

Veiled Threats: Human Rights and the Russian Criminalization of Muslim Dagestani Women

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Amid Russia's war in Ukraine, a disturbing trend has emerged: The heightened criminalization of Muslim Dagestani women. This paper explores how these women employ religion as a means of resistance to Russia's shifting policies only to be labeled and treated as extremists. It highlights the complex interplay of political oppression, gendered rhetoric, and religious discrimination and argues that Russia's actions constitute a significant breach of established human rights norms.

I was browsing international arrests warrants, or Red Notices, on the International Criminal Police Organization's (INTERPOL) website when I discovered a recurring trend: Hundreds of women were accused by Russia of various charges related to "extremism." I noticed that most of those women wore the hijab in their identification photographs – a detail which I believe contributes to a narrative that associates Islamic women with female subservience and religious fanaticism (see Kumar, 2010) – which in turn fuels Islamophobic bias and justifies discriminatory action. Importantly at the time of my search, Russia's war in Ukraine had just reached the one-year mark, and the country's forced conscription of men from Dagestan, an ethnically non-Russian republic in Central Asia, had led to a disproportionately high rate of Dagestani casualties (Abkhaz World, 2023). This chance observation led to my current research topic, which centers on human rights abuses and criminalization targeting Muslim Dagestani women.

Dagestani women have been participating in various forms of protest against Russian state actions and are increasingly criminalized as terror threats by the Russian government. Some women channel their political discontent into active participation in domestic and foreign jihadist movements, while many others are arrested merely for social media posts or attending peaceful protests. (Exact figures of such protest activities are unknown due largely to the opacity of Russian records, but regional

online news sites have not reported on new terror attacks. They have, however, reported on several instances of arrests associated with picketing, protesting the military draft, association with extremist organizations, possession of an Islamic State flag, public calls for extremism, and financing extremism¹) In response, Russia is targeting Dagestani women for their participation in “crimes against public security” in record numbers. The charge is vaguely defined by Russian Criminal Code Article 282 as the “instigation of hate and enmity even when no violence is involved” (quoted in Roudik & Law Library of Congress, 2016).² Recently reported protests and arrests indicate that Russian political-military actions, including the forced conscription of Dagestani men, are a driving force behind the heightened engagement of Dagestani women and thus contribute to the perception of their religious-based extremism.

Therefore, this article investigates Dagestani women’s increasing public engagement through protests and growing religious militancy, including alleged acts of terrorism, in response to discrimination by the Russian state. Evidence suggests that the criminalization of Muslim Dagestani women constitutes violations of internationally recognized human rights standards (United Nations, 2023). This research is based on a comprehensive analysis of INTERPOL’s Red Notices, which serves as a critical database that outlines the profiles of and charges against Dagestani women implicated in alleged acts of terrorism and extremism. It also draws from a diverse array of digital sources, including governmental reports, media outlets, and Russian state news publications. Digital archives at the U.S. State Department and the Library of Congress provided further documentation to analyze Russia’s systemic targeting and persecution of Muslim Dagestani women. With its focus on Dagestani women responding to state discrimination and persecution with various forms of dissent, this paper builds upon existing scholarly literature on gender discourse and religious discrimination in the Russian Federation.

I argue that Russia’s heightened criminalization of Muslim Dagestani women is rooted in several intersecting factors, including their ethnic background, status as a religious minority, and gender.

¹ Online media sources included *The Caucasian Knot*, an English and Russian language site that focuses on human rights issues in the Caucasus region. One report, for instance, detailed the arrest of a man in November of 2019 who was accused of “preparing a terror attack.” However, the suspect claimed he confessed under coercion and torture (Caucasian Knot, 2020). *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, a state-sponsored publication in the region, did not report any terror attacks involving women from the region as far back as 2012. It simply listed organizations, individuals, and materials associated with and deemed to be extremist (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2017).

² Russia updated its terrorism and extremism laws in 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine. The revised laws categorize a myriad of resistance actions as felony crimes, including the prohibiting of anti-war speech and protest (United States Department of State, 2022b). These activities range anywhere from acts of violence to sharing a post on social media. The Meta corporation and its subsidiaries were added to Russia’s extremist and terrorist groups in 2022 for allegedly tolerating “Russophobia” on their platforms (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Xenophobic attitudes in Russia stem from a complex legacy of stereotyped cultural diversities and religious practices of ethnically non-Russian Muslims. Historically, tensions have arisen from geopolitical conflicts in the North Caucasus region, which exacerbate existing prejudices through biased media portrayals and institutionalized discrimination – namely, that Muslims are a security threat (Aziz & Calderone, 2024). The historical legacies and evolving patterns of ostracism in the current climate of the Russia-Ukraine war ultimately make it clear that Russia's actions do indeed constitute a significant breach of human rights.

Historical and Geopolitical Context

Dagestan, a mountainous republic in Central Asia situated in the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, borders Georgia, Chechnya, and the Caspian Sea. The population is just over three million people who are largely isolated and living in remote ethnic groups with few urbanized centers. And while there is a vast array of languages and ethnicities in Dagestan, most inhabitants are of the Sunni Islamic faith – an enduring imprint of historical Persian influence (Kelly, 2023). Dagestan's cultural fusion, coupled with the region's geographic location as a junction between Europe and Asia, laid a foundation for Dagestan's unique blend of Islamic traditions and indigenous customs.

Since the eighteenth century, Russia has maintained a presence in the Caucasus. The country's involvement has long been a point of contention for Dagestan and other area republics seeking political autonomy. Russia's first foray into Dagestan was under Peter the Great in 1722, and by 1824 nearly all Dagestani territory was under Russian control. There have been several points of rebellion since that time, reflecting a legacy of Dagestani bitterness toward Russia that endures to this day (Khalid, 2014). Religious leaders consistently attempted to use faith as a rallying force for resistance against Russia's governance. In the late 1820's two imams, Ghazi Muhammad and Shamil, promoted combining military efforts with religion, resulting in guerilla warfare that battled Russian occupying forces for almost 30 years (Ware & Kisriev, 2009). There were similar uprisings led by imams in 1861, 1862, 1871, and 1877-78, when Dagestan attempted to distance themselves from Russian rule to no avail. Russia met each rebellion with increasing brutality by burning villages and staging public executions until the republic finally incorporated Dagestan after the 1917 Revolution (Gammer, 2013).

The Soviet era marked a period of profound socio-political transformation, leading to the widespread suppression of religious practices and the imposition of atheism as the state ideology. This significantly altered the cultural and religious dynamics of the Caucasus region, where Muslim identity was so intertwined with the Dagestani historical heritage (Khalid, 2014). These changes generated a

decades-long ripple effect on the lives of Dagestani people that included stringent policies and laws enforced by Russian authorities that have created a climate of marginalization and prejudice. Even today, dissidents to the Russian State who are overt in their religious practices have been singled out by state security and are subject to exclusionary laws (Aziz & Calderone, 2024). Russia's constitution details the right to religious freedom, but the government has branded many religious groups – including Jehovah's Witnesses, Falun Gong, the Church of Scientology, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups – as extremist. Government authorities routinely jail followers of these traditions for organizing religious activities (United States Department of State, 2022a). Despite Russia's coercive efforts to quell religious expression, the deep-rooted traditions of Dagestan endured in various forms of clandestine religious observation and cultural preservation. The lasting repercussion of subjugation, paired with the political climate of the post-Soviet era, compelled some Dagestani Muslims to seek alternative methods of religious practice in the face of the state's oppression (Khalid, 2014).

The adoption of Salafi Islam was one such alternative. Salafism is an ultra-conservative Islamic movement that seeks to emulate the practices and beliefs of the early Islamic community, including the Prophet Muhammad. Salafi Muslims emphasize the importance of commanding right and forbidding wrong, believing it is their religious duty to perform virtuous deeds and discourage immoral behavior in their communities as a form of moral and social justice (al-Azami, 2021). It offers a distinct focus on religious authority, serving as a form of rebellion against an unfair government through faith and providing an avenue for dissent through one's religious identity (Sokolov, 2016).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990's, Chechnya drew Dagestan into its fight for independence from Russia. This development introduced complex societal shifts for Dagestani women due to the high number of casualties of Dagestani men (Ware & Kisriev, 2009). The consequences of the demographic shift transformed Dagestan's collective landscape, influencing the individual agency and religious dynamics for Dagestani women. The women encountered a high emotional toll from the loss of family members and an upheaval in familial dynamics and limited support. These hardships caused many Muslim Dagestani women to turn to their faith for solace and guidance, finding in Islam a source of strength that could also be a catalyst for change (WPS Prague, 2019).

The transformations that occurred during the Chechen Wars are now being echoed in the contemporary situation for the women losing loved ones in Russia's war on Ukraine (Sokolov, 2020). As a response to the political unrest of the Chechen Wars, a growing number of young, unemployed, and disillusioned Dagestanis turned to Salafi Islam. Salafism condemns, among other things, corrupt political systems, and moral degradation (Williams & Lokshina, 2015). Women's roles in Salafism are significant

in fostering and perpetuating the movement's ideologies and propagating conservative values (Nurani, 2019). Dagestan's Salafi community is often correlated with extremism and religious militancy due to its calls for resistance against Russian State control. Salafism is also frequently used interchangeably with Wahhabism, although there are nuanced differences.³ Wahhabism is also a strictly conservative movement, founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Both sects have historical associations with the terrorist groups ISIS and Al-Qaeda. They are similarly associated with radical ideologies because of their rigid interpretations of Islamic doctrines (Tůpek & Beránek, 2018). This parallel underscores the impact conflict has had on the Dagestani community under Russian oppression and offers insight into the patterns of the women's roles across different points of their shared history.

Russia's invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 was the continuation of a historical legacy of state oppression as it opened another chapter of violent conflict for the people of Dagestan. The assault revealed a geopolitical landscape long marred by heightened tensions and regional instability. Ethnically non-Russian men in Dagestan are being drafted into the war at far higher rates than the rest of the Russian male population, which has led to devastating casualties (Abkhaz World, 2023). The rate of casualties among ethnic minorities highlights a disturbing trend, with Dagestani men suffering a disproportionate rate of deaths. Although Dagestan makes up approximately 2.2 percent of the population in the Russian Federation, they comprise close to 15 percent of reported casualties (Molfar, 2023). It has been suggested that the number is likely higher because Russian officials are significantly under-reporting their losses (Cole, 2024). This hints at a broader state agenda of targeting ethnically non-Russian populations, like Dagestan, for mandatory drafts – possibly as a form of ethnic cleansing.⁴ Evidence also suggests that Russian conscriptions have depopulated non-Slavic areas by as much as 20 percent, even though they are significantly less populated regions (Van Son, 2022). The historical and geopolitical context serves as a foundation to better understand the complex interplay of the lives of Dagestani women and the layers of their identities.

Lived Experiences: Ethnicity, Religion, Gender

The experience of Dagestani women emerges from the convergence of their cultural heritage, religious convictions, and history with conflict and war. In Dagestan, women play a pivotal role within domestic and communal structures. There is a multifaceted nature to their responsibilities; Dagestani

³ Wahhabi Islam and Salafi Islam are considered similar in my aspects, but have different historical origins, a difference in emphasis, and differing political influences (Tůpek & Beránek, 2018).

⁴ The United Nations (n.d.) defines ethnic cleansing as “rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups of given groups from the area.”

women are integral to upholding their family's honor, preserving traditions, and fostering community solidarity amidst the atmosphere of political turmoil and regional instability (WPS Prague, 2019). Meanwhile Islam occupies a primary role in Dagestani society, serving as a cornerstone of identity and a source of spiritual solace. Islamic faith calls for *haqq alnas*, or duties to the community, and the role of sustaining Islamic culture is ascribed to women (Haddad, 2011). In the face of limited options, there is often a complex trajectory for Dagestani Muslim women's lives. One option is the traditional, rural experience possibly including arranged marriage (WPS Prague, 2019). Alternately, some women are exploring opportunities outside of their villages and discovering the urban cities of Dagestan or other regions in the North Caucasus. In this pursuit, they are brushing up against conflict-ridden areas like Syria and Turkey and a more conservative sect of Islam, Salafism. This is causing transformative impacts on their identities as Muslim women and their supposed affiliations with male counterparts in extremist groups (Williams & Lokshina, 2015).

Dagestani women's perceptions of their Islamic faith are intricately woven into their daily lives and shaped by cultural, historical, and political factors. For these women, Islam is not merely a set of doctrines, but a way of life that provides meaning, community, and ethical guidance (Mahmood, 2006). Their interpretations of Islamic teachings are deeply rooted in local traditions, family values, and distinct historical experiences in the North Caucasus. The aftermath of the Chechen conflict led to significant changes in the religious and social identities of Muslim Dagestani women. In the North Caucasus region, Sunni Muslims represent most of the population. Salafism, a "purer" Islamic practice, surged in appeal during and after the Chechen conflicts because it is considered a pathway of resistance against the unpopular Russian state and law enforcement (Sokolov, 2020). Many younger generations of Dagestani women have embraced the more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam in response to the fluctuating political landscape. It is not surprising then, that officials are branding Salafism as radical (Lokshina, 2010).

Muslim Dagestani women's lived experiences and interpretations of Islam transcend the simplistic narratives often portrayed in Western and Russian media, which often diminish these nuanced expressions of faith to a singular/monolithic/exotic description that neglects their diversity (Kumar, 2010). This reductionist perspective contributes to the stigmatization of Muslim Dagestani women, fostering a climate where their religious identity becomes a target for discrimination. The frequent discourse narrative of the "Black Widow" or "jihadi bride," where Muslim women in hijab seek martyrdom through their radical faith, is one such example (Krulišová, 2016). The disconnect between internalized religious practices and biased external perceptions intensifies the challenges the women

face, particularly when viewed through the lens of Western secularism that often associates Islam with violence and veiled women as “clashing” with Western ideology (Kumar, 2010).

The media typecasts that contribute to the stigmatization of Muslim Dagestani women also lays the groundwork for the surge in their criminalization. For instance, Russian state media publishes a list of individuals who are allegedly involved in extremism (see *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 2015), which underscores a pattern of stereotyping women as terrorists. The portrayal of Muslim Dagestani women as threats to national security, perpetuated by both media narratives and government discourses, further exacerbates their vulnerability and subjects them to unwarranted scrutiny. The characterization of the veiled, radicalized woman offers critical insight into the gendered typecast and prejudices that shape outsiders’ perspectives of Muslim Dagestani women. They are framed as agents of irrationality and vindictiveness, which perpetuates a cycle of social exclusion and discrimination (Krulišová, 2016).

Additionally, cycles of violence and the loss of male family members reverberates within familial narratives and compels Dagestani women to navigate the complicated terrain of grief, resilience, and resistance. It has also provoked a reevaluation of religious identity and expression for some women, motivating them to question their faith or seek alternative paths (Sokolov, 2016). The disproportionate conscription of Dagestani men into the Russia-Ukraine war serves as one such catalyst, propelling women into the forefront of sociopolitical activism and possible religious militancy. The reality of losing their loved ones to a violent conflict inspires a sense of disillusionment and resentment toward the Russian government’s coercive measures, further sparking a collective fervor among Muslim Dagestani women to challenge the injustices and assert their agency in challenging the narrative of their community’s plight.

Research by anthropologist Denis Sokolov (2020), whose work focuses on Russia and the North Caucasus and explores the proliferation of Salafi Islam in rural communities, highlights how Muslim Dagestani women are impacted by ongoing armed conflicts. In one field interview at a detention camp, Sokolov (2020) detailed how a Dagestani woman named Zarema found her way to rebellion through Salafi Islam. She and her husband had grown up in secular families and later became part of the “Islamic renaissance” in the North Caucasus, adopting Islam as a source of morality in their everyday lives and choosing Sharia courts over the corrupt post-Soviet system. When Zarema’s father-in-law passed away, neighbors reported her family to authorities for holding a “Wahhabi” funeral service. As a result, law enforcement raided her family home. Zarema soon fled the country with her children, ultimately arriving in Syria. There, officials took her phone and passport, and she was subject to registry in an immigration detention center. She has remained in a Kurdish detention camp, unable to return to the Russian

Republic due to the threat of criminal prosecution and imprisonment. According to Sokolov (2020), this is just one example of a deepening trend.

In their resistance against their criminalization and persecution in Russia, Muslim Dagestani women often navigate a precarious landscape of religious militancy. The narratives woven around their alleged affiliations with extremist organizations and their depiction as “jihadi brides” in the Russian media reflect a broader sociopolitical context of sweeping Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobic discourse that further supports their criminalization (Martini, 2018). After a 2010 Moscow metro suicide bombing was reportedly carried out by two Muslim women from Dagestan, Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published the names, home addresses, and photographs of 22 Muslim Dagestani women who had no relation to the Moscow incident. The headline read “Forewarned” and listed the women as “potential” future suicide bombers. It is believed that the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia’s federal security agency, released the names to the press agency. None of the women had been suspected of, or charged with, any crimes. However, they were targeted because they were practicing Salafis or had husbands or other male relatives who were considered religious extremists (Lokshina, 2010).

The overlay of their gender and religious identities, paired with the looming threat of domestic terrorism, reinforces the stereotype of Muslim Dagestani women as dangerous outsiders. This continual fear and suspicion permeate their everyday lives, restricting their ability to openly protest unjust power structures, like the Russian government, that seek to silence their voices. In another field interview, Sokolov (2020) describes the experience of Aysha, a woman from the North Caucasus who traveled abroad to marry. Her family reported her to the government for suspected Wahhabi affiliation. When she attempted to return to her home country, she was beaten and sent to Moscow. In Moscow, FSB officers were waiting for her; they took her personal belongings, including her passport and her phone, and she was detained. Aysha remains in a detention camp. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB frequently summon her mother for questioning because of her daughter’s religious practices, travel, and personal affiliations (Sokolov, 2020).

The intersection of religious identity, gender roles, and sociopolitical activism interlock within the lived experiences of Muslim Dagestani women. Their contemporary narratives serve as a testament to the historical practice of utilizing religion as resistance in the North Caucasus and highlight their resilience, defiance, and communal solidarity. These examples amplify the urgency for action, including measures to safeguard the rights of Muslim Dagestani women who face discrimination and criminalization by Russian authorities.

Criminalization of Dagestani Women

Russia employs multifaceted mechanisms to designate Muslim Dagestani women as criminals, with the ultimate goals of discouraging dissent and exerting control. Thus, women find themselves navigating an existence where outspoken voices or perceived affiliations can swiftly lead to their inclusion in international criminal databases. Russia updated its terrorism and extremism laws in 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine, and the revised laws categorize a myriad of resistance actions as felony crimes, including the prohibition of anti-war speech and protest (United States Department of State, 2022b). These activities range anywhere from acts of violence to sharing a post on social media.⁵ Along with the previously mentioned Russian Criminal Code Article 282, which prohibits the inciting of hate and enmity (including the use of media or the internet even when no violence is involved), there are other vague laws used to police a wide range of citizens' activities. Article 205, for example, prohibits involvement in the commission of (or assistance with) crimes of a terrorist nature. These crimes include the public justification of "terrorism" on social media or in the mass media (Roudik & Law Library of Congress, 2016). These vague policies blur the lines in defining criminality and serve to restrict citizens' activity using third parties such as INTERPOL or the media. Intentionally broad or inconsistently applied measures – such as those used by the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when the U.S. Patriot Act allowed for administrative detention without criminal charges – open the door for human rights violations under the pretense of protecting the public from terrorism (Fitzpatrick, 2003).

While Russia utilizes domestic laws to suppress perceived extremism, it also extends its reach by engaging with international entities. INTERPOL is an inter-governmental organization that provides a central database for law enforcement agencies from 195 participating countries to share information about crimes, missing persons, global security, or persons wanted for serious crimes in their respective countries (INTERPOL, n.d.b). It issues Red Notices after receiving submissions by agencies in member countries for individuals wanted in their jurisdictions. The notices on INTERPOL's website share names, photographs, personal descriptors, and alleged crimes of the suspected criminals. In August 2023, there were a total of 6,943 Red Notices in the database from all contributing countries, and 960 of those total notices were issued for women. Russia issued 710 (73.9 percent) of the Red Notices for those women. Of the 710 women, 539 (76 percent) were wearing hijab in their photographs, and 407 (57 percent) were from Dagestan. Almost all (678, or 95 percent) of the women were wanted for charges related to

⁵ The Meta corporation and its subsidiaries were added to Russia's extremist and terrorist groups in 2022 for allegedly tolerating "Russophobia" on their platforms (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

terrorism or extremism (see INTERPOL, n.d.a). As a comparison, the United States had a total of 12 Red Notices issued for women; only one of those was a terrorism-related charge (see INTERPOL, n.d.a).

The Russian government strategically uses the issuance of INTERPOL Red Notices, in conjunction with state-sponsored media, to label and publish lists of individuals as extremists. This practice impacts the daily lives of Muslim Dagestani women. For instance, one of the women who was identified as a “potential” suicide bomber in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* because she was a practicing Salafi Muslim consequently lost her job and was continually harassed by neighbors in the street (Lokshina, 2010). These lists, which are often disseminated through official channels, subject Muslim Dagestani women to intensified public scrutiny and alienation, which stigmatizes them within their communities. One Dagestani woman who moved to Moscow was discouraged by her family from wearing the hijab, reading the Qur’an, or studying Arabic and was routinely harassed by Russians in the metro (Sokolov, 2020). Public blacklisting therefore leads to discrimination and exclusion.

Muslim women who are perceived to be affiliated with religious extremism – as sometimes indicated by conspicuous Islamic attire like the hijab or by openly practicing religious ceremonies – can also be reported to authorities as “Wahhabis,” which is used as a pejorative term. This can subsequently lead to excessive questioning, fingerprinting, collection of DNA, searches, and confiscation of personal electronic devices without being suspected of a crime (Sokolov, 2020). Russian authorities further use preventive registers, which are government-created and monitored informational databases, to target women deemed to be religious extremists (United States Department of State, 2022a). For Muslim Dagestani women, this is a violation of their privacy, and it acts as a mechanism for state-sanctioned discrimination. The use of preventive registers worsens the atmosphere of fear and intimidation, as the women become subject to unwarranted surveillance simply based on their religious practices (Belova-Dalton, 2022). This practice not only undermines the principles of due process, but also contributes to the pervasive climate of suspicion.

Human Rights Violations

The Russian government’s systemic targeting of Muslim Dagestani women stands in direct contradiction to the principles outlined in both the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, and also binding international law such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These frameworks articulate universal and inalienable rights that should be afforded to all people. Russian state discrimination against Muslim Dagestani women violates their rights to expression and political participation while simultaneously

creating a hostile environment of state-sponsored violence, coercion, and intimidation. The use of preventive registers and government watch lists to surveil individuals who have not committed a crime, for instance, violates their rights to equality before the law – including their right to due process (see United Nations, 1948, Articles 10-11; United Nations, 1966, Article 14). Muslim Dagestani women face discrimination based on the intersection of their religion and gender, which further violates human rights norms related to freedom of discrimination (see United Nations, 1948, Article 2; United Nations, 1966, Article 26) and generates a profound sense of alienation and exclusion among the historically marginalized communities of Dagestan. Furthermore, Russia’s restrictions on the civil and religious liberties of Muslim Dagestani women creates a level of intimidation that resonates throughout Dagestan and the North Caucasus region. In pursuit of a “United Russia,” the state prohibits what they determine to be explicit religious, ethnic, and political parties, including many human rights groups which Russia deems unpatriotic and a threat to national security (Balzer, 2011).

The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights⁶ offers a human rights lens to view this issue from a Muslim standpoint (see Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 1981). In Islam, the concept of social justice is deeply rooted in the Qur’anic teachings and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. There are individual responsibilities incumbent on Muslims to prioritize the principle of justice in all aspects of their lives, with daily prayers including asking God to help them practice justice. In this context, the Prophet Muhammad tells Muslims that they should not settle for unjust leaders and that Muslim societies are responsible for standing up for piety and righteousness (Akhlaq, 2018). This insight highlights how the criminalization of Salafi women in Dagestan is not only an affront to their personal freedoms but is also a departure from Islamic principles that call for a social responsibility.⁷ Muslims, as stewards of justice in their communities, are encouraged to resist oppressive measures to align their actions with the Qur’anic vision of justice (Akhlaq, 2018). According to the Islamic Declaration, Dagestani women’s rights are additionally violated when Russia restricts their ability to protest oppression and to openly participate in their religious communities, where they should be able to promote what is right (*ma’root*) and wrong (*munkar*) (Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 1981, Articles 12 & 14).

⁶ The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the Islamic Council of Europe in September of 1981 and the rights outlined in its text are supported from chapters and verses in the Qur’an.

⁷ Russia attempts to justify rights violations by portraying customary Qur’anic laws as a threat to state authority and stability. This rationalization, however, overlooks the genuine concerns of the women who seek to uphold their religious practices as well as their personal freedoms (Balzer, 2011).

Conclusion

The pointed criminalization of Muslim Dagestani women by the Russian government presents a disturbing breach of human rights, revealing the intersectionality of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and religious identity. The historical context of Dagestan's role in the Russian Federation is fraught with oppression, setting the stage for today's struggles. Russia's current targeting of Muslim Dagestani women corresponds with the war in Ukraine, where Dagestani men face disproportionately high draft rates and casualties. The cycle of grief and resentment among Muslim Dagestani women echoes the impact of the Chechen Wars and reinforces the presence of conflict and resistance in their culture.

Religious identity plays a central role in the lives of Muslim Dagestani women, but their practice of Islam clashes with the Russian state's secularism and leads to their marginalization and stigmatization. The portrayal of these women as potential threats to national security perpetuates harmful stereotypes and harms their daily lived experiences. Criminalization mechanisms – including INTERPOL Red Notices, preventive registers, travel restrictions, and media lists – demonstrate Russia's efforts to suppress dissent and control Dagestani women. These actions violate numerous human rights principles as outlined by international normative frameworks and binding international law. The multifaceted nature of the problem requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the historical legacies, geopolitical complexities, and systemic discrimination shaping the experiences of Muslim Dagestani women. As the international community grapples with these challenges, Dagestani women urgently need safeguards to protect their dignity, agency, and autonomy.

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