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'Honor Killings' Persist in Russia's Dagestan, Chechnya

By Allison Quinn

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Ramzan Kadyrov came under fire for 2009 comments on honor killings.

Early last Monday morning, a photo of a young Dagestani woman believed to have been suffocated by her own father appeared briefly before being deleted. It was not removed because of the shocking nature of an image of a corpse propped up in the passenger seat of her father's car. It was removed for the same reason that the 21-year-old victim was killed: The family did not want to damage her honor.

"Many people in our society believe that [honor killings] shouldn't be written about, that there is no need to wash one's dirty laundry in public," said Svetlana Isayeva, the head of the human rights organization Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights.

"Many crimes of this character are justified by the mentality that shame can be washed away only with blood. This is where the endless cycle of honor killings comes from," she told The Moscow Times.

This is not the first photograph of a murdered young woman from the Caucasus to surface momentarily before being swept under the rug. Within the past couple of years, there have been photos not only of suffocated victims, but also of some with slit throats and stab wounds. As a rule, these photographs — along with the details of the crimes — vanish without a trace before they can reach a large audience.

Without formal means by which to monitor these killings, and without special legislative framework in place, it is impossible gauge the scale of the phenomenon — and how many causes of death recorded as "suicide" or some mysterious illness may have actually been a family's attempt to blot out something they considered shameful.

Dirty Little Secret

The latest case of an "honor killing" in Russia came to the public's attention almost by accident, when the 21-year-old victim's father was pulled over by police for a routine traffic stop on his way to dump the body.

The 54-year-old man, whose name has not been disclosed by police, has been detained and now faces murder charges for what investigators believe to be an honor killing, according a statement on the Investigative Committee's website.

Those familiar with the phenomenon of "honor killings" in Russia's Dagestan and Chechnya say the crimes likely go unnoticed more often than they result in criminal charges, usually coming to light only if the perpetrator himself becomes consumed with guilt and confesses to the crime.

"As a rule, the relatives and local police prefer not to publicize these cases, seeing them as a strike against the reputation of the family or the clan. Naturally, there are no official reports on such crimes, they just get merged in with the general mass of murders. This is a problem of traditional culture, in this case Islamic culture, clashing with the reality of contemporary society. It will take a long time to resolve this problem, both by means of ensuring legal consistency (punishment for murder) and by means of protecting these women through relocation and other methods," said Georgy Engelhardt, an independent expert on Islam.

The lack of will to expose the problem makes it nearly impossible to prosecute the crimes, as does the lack of a distinct legal definition applicable to the crime, meaning that perpetrators who are charged can get a much more lenient sentence.

"Law enforcement authorities might not even know about such murders, since the relatives don't file complaints. To the contrary, they present a death certificate citing some illness. And even if the local policeman knows about the murder — it'd be difficult to cover such a thing up in small villages — he won't open a criminal case, because he'd never be able to gather enough evidence: No one will provide testimony, the killer will have an alibi," Zakir Magomedov, a journalist who covers women's rights issues in Dagestan, said in comments carried by the Kavkazsky Uzel news site.

Friends and family members of the victim prefer to cover up the crime rather than make a big fuss, even if it was a loved one who was killed. Magomedov reported a similar scenario in an article for The New Times in early October.

A woman interviewed by Magomedov said one of her female relatives had been killed by her own brother after rumors spread that she'd been absent from a high school dance for a few hours.

According to the woman, the family knew about what he'd done but chose not to turn him in.

"The entire village covered for him. They lied to the police, said that he'd been at the mosque with his friends, doing renovations. And our village doctor made a fake medical card and wrote a certificate saying that the girl had suffered from problems with her stomach since childhood, that she'd been poisoned by something at the dance," the source said in comments carried by The New Times, speaking to Magomedov on condition of anonymity.

On Friday, a court in Dagestan's Buinaksky district had to postpone a hearing in the criminal case against a 31-year-old man who allegedly killed his own 25-year-old cousin for her "amoral behavior" because the witnesses failed to turn up to the court, Kavkazsky Uzel reported.

The complicity of the victim's friends and relatives in covering up the crime may seem baffling, but Engelhardt says such actions are deeply rooted in the value systems that dominate traditional Islamic communities.

"In such a system, an honor killing is seen as the preservation of not only the honor of the woman (the reason for her death may remain a secret), but also the honor of the entire family, who in this case were capable of 'managing risks.' Even in such a painful way," Engelhardt told The Moscow Times.

According to the traditional Islamic mindset, men see it as their duty to "protect their family, raise and control their own wives, sisters and daughters. Adultery by these women, especially if it becomes known, means the man has been incapable of fulfilling his main duty and that undermines their reputation within the community," Engelhardt said.

The men who commit such crimes thus often see the honor killing as an obligation, as the only way to right a wrong. In this case, the "wrong" was having raised a daughter who allowed something "shameful" to blacken her and her family's reputation. Logic is skewed to the point where the act of murder is seen as an act of saving; the young woman is not so much killed as she is saved from disgrace, her wholesome reputation preserved.

Within the context of such a mindset, a whole family can suffer the impact of the actions of even a distant female cousin — they don't have to live under the same roof, Engelhardt said.

"Premarital sex practically excludes the opportunity for a woman to enter into a religious marriage in her own religious environment or the environment of her own community, since marriage to a 'harlot' would bring shame not only to the husband but also his family," Engelhardt said.

"That is why a 'harlot' is doomed to live with her parents, who are seen as shamed before the community. The chances of her younger sisters having a successful marriage are also lowered by this, as well as that of her relatives — because they also may have been 'brought

up badly,'" he said.

Anything that can be loosely interpreted to indicate premarital sexual relations can turn a young woman into a walking target.

Honor killings are believed to have been carried out for "offenses" as minor as receiving a text message from a man.

In August 2010, 22-year-old Dagestan resident Maryam Magomedova was reportedly killed by a male family member for receiving a text message and a phone call from a man, Kavkazsky Uzel reported at the time.

Carte Blanche?

While many recent victims of "honor killings" have been Dagestani, the problem is not limited to that republic, which has gained a reputation for instability as security forces continue to battle an Islamic insurgency in the area.

Chechnya, which boasts shiny new infrastructure and peaceful stability after having earlier put down a similar insurgency, also suffers from the honor killing phenomenon.

Last week, a 30-year-old Grozny resident was charged for allegedly killing his own sister after the two got into an argument. A spokesman for the Chechen prosecutors' office was cited by Kavkazsky Uzel as saying the crime was believed to be an honor killing.

The international human rights group Human Rights Watch has previously called Chechnya out for its "frequent reports of honor killings" in a report published in 2012 — three years after Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov endorsed the practice publicly.

At that time, when confronted by reporters over a recent case in which seven women were found executed and left dead by the side of the road, Kadyrov said the women likely had "loose morals" and deserved what they got, The New York Times reported.

"If a woman runs around and if a man runs around with her, both of them are killed," Kadyrov was cited by the paper as telling journalists.

In 2008, Kadyrov had said in a statement published on Chechnya's government website that "the actions of the killers [of these women] cannot be justified by any traditions."

In the same breath, however, he said the murder was "connected with the fact that the women ... had been leading amoral lifestyles."

Just like Dagestan, Chechnya lacks any official statistics on the number of cases of "honor killings," meaning it could be taking place much more frequently than anybody realizes.

Svetlana Yakimenko, director of the Russian branch of Project Kesher, an international organization for Jewish women that seeks to end trafficking and violence against women, said cases in Chechnya would be less likely to get coverage in the press than those in Dagestan, where Project Kesher has offices.

"You probably won't be able to read about it anywhere in the media. The growing influence of Islamic extremism in the region will not allow this issue to make it into the official press or even the Internet," Yakimenko said.

Engelhardt agreed, saying some of Kadyrov's policies play right into the hands of Islamic extremists who promote such things as honor killings.

"Kadyrov has been conducting a campaign for several years to preserve 'traditional Islamic values,' including standards for women's clothing and behavior, ... so any actions for protecting women will be described as a fight against Islam and 'protecting harlotry' by the radicals," Engelhardt said.

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