The Chechen Republic is a region of marked dichotomies. For centuries, the Chechen people have fought brutally for independence from the Russian State, with hundreds of thousands of citizens having died in the process. Yet, Chechens gained much in the Soviet system of affirmative action, which granted opportunities to ethnic minorities based on population size. Today, the government advertises the post-war resurgence of the region by sponsoring cultural events and re-opening the international airport. At the same time, Chechens cleave to a deep sense of history, much of which is constituted by recounting instances of resistance to Russian rule. The deportation of nearly the entire population in the 1940s continues to loom large in collective memory and is mobilized in different ways by rebel forces and pro-Russian leaders in order to entrench a sense of national identity.

Leaders encourage citizens to keep alive “traditional” clan-based practices such as the “kidnapping” of brides for marriage and polygamy, highlighting the deeply patriarchal nature of Chechen culture. Other customary practices are promoted under sharia law, which has increasingly taken hold in the region. Women now are barred from universities and state offices unless they adopt hijab. Although Chechen women, like
most in the Soviet system, have worked outside the home and attended universities since the Bolshevik Revolution, birthrates in Chechnya have consistently remained the highest of any Soviet Republic, affecting both women’s health and their ability to participate in the paid labor force. This perceived oppression of Chechen women is bolstered by a myriad of human rights violations reports from non-governmental organizations.

Yet, during recent Russo-Chechen Wars, women took on roles that were anything but traditional. From 2000 to 2004, 43 percent of Chechen suicide bombers were female. Some scholars argue that female engagement in suicide bombing is further evidence of the exploitation of Chechen women, contending that women have chosen to immolate themselves as a result of religious zealotry, brainwashing, or mental deficiency. Others argue that women’s undertaking of suicide missions may not be a sign of oppression but an expression of political engagement stemming from a desire for independence and preservation of territory.

Prior to the early 1990s, the Chechen Republic was anything but a hotbed of Islamism. Though the majority of Chechens engaged in the home-based practice of Sufi Islam, scholars have reported increasing evidence of Islamist practices taking hold in the Republic. At the same time as women are very visibly being “put in their place” via public mandates, they are being granted new opportunities for economic advancement. International modeling has been introduced as a potentially lucrative career path for young women. The Chechen government staged its own pageant, Beauty of Chechnya in 2006, and in 2007, playing host to contestants from the Mrs. World Pageant.

This article interrogates just three of the changing and contradictory public roles that Chechen women have assumed during and immediately after two recent Russo-Chechen Wars: the mother, the suicide bomber, and the beauty queen. These roles demonstrate some of the ways women’s bodies are frequently front and center in debates over religion, tradition, and women’s rights in the developing world. Ultimately, these roles have more in common than one might think. Each of these public personae has resulted in placing women at the forefront of competing narratives regarding issues such as territorial independence, adherence to tradition, and the effects of globalization in Chechen society, while at the same time revealing little about the actual experiences of Chechen women today.

Chechen Women as “Fire Keepers”: Motherhood as Anti-Russian Resistance. Chechens have long prided themselves on having one of the highest birthrates of any Russian Republic even during times of extreme stress. In 1944, Josef Stalin ordered that nearly the entire Chechen population be deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. For more than ten years afterward, the Republic was re-populated with Russian citizens. In most populations at times of excessive hardship, such as deportation, the birthrate falls. In the case of the Chechen deportation, however, the birthrate remained high. Although an estimated 70,000 Chechens died in the first year of exile alone, the population that returned to the homeland in the 1950s and 60s was as vibrant in number as the population that had been deported. In the aftermath of the Russo-Chechen Wars, Chechen birthrates are
again soaring, with the Republic boasting one of the highest in Russia."

Extraordinarily high birthrates have been described as oppressive to women not only because the combination of repeated pregnancies and poor access to medical care endanger women’s health, but also because the emphasis on women’s roles as mothers may prevent women from entering other spheres of society. In Chechnya, the combination of state-sponsored promotion of high birthrates, a resurgence of bride-kidnapping, and the institution of polygamous practices may be indicators of strict re-impositions of gender hierarchies. On the other hand, many scholars view Chechens’ perpetual fecundity as an example of a way that women actively engaged in resisting Soviet authority."

High Chechen birthrates during and after deportation have been called an expression of communal solidarity, a way for the population to recover from losses and ultimately outnumber their Russian counterparts. Others characterize rising Muslim birthrates as a calculated threat to Western secularism."

With birthrates in Russia as a whole dramatically declining, competition among Republics to sustain high birthrates—and thus secure access to scarce resources—continues to this day. The Chechen government trumpets new maternity hospitals and post-natal care programs for mothers and infants as signs of health and vitality, even to the point of stretching the truth to emphasize the Republic’s fecundity. Although many children born in Chechnya today suffer birth defects due to environmental hazards and lack of medical care, discussion of these issues is eclipsed in order to emphasize the number of children born and, therefore, the Republic’s demographic vibrancy (and perhaps legitimacy)."

These facts, combined with the imposition of stricter standards governing women’s “appropriate” behavior, make it tempting to view the engagement of women’s bodies in strategic reproduction as exploitative. However, it may be overly simplistic to attribute high rates of reproduction during deportation solely to victimization of women. While motherhood is viewed in the West as a matter of women’s personal choice, in the context of ongoing struggles between Chechnya and Russia, women’s perceptions of the role and function of motherhood may not be the same. Westerners often assume there to be an essential dichotomy between men and aggressive behavior and women and peacemaking. However, from the time of ancient Greece, the role of the mother has been the most visible example of women’s mobilization of their bodies in war. The important civic function served by the mother of warriors is exemplified in Palestine today, where “[t]he climax of the process of nationalizing motherhood in the first intifada was the bestowal of the exalted status of ‘Mother of a shahid’ upon the Palestinian woman, as militant organizations encouraged women to ‘sacrifice’ their sons in the struggle against

In Chechnya, women’s bodies are viewed as the site of both the generation and preservation of culture.
In the Chechen case, childbirth may not only be a personal experience but also may fulfill women’s civic responsibility to engage in “self-defense in the face of possible liquidation.”

In Chechnya, women long have been revered as “fire keepers,” members of the population who literally and figuratively preserve cultural heritage and national identity. Historically, one of the first tasks of a newly-married woman when she moved into her husband’s household was to maintain a fire lit by her mother-in-law. The quality of a wife could be judged by the vitality of her fire. Today, Chechens continue to hold “fire keepers” in high esteem. The reverence with which Chechen speak of wives and mothers highlights that, in Chechnya, women’s bodies are viewed as the site of both the generation and preservation of culture. As will be discussed herein, this status of women of child-bearing years as responsible for upholding national traditions makes women easy targets in debates over modesty and sexual freedom and religion and secularism in the Republic. It also makes it all the more surprising that nearly fifty women of child-bearing age have engaged in political violence as suicide bombers.

**Chechen Women as Perpetrators: Violence and the Cult of the “Black Widows.”** The UN and Human Rights Watch have documented at least 5,000 disappearances and innumerable other human rights violations in the period during and after recent Russo-Chechen Wars. Rape is a prevalent feature in post-modern conflict, although the actual numbers of persons who experienced this trauma in Chechnya is nearly impossible to ascertain due to the shame and stigma surrounding the crime. As the majority of the refugee population, women also faced unique challenges. Because men were charged exorbitant sums for or were prohibited from crossing borders into Azerbaijan, Ingushetia, and Georgia, women frequently became sole caregivers in the harsh and unsanitary conditions of camps for displaced persons. In the post-war environment, challenges faced by Chechen women were exacerbated due to a dearth of social and medical services, as well as Russian restrictions on the operations of non-governmental organizations.

Despite the numerous ways in which Chechen women been victimized over the course of the past fifteen years, the most prevalent portrayal of Chechen women in Western media is as terrorism’s most deadly perpetrators. Since 2000, Chechen militant involvement has been identified in approximately thirty terrorist acts in the Russian Federation, leading Vladimir Putin to refer to the Republic as the “epicenter of the global war on terror.” Events of political violence launched by Chechen rebel forces are widely covered in the media due to the dramatic location of the attacks—one took place in an elementary school, one at a rock concert, and another in a theater. They have also garnered worldwide attention because more than 40 percent of suicide attacks featured groups of women as perpetrators.

Eighteen Chechen women participated as captors during the 2002 hostage situation in the Dubrovka Theater staged by Chechen militants. Women were also the primary perpetrators of political violence during a two-week period in the summer of 2004, which was labeled the “summer of terror” by the Russian media. During this time, Chechen
women executed a bombing on a Moscow subway, the explosion of two Russian airliners, and assisted during the hostage-taking at Beslan Primary School. Women who participated in these events often wore black robes and full face veils and frequently espoused Islamist rhetoric. The women’s spectral presence, coupled with the knowledge that so many men had died in Russo-Chechen conflicts, garnered them the nickname “black widows.”

The combination of long-entrenched beliefs regarding Chechens as warlike and militants participating in so many terrorist activities in the Russian Federation from 2000-2004 has led to the association of Chechnya with political violence. The fact that women participated in so many suicide missions made it even easier to portray Chechen people as hostile, strange, and aberrant. After Chechen women participated in repeated events of political violence in summer 2004, articles appeared in the Western press describing Chechen women’s participation in suicide bombing as an epidemic. A particularly chilling article observed that there were “brigades of women swarm[ing] Russia spreading death and destruction.”34 Another noted that female rebels were “So warped by hate, they [would] kill anyone to take revenge against Russia.”35 In the end, Chechen women were considered the “most ruthless in the world,” a “striking cult of vengeance” that set a new standard for women—be “heroines of jihad.”36-37 Although the 2002 incident at the Dubrovka Theater and 2004 Beslan hostage-taking received massive amounts of coverage in the Western media, these events rarely made mention of the names, occupations, or level of religiosity of individual women who participated. The “black widows” of Chechnya most often were described in the collective—a “swarm,” a “brigade.”

Many academics have unquestioningly adopted the term “black widows” to describe female militant actors, regardless of whether women rebels engaged in particular acts of political violence were religiously observant, wore black, or were, in fact, grieving over men lost in the war.39 One rumor—now widely discredited—abounded that the women were brainwashed by an Arabic female handler called Black Fatima, a middle-aged woman with a “hooked nose and dark hair.”39 The most common belief about Chechen women engaged in political violence is that they are part of a “cult of vengeance,” seeking bloodthirsty revenge for the deaths of male relatives during the wars.30

Activists in developing nations observe that the function of nicknames bestowed on women militants, such as the “armed virgins” and “birds of paradise” of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Palestinian “Army of Roses,” or the Chechen “Black Widows” is to characterize women’s engagement in armed struggle as exceptional and to de-politicize the actions of such women.30 The majority of scholars studying suicide bombing today describe suicide bombing as structured, purposeful action intended to influence political processes.30 However, the much scholarship regarding women and terrorism is premised on the assumption that women engage in such activities because they are brainwashed, drugged, or more easily led than their male counterparts.30 This status of women bombers as “dead enders” in highly patriarchal societies allegedly makes women easy prey for terrorist organizations and/or may cause them to “snap” and seek to avenge
the deaths of male relatives. The effect of such descriptions is to render the actions of Chechen women suicide bombers outside the realm of political violence and within the realm of personal psychological disturbance. An image persists of women who engage in militant operations as "double deviants," persons who, in stepping outside traditionally ascribed gender roles, violate both criminal laws and laws of nature. Ultimately, these representations of women function to stigmatize Chechnya in the public imagination and to foreclose discussion of the countless human rights abuses that have occurred and continue to occur in the Chechen Republic.

Although scholars generally discuss suicide bombing as collective violence in terms of male actors, the case of Chechen female suicide bombers may too fit into this paradigm. Chechen women's engagement in motherhood as part of a resistance strategy demonstrates that female bodies have long been politically engaged in protest to oppression by the Russian state. Analysis of attacks by Chechen female suicide bombers as acts of collective political violence is supported by the fact that Chechen female militants are among the few women to have participated in coordinated suicide attacks. It is also bolstered by the fact that the women engaging in Chechen suicide attacks have come from many walks of life. The youngest were teenagers, the oldest in her fifties. Like male suicide bombers today, Chechen women bombers were better educated than the surrounding population. More than 65 percent of Chechen suicide bombers finished high school, and more than 34 percent were in college or had completed college. These statistics comport with recent data that suicide terrorists frequently emerge not from the lowest rungs of conflict-torn societies but from the middle classes, perhaps because it is "educated, middle class" persons who may suffer the most frustration with societal circumstances as they recognize that "potential opportunities are less attractive than...prior expectations."

Most conflicts today are not waged between states but between states and non-state actors. Similarly, traditionally demarcated gender roles in conflict—men as perpetrators and women as victims—are blurred in post-modern war. "Civilians," including women, not only suffer "collateral damage" but are also "legitimate" military targets. In the Chechen Republic, women have been systematically identified as enemies of the state, and the torture of women has become a form of military aggression integral to Russian military practices. The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya describes cleansing operations as "underappreciated as a motive for suicide bombing," noting that suicide terrorism was absent from the Russian

The government deemed the visit of the world’s most beautiful women as demonstrating that the Republic had finally reached a "much-needed lasting peace."
Federation after the start of the Second Russo-Chechen War, a conflict that was marked by the razing of the capital city, annihilation of nearly all Chechen cultural resources, forced disappearances, and widespread rapes. The link between state aggressions and suicide bombing is bolstered by the fact that today’s suicide bombers are usually not members of state military forces but volunteers from areas where states have not successfully been able to distinguish among civilians and soldiers. Chechen women and men have suffered similar oppression from both Russian military and rebel forces, and it is possible that they have elected to engage in suicide attacks out of a similar sense of attachment to a territory that is rapidly slipping from their grasp.

Conflict may provide a "terrain for renegotiating oppressive...gender hierarchies." Women in the military have the opportunity to gain skills unavailable to civilian women, "which provide them with the possibility of interrogating conventional gender prescriptions." Speckhard and Akhmedova found that nearly half of women bombers had actively assisted in rebel movements prior to engaging in suicide missions, receiving specialized training not only as nurses but also in driving, shooting, and tactical operations. To this end, the Russo-Chechen Wars may be argued to have facilitated "cross-gendering," opening up different avenues for women’s engagement in public life. Because men began to be targeted by Russian soldiers for searches during the First Russo-Chechen War, women became actively involved in selling arms in Chechen marketplaces. Women also assisted in barricading cities and provided assistance in rebel operations as nurses and caregivers and in providing safe-houses.

During the Second Russo-Chechen War, traditional roles of Chechen women as guardians of collective morality, may have led Chechen women to play a different role—that of suicide bombers. In the aftermath, however, the roles that women played in militant struggles over the past fifteen years are rarely recognized. Rather, in keeping with traditional associations of war and masculinity and women and peacemaking, the government is focusing on promoting a post-war baby boom and sponsoring events such as beauty contests. Their aim is to de-link Chechnya in the public imagination from images of terrorism and to instead promote an image of the Republic as peaceful, modern, and beautiful. Whether they are portrayed as militants or as beauty contestants, women’s bodies remain at the forefront of debates over tradition and modernization, independence and oppression, and Islam and secularism in the Republic.

Swimsuit Optional, Kalashnikov Necessary: The Beauty of Chechnya. In May 2006, fifteen-year-old Zamira Jabrailova was crowned the first ever "Miss Chechen Beauty." In her acceptance speech, the winner thanked both her mother and deceased former President Akhmat Kadyrov for stopping the war that had plagued the majority of her life. For her prize, she won a Toyota, which she was too young to drive. While women in the pageant were unveiled, in a nod to propriety there was no swimsuit competition, the panel of judges were all female, and rehearsals were attended by Muslim clerics. Indicative of the conflict in the Republic between adherence to tradition and desire for modernization, Zamira was selected as the winner in part due to her
knowledge of Chechen culture and graceful folk dancing, and in part based on votes gathered from around the world via the Internet. Although the pageant offered women—young, pretty, unmarried women—opportunities for advancement including trips abroad and cold hard cash, the contest also provided a way in which the government could emphasize the importance of female modesty and domestic pursuits. The finalists sang, presented baked goods, performed national dances, and showed off their knowledge of traditions and culture of the Chechen people.

The official press release by the government identified the pageant as a way for the Republic to disassociate itself from both war and radical Islam: "We want Chechnya to stop being associated with bearded men carrying guns." The press release also implied that the contest signaled the modernization of Chechnya by demonstrating the government’s commitment to women’s rights: “It’s no secret that women in the Republic are being driven into the background. Now a beautiful girl will become the symbol of our country and we’ll show that we are no worse than other states.”

Building on the success of Miss Chechnya, in March 2007 the Republic played host to contestants in the Mrs. World pageant, an international beauty competition for married women being held in another part of Russia. The government deemed the visit of the world’s most beautiful women as demonstrating that the Republic had finally reached a “much-needed lasting peace.”

Despite the Chechen government’s enthusiastic promotion of recent beauty contests as demonstrations of the region’s peaceful and cosmopolitan state, a cursory examination of these events shows that, like many of Chechnya’s renovated buildings, the events are decorative facades that mask continuing, and very real oppression. The clash of traditional adats and modernization in the Republic became evident when one of the most memorable stories to come out of the Mrs. World pageant was not the crowning of the winner but the marriage proposal extended from President Kadyrov to Mrs. Kenya. Kadyrov reportedly sought to “redeem” his bride in accordance with Chechen custom, offering her “horses, a white goat, and a couple of hens.” These pageants also took place in the context of very real dangers that remained unacknowledged in the midst of the contest. When the Mrs. World contestants were transported to Chechnya, they were driven into the Republic in unmarked cars, with armed soldiers positioned along the road to protect them from rebel attacks.

In a war-torn region like the Chechen Republic, a beauty pageant may be seem like a breath of fresh air and a positive herald of reconstruction. Such pageants also may be seen as providing new and potentially lucrative opportunities for women, particularly via migration. Unveiled women parading on the pageant stage, however, masks the fact that the advent of sharia law and the ascendency of President Kadyrov in Chechnya have come at a significant price for Chechen women. The aftermath of the two wars has brought about not only a resurgence of “traditional” values but also the imposition of Islamic law strictly limiting women’s rights in many different arenas. President Kadyrov has publicized plans to propose a bill in the Chechen parliament to legalize polygamy in the Republic. The government has also demanded that women wear head-
scarves or be banned from jobs and university classes. There is even a current ban against women wearing “low-cut” wedding dresses. Russian Federation officials are quick to attribute this return to (or newfound embracing of) religion to Islamist influences from outside the region. Others observe, however, that mobilizing the rhetoric of fundamentalist Islam has historically been a key means of promoting a Chechen identity in opposition to the Russian State.

Regardless of the motivations, these mandates—some seemingly minor and some significant—carry very real consequences for the women of Chechnya. Abuses against women in Chechnya are not uncommon. A recently-released report from the International Rescue Committee found that gender-based violence was a fact of life in Chechnya; 95 percent of female focus group participants had heard about or witnessed an incident of violence against women. In a survey of approximately 200 women from Chechnya and neighboring Republics, 80 percent stated that they felt it was appropriate for a man to hit his wife if she had an affair with another man, over 60 percent felt it was proper for a man to hit a woman if she “behaves inappropriately.” Women have suffered public beatings by secret police after allegations of adultery. Chechnyafree.ru, a website allegedly supported by the Chechen government, cautions ominously, “[A] woman of loose morals is the biggest disgrace of her family. A few women of loose morals have been lynched in the Republic.”

The recent emphasis on beauty pageants in post-war Chechnya highlights another way in which women are at once “guardians of national morality and the largest threat to this moral foundation simply because of their gender.” Granting Chechen women the opportunity to succeed based on traditionally “feminine” characteristics such as beauty or diplomacy may seem harmless, but the focus on women’s attractiveness may function to obscure the very real effects experiences of longstanding conflict have had on the women in the Republic. The UN Economic and Social Council recently reported that the restructuring of the Russian Federation to a market economy has led to an “upsurge in patriarchal attitudes towards gender relations,” increased barriers to women’s political participation and employment, and an upsurge in violence against women. The situations of women in the Caucasus further are impacted by continued violence as a result of military operations. Focusing primarily on women who have strived to maintain traditionally “domestic” or private pursuits, rather than those who have stepped out of traditionally-ascribed gender roles during times of war, may also reinforce patriarchal standards in peace time.

Conclusion. History is written on the body. Factors such as historical, social, and cultural exigencies produce bodies of a determinate type. In the Chechen Republic, women’s bodies have been front and center in struggles to raise birthrates in order to secure ethnic advancement and promote a sense of peace and national unity in periods after time of strife. They have been the focus of discussions over modesty, adherence to tradition, and religious observance, as women took the stage as contestants in beauty pageants. And they have been at the forefront in debates over Chechen terrorism, with the “black widows” of Chechnya being recognized in the West as
heroines of jihad.

While it may be tempting to focus on specific, iconic female bodies during times of struggle, highlighting certain types of women may foreclose important discussions of the everyday challenges and realities faced by all women. "[T]o date, no liberation or revolutionary war, no matter how progressive its ideology regarding emancipation of women...has empowered women and men to maintain an emancipating atmosphere for women after the military struggle... [is] over." In the aftermath, women who have served in militant operations face a lack of acknowledgement of their contributions, and there is a scarcity of options for addressing concerns such as rape that are faced by women in war. Critically examining the roles that women assume during times of conflict may be one way in which we can begin to identify more effective ways to challenge gender hierarchies in the aftermath.

**NOTES**

17. Yessir Arafat is reported to have said, “The Palestinian woman who bears yet another Palestinian every ten months...is a biological time bomb threatening to blow up Israel from within.” See Yuval-Davis, 36.
18. Yessir Arafat is reported to have said, “The Palestinian woman who bears yet another Palestinian every ten months...is a biological time bomb threatening to blow up Israel from within.” See Yuval-Davis, 36.
21. Thomas Faustini, "Desperate Decline: The
25 Matthew Owens, “So Warped By Hate, They Will Kill Anyone to Take Revenge Against Russia,” Daily Mail (London), 4 September 2004: 8.
29 Skaine 2006, 47; but see Speckhard and Akhmedova 2006a. This rumor widely has been discredited.
30 Speckhard & Akhmedova 2006a; Schweitzer 2006; Skaine 2006. See also Murphy, Kim, “Chechen Women are Increasingly Recruited to Become Suicide Bombers,” in What Motivates Suicide Bombers?, ed. Laurie Friedman, (San Diego: Greenhaven, 2005): 77.
32 “In contrast to being ostracized, poverty stricken, or misfits, ”most suicide attackers are psychologically normal, have better than average economic prospects for their futures, and are deeply integrated into social networks and attached to their national communities.” Robert A. Pape, Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism, (New York: Random House, 2005). See also Diego Gambetta, ed., Making Sense of Suicide Missions (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2005); CharlesTilly, “Terror as Strategy and Relational Process,” International Journal of Comparative Sociology, Vol. 46 (2005): 11-32.
33 When discussing women, scholars most frequently argue that the desire to commit acts of terrorism is a result of emotional problems, brainwashing or stress stemming from personal factors such as infertility, lack of educational opportunity or divorce. See, e.g., Skaine 2006; Schweitzer 2006; Beyler 2003; Barbara Victor, Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers (New York: Rodale, 2003).
34 Jad 2005, 191.
36 Pape 2005; Speckhard and Akhmedova 2006.
38 Speckhard and Akhmedova 2005, 66.
42 Reuter, 2
44 Balasingham 2003, 6, 270. See also A. Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat,” in Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?, ed. Yoram Schweitzer, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, No. 84 (August 2006). 81-90, 84.
46 Cooke, 103.
47 Anne Nivat, Chienne de Guerre (New York, PublicAffairs, 2001).
50 See Tsurayev and Baisultanova.
52 See Tsurayev and Baisultanova.
53 See Tsurayev and Baisultanova.
54 See Tsurayev and Baisultanova.
56 See Corby and Creighton.
57 Chechnya Weekly, 8:9, 1 March 2007.
60 See Radio Free Europe.
61 Edward W. Walker “Islam in Chechnya,” speech
delivered at University California, Berkley: Berkley-Stanford Conference (13 March, 1998).


63 IRC *Gender-Based Violence*, 39.


65 IRC *Gender-Based Violence*, 39.


