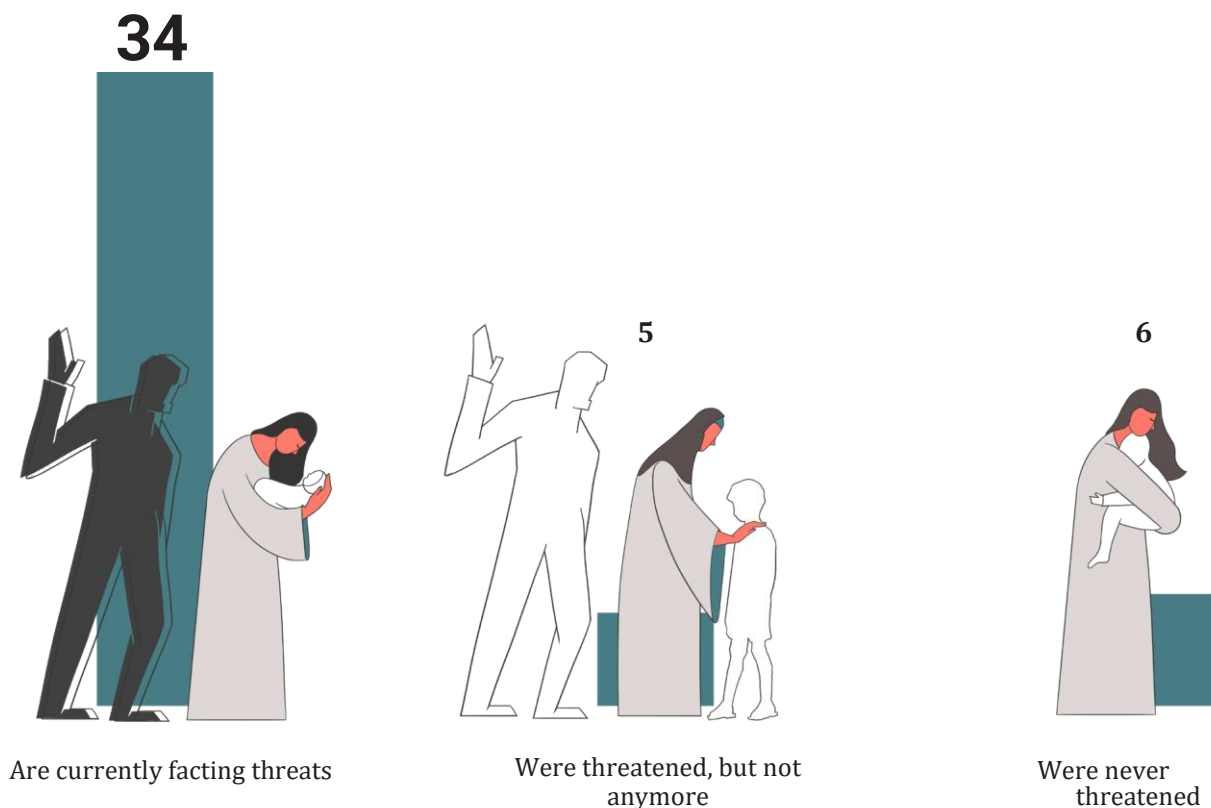
One of the participants in our study, having got no help from the authorities, returned to her drug-addicted abusive husband just to be near her children.

- The other woman is trying to mend relations with her husband whom she despises **just to have the opportunity to see her children.**

Thus, the women use every means available to them to reunite with their children, even going so far as to return to their abusive husbands. The most effective (and complicated) way remains exposing the situation in the media and online, while the most frequent (and often ineffective) way is appealing to the official authorities that can make a favorable decision, but offer no enforcement mechanisms. Sometimes the children are returned to the mother in unpredictable ways (influential relatives, a unique opportunity arises to take the children, the ex gets tired of playing daddy and returns them voluntarily).

Are the mothers threatened for attempting to return the children

(out of 45)



The majority of women face threats for attempting to remain in their children's lives. Only one sixth of the study participants (about one eighth) said that they were not threatened. Two thirds of the study participants (34 of 45) are a subject of constant threats and insults for attempts to contact their children, to find out about them or return them. Some mothers face physical danger when coming to the region where their children are being held.

Five more women indicated that they are receiving no threats at the time of the study. But those threats stopped when the ex-husband got custody and the mother stopped insisting on the visitation. One of the women said that she never got direct threats, but realizes there will be hell to pay for her and her children if she activates her attempts to return them.

- Several women **got threats from the representatives of the police, child welfare agencies or other government agencies** because these representatives are connected in some way to the children's father, like they are members of the same clan.
- Some women are **subjected to threats and pressure by their own families.** Some are prohibited from going to court, some are told by their father and brothers to surrender the children to the ex and remarry. In two cases the women were forcibly remarried.
- Also, the father **who abducted the children** can find support from **the relatives of his subsequent wife.**
 - According to Zhaneta Tuhaeva her son's second abduction was planned by her husband's new brother-in-law, his second wife's brother, a professional wrestler. Zhaneta and her mother

were badly beaten in the course of the abduction.

The intimidation occurs not only when the woman actually attempts to insist on her parental rights, but also gives public exposure to these attempts.

- Chechen women report that **the highly placed bureaucrats** in Chechnya don't take kindly to such exposure. *Anyone who gives Chechnya bad press or says anything negative becomes an enemy.* .

Sometimes women **are threatened and pressured into signing away their parental rights.**

- was done in the case of an Ingushetia resident, whose ex took their four children to another region. Her own bother pressured her to give up her parental rights ostensibly because she remarried.

Not only mothers, but anyone who gives them support in the fight for their children are targeted for threats.

- Respondents report that the following individuals have been targeted for threats: the relatives who are supportive, lawyers, journalists or anyone who expressed sympathy for the mother online.

My husband's friends and relatives threatened me and my parents back in Chechnya. They drove my parents to an early grave (respondent, Chechnya)

I received threats. So did my lawyer and the journalist who reported on the case (respondent, Chechnya)

I am being threatened every time I write about my case online. In the courtroom my ex insulted me and my attorney (respondent, Chechnya)

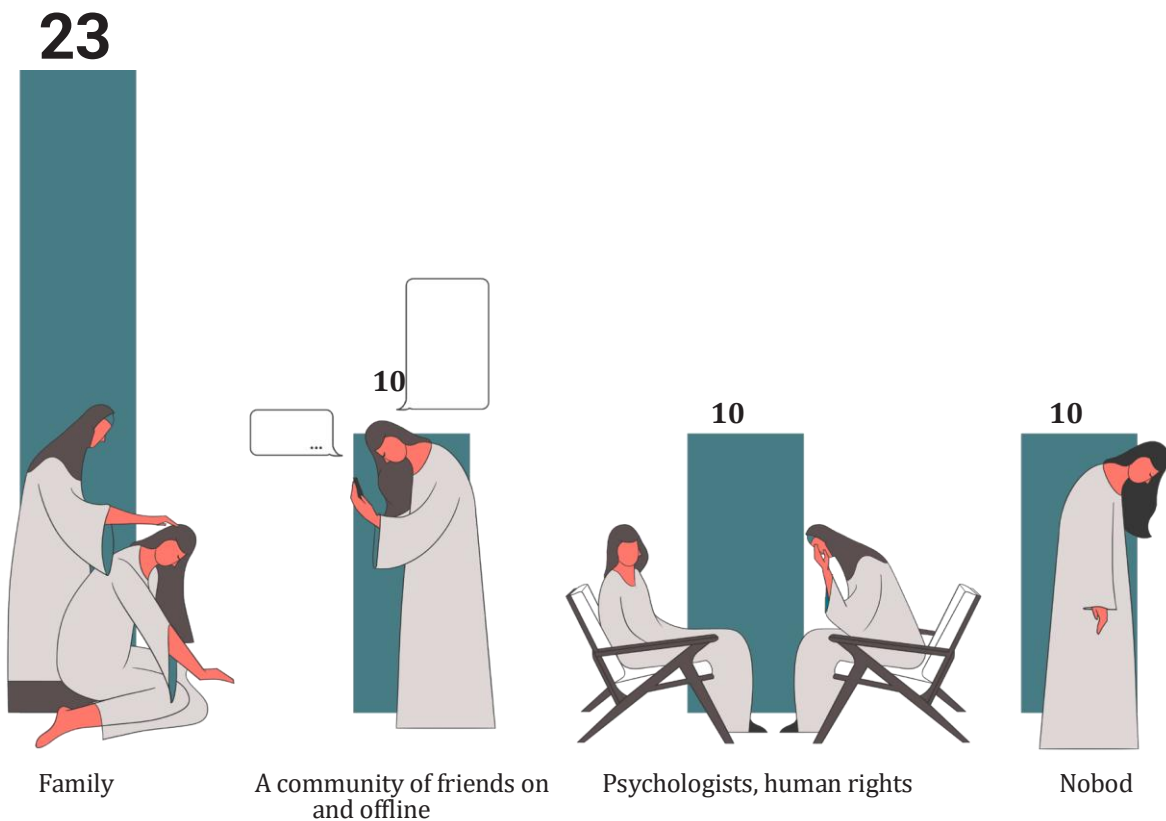
My ex threatens me because he wants me to give up the children, the child support and my share in the family home (respondent, Dagestan)

The prosecutor's office threatens me. They want me to stop appealing the lenient sentence received by those abused my child (respondent, Ingushetia)

Moral support

Who supports the mothers in their fight to return the children

(out of 45)



**Some women selected more than one option*

Who gives the women moral support and approves of their fight to return their children and be a part of their children's lives? It feels obvious that the woman's family is her first line of support and in many cases it is actually so. However, that happens in about half the cases. In another half the family offered the woman no support in her misfortune and some actually sided with the woman's ex-husband. Often the gender is the dividing line. Female relatives support the woman, while male relatives either withhold support or offer to kill or maim the ex-husband and the woman declines this offer, fearing that it would only make the situation worse.

More than half the women (23) said that at least one family member supported them.

- Many stories include support by female relatives (mother, sisters, aunts), while uncles, fathers and brothers are hostile and insist the children be surrendered to their father's clan. Women appreciate even the smallest show of support from their family members, even one expressed privately and not publicly.
- Of all the participants only one said that her brothers expressed willingness to help her: to go her ex husband's relatives and collect her children. It sounded like the woman declined this offer for fear of violence ensuing and a blood feud arising between her brother and her ex, as well as their respective clans.
- In spite of the fact that traditions and customs mandate brothers to protect sisters, the women are afraid that they would be saddled with the blame in the event their brothers are endangered while protecting them. As a result, no woman reported any actual help from their brothers – physical, legal or moral.
 - Heda Patzaeva quoted her mother saying "I only have one son" as an explanation why she didn't want Heda's brother to get involved in the conflict. Apparently, a son is more important than a daughter.

My mom gives me moral support, so does my sister and my female friends (respondent, Ingushetia)

My mom supported me because she knows what it's like – to grow up motherless. She lost her own mother when she was ten years old and her stepmother abused her (respondent, Dagestan)

A wide network of relatives tries to help, but no luck so far (respondent, Chechnya)

My family's support is limited to words, but they afraid to antagonize my ex's family (respondent, Chechnya)

Nearly half the number of respondents (21 women) **say that they are mad at their family for their lack of support** or even support of the other side.

- Half of them drew their own conclusions and have no intent to forgive being betrayed. Yet others try to distance themselves emotionally from the situation and not analyze the actions of their relatives, including parents.
 - *Women say “I try not to think about it”, “I didn't count in their help”, “I don't want them to get involved”, “I try not to blame them”, “I feel not understood”, “I am disappointed that my father didn't help”*

My clan ruled that I have no right to go to my ex's house to see the children. I can't find it in my heart to forgive my extended family, uncles, aunts, and such. They think that if want to be with my children, I must return to my husband and put up with his shit (respondent, Dagestan)

My parents betrayed me wholesale. They try to dissuade me from going to court and expect me to do everything my ex tells me (respondent, Dagestan)

In this context support from other sources is especially important. The mothers can lead on friends, fellow survivors or human rights activists.

Ten study participants indicated support from friends, both on and offline.

- In online groups and chats women can find emotional support, a shoulder to cry on as well as practical advice and encouragement.

I actually do have a lot of support – from friends, the media and even the local authorities. But in the family my mom is the only one who supports me (respondent, Dagestan)

Ten study participants indicated the presence of moral support from human rights activists and feminists.

” The Legal Initiative Project really helps. Mom and other female relatives feel for me, but cannot do anything. The other side is very well-connected and the belief system is on their side (respondent, Chechnya)

The child welfare services actually helped as well as a psychologist. She examined the children and prepared a detailed report on how their father's violence affected them (respondent, Dagestan)

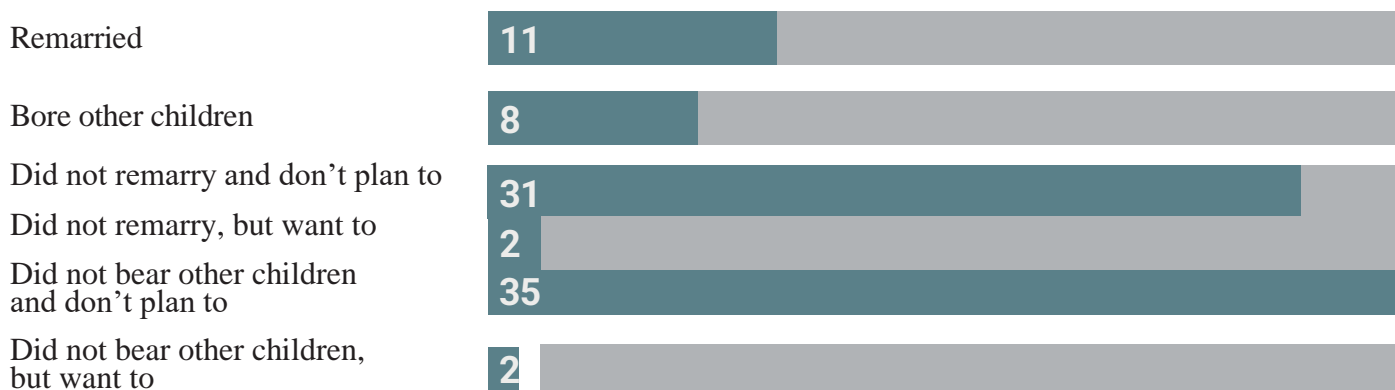
Another quarter of the participants (10 respondents) indicated that they did not receive support from anyone. Ten women are separated from their children and that horror is compounded by pressure from family and society, sometimes official agencies and the children themselves who were poisoned against the mother.

No-one supported me openly, they just felt sorry for me in private. In essence, I am alone (respondent, Chechnya)

Further family life after separation

Family life and plans after separation from the children

(out of 45)



For the majority of women forcibly separated from their children, their subsequent lives have no place for marriage or motherhood. This is connected not only to psychological trauma of first marriage and separation from the children, but also to the discrimination against women remarrying, societal condemnation of remarriage. Moreover, remarrying cements losing the rights to children from the previous marriage.

Out of 45 women who survived forced separation from their children **two thirds (31 participants) did not remarry**. Almost all of the declared that “they live via hope of restoring their children to themselves or at least recreating a meaningful connection with them that was severed.” Some participants are convinced that they will be denied all contact opportunities with their children in the event of remarriage and that is why they avoid starting new families.

I did not remarry, the violence I survived in the first marriage took away all the motivation. I have fear and no energy for new relationships or children. (respondent, Chechnya)

All my income is spent on legal expenses related to my children, I don't want to remarry (respondent, Chechnya) husband threatens me that if I remarry, he will take the children away permanently. He also forces me to sleep with him, using the same threat. (respondent, Dagestan)

In spite of being in the prime of their childbearing years, the vast majority of respondents (35 of 45) did **not bear other children**. Many respondents report that they can't even think about it after what they went through. The anguish experienced by themselves and their children as a result of forced separation is something they wish to avoid at all costs, even at the cost of possibly happiness in a new family.

I live via attempts to regain my children (respondent, Ingushetia)

Only two participants report that they did not remarry after the divorce, but would very much like to. That very opportunity is blocked by the ex-husband who uses the children to manipulate, would not grant a divorce according to the Sharia law, etc.

I think about starting a new family, but my husband would not divorce me according to the Sharia law (respondent, Chechnya)

One respondent reported wanting to have another child, another reported the intent to remarry and have more children only when she regain meaningful regular contact with her daughter. This particular woman was separated from her daughter when the little girl was three years old and have not seen her since, for several years.

If I was allowed to see my daughter, maybe I could live a normal life. (respondent, Chechnya)

Eleven of the participants (one quarter) remarried, eight of them bore children. Probably the negative experiences in the first marriages affected the subsequent marriages.

- Some remarried only because their parents and brothers insisted
- About half of those who remarried later divorced (5 of 11)
- One of the participants reported that her second marriage fell apart because of the “struggle for the children”
 - Some women had their children taken away immediately after they remarried.

The investigative journalist’s comment: Traditional society frowns upon women who remarry and start new families. It is seen as proof of the woman’s licentiousness or not a serious attitude.

On the other hand men remarrying or even having several wives with children at once is permitted and even encouraged as good in the spirit of Islam. The public opinion does not scrutinize the quality of life of these families. A man does not even have to provide for them in order to be considered a decent person and a good Muslim. The women frequently support themselves and their children and having children from a first marriage in no way limits a man who wishes to continue procreating. When women survivors of separation from their children deny themselves opportunities to start new families, they do it more for societal than personal reasons.