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Chechnya's 'First Transgender Woman' Comes Forward

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Dmitry Lovetsky / AP

A woman calling herself Chechnya's "first transgender person" has come forward saying she fled illegally last year to the United States, after facing persecution in Russia. The independent TV station Dozhd says it verified the transgender woman's identity through human rights workers who helped her escape Russia.

Asking to be identified as "Leila," the woman says she underwent sex reassignment surgery in the mid-2000s, after studying in Chechnya and working in the Chechen government. Leila says she sometimes even met Ramzan Kadyrov, the republic's controversial, devout Muslim leader.

After moving to Moscow, Leila says fellow Chechens started harassing her. Meanwhile, back home, unknown men visited her parents and informed them that they must kill her, or someone else would. In October 2015, a man did try to kill Leila in downtown Moscow, stabbing her twice in the chest with a knife. But Leila survived.

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She says the Moscow police ignored her reports that someone was trying to hurt her. Officers apparently told her, "Either screw off to Europe, or we'll escort you back to Chechnya ourselves."

After the murder attempt, Leila moved to a new apartment, stayed hidden, and eventually decided to emigrate to Argentina, later deciding on the U.S., instead. In 2016, she says she illegally crossed from Mexico into the United States, where she lives today as an illegal immigrant.

More than 100 gay men in Chechnya have reportedly been kept in secret prisons, tortured, and forced to denounce other gay men. Novaya Gazeta, Radio Liberty, Meduza, and The Guardian have independently corroborated the mass crackdown. Local authorities, however, have denied these accusations, insisting implausibly that there are no gays in Chechnya. President Putin has be reluctant to comment publicly on the allegations.

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