

WOMEN NGOs AND THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

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"It is easier to wage war than to make peace"
Georges Clemenceau

Today people from all over the world are discussing the situation in the Republic of Chechnya. Thousands of articles on this issue has been published, hundreds of speeches and programs have been broadcast on radio and television. They discuss political, economical, ethical aspects of the war. For the international community the issues of primary concern are violation of human rights and aggression against civil population of Chechnya. At the same time Russian media and population seem especially worried about the situation within the Russian Army and with economical consequences of the war. But all the vigorous discussions that go on about Chechnya often miss one very important point, which is its gender aspect.

When we talk about Chechnya we usually talk about Russian soldiers and commanders, about Chechen troops, about terrorists and about politicians - in other words we talk primarily about males. Women are brought up only while talking about civil victims of the conflict (which is not a very popular subject to discuss in Russia). As an example we should look at the typical TV broadcast from Chechnya. First we see Russian soldiers, and may be some captured Chechens; we listen to comments from commanders and politicians (who are definitely males); and then we are shown Russian and Chechen women whose faces are distorted with grief for their friends and relatives who have been killed, for their destroyed families and for their own destroyed lives. Thus in this war women are put in a dependent position. Unlike males who are viewed as main actors and decision-makers of the war women are perceived primarily as passive objects of the situation. At list this is the perception of the situation that we get from media and other informational sources.

Is that really the case? Certainly the war has not brought as many sufferings for women of Russia (those that live outside Chechnya) as it did for women of Chechnya. But we also can not say that the war has passed Russian women by. Chechnya is connected to Russia with billions of tiny strings and that is why every shot, every explosion in Chechnya echoes in the hart f someone in Russia. Even if women of Russia do not live on the territory of the military actions this war is the war in their country and the problems of the war are their problems as well. Their children are dying in this war, lives of their friends' and relatives' are being destroyed, and their nation is getting corrupted and becomes more and more aggressive. It is hard to believe that women of Russia who on their own lives experience all these troubles and sufferings coursed by the war view themselves only as passive hostages of the aggression. Women as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters were traditionally seen as the main peacemakers of this country. In

traditional Russian folk tales women are the ones who pray for peace while their husbands and sons are fighting at the battlefields. They also are the ones who cure the wounds that the war leaves in people's bodies and souls, the ones who relieve the sufferings of their land burnt with the fires of fights and struggles.

I do not want to create an idealistic portrait of Russian women as pacifists and anti-war activists. Actually history of Chechen War gives examples when women together with men were fighting on the battlefields; for example famous women who compete in biathlon events were hired as snipers for Chechen troops. But I believe that the later cases are more an exception than a typical situation.

Current situation clearly reveals failure of military measures of conflict resolution. It is obvious that some alternative ways to bring peace into the long-suffering lands of Chechnya are needed. And women are the ones who might show these ways. I say *might* because I keep in mind that today Russia has a male dominated society and that it will take a lot of efforts from the women's to be heard in the current situation. But women constitute more than half of the country's population and their right equality with men is established by the Constitution which means that they have their right to be heard.

This study is aimed to present and analyze attitudes and efforts of Russian women, women who value life more than any political or economical interests and who are willing to do whatever they can stop sufferings caused by the war in Chechnya. It is based on content analysis of materials from Russian media as well as documentation presented by different non-government organizations of Russian women. The core of the study is based on an analysis of interviews with members of several women's organizations from different parts of the country: Petersburg, Moscow, Vladimir, Tomsk, Arzamas, and Velikiy Novgorod.

In order to understand current attitudes of women's NGOs toward the war in Chechnya and their actions connected with this issue we need to go back to the history of modern women's movement in Russia. Reasons and issues that were standing at the origin of the movement have greatly determined its current specificity.

We would look at the history of women's movement in Russia starting from the second half of the 80s. Certainly before that during the communist period there were some organizations of women, for example Women's Unions (*zhen soveti*) that were supposed to work as local committees on women's issues. But Unions were more of the elements of command and administrative system than of predecessors of women's NGOs or women's movement in its current meaning.

The strength of a women's movement in a democratic state can be determined by its influence on the politics of the country and its impact on civil society. One of the main reasons that explains why females are perceived as objects rather than subjects of the Chechen war is the fact that women in the Russian Federation are limited in influencing policy, especially in the field of national security. The main barriers are institutional and cultural: low representation of women in politics, absence of women in power institutions

such as the Security Council and Presidential Committee on security, and gender power discourse.

The State Duma (Russia's Parliament) could provide an open tribune for women politicians against the war in Chechnya. The separate women's party, or alliance, called "Women of Russia" had achieved a staggering success in December 1993. "Women of Russia" established their position of defenders of social protection and security during a year of hard work in the State Duma. Many people expected them to lead an anti-war coalition as "mothers" or at least to put social issues and a demand to provide for the security of the civilians on the Chechnya agenda. That did not happen. "Women of Russia" followed the government policy and did not speak out against the war. Due to increasing civic indignation against the war, "Women of Russia" later shifted their position, but it was too late. The perception that "Women of Russia" *voted for Chechnya* had been formed before the election in 1995. (Actually it was not true, in accordance with the constitution the State Duma could not vote for military intervention at all.) However "Women of Russia" acquired a reputation of pro-Yeltsin organization ("state women") and lost their image of "mothers" and defenders of the poor people together with their seats in the Duma. Before the elections in 1999 "Women of Russia" split in two separate parties. The larger of the two kept the name "Women of Russia" and joined the alliance "Motherland" for the elections. This alliance showed that practically the only political organization of Russian women has given up running in the Duma elections as a separate force. Even though women in Russian parliament did not manage to form an active anti-war coalition and to become anti-war leaders it should be noted that some of them (for example, the democrats, Tatiana Yarigina and Galina Starovoitova) voted on various issues against the military approach.

The situation is different when we speak about civil movement of women. This movement consists of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers and other organizations with similar programs, professional women's unions, local women's parliaments, crisis centers for women and a large number of other organizations.

Many of these organizations started their work in the end of the 80s and at the very beginning of the 90s. They had different programs and worked with different issues. For example for Soldiers' Mothers Committee's and similar organizations - the major problems that they dealt with were issues of obligatory recruitment, violence and violation of basic human rights in the Russian Army.

Army of Russian Federation inherited a lot of command features of the Soviet Army. Democracy that at that point was so widely discussed by politicians and civilians was not allowed into the military camps. Tyranny of the upper officers, impunity and crimes flourished in the Army. Political, economical and cultural chaos in the country has even worsened the situation. Collapse of the soviet regime and dramatic change in foreign political situation made the entire ideology of the Army more than questionable. The Army that for decades used to be seen as a main stronghold of communist ideas of the Soviet nation turned into the major barrier for the country's escape from its communist past. Prestige of the Army service was declining implacably. More and more often it

was referred not as an Army that brings freedom but as an occupation Army. Nation was losing respect for their Army.

Young males tried to avoid obligatory recruitment by any possible means, there were more and more cases of desertion. In return Army authorities did not take any serious efforts for modernization and reformation of the Army. Even though it was more than obvious that military forces of the country were in need in deep and carefully planned changes that would adjust it to the new democratically oriented reality, Army was still holding back to its totalitarian past.

The situation was aggravated by drastic decline in budget expenditures on the military. Poor feeding and bad medical treatment in the bootcamps played a role of a spark in a barrel with gunpowder: hungry soldiers started to turn their dissatisfaction into anger and violence toward their mates or deserted.

The most serious and vigorously discussed problem of the Russian Army was obligatory recruitment. Through the entire existence of the Soviet Union its troops were filled by means of obligatory recruitment. All males over 18 years of age were and still are obligated to do certain number of years¹ of the army service. Unlike contract soldiers those on obligatory service do not receive any payment except food, cloth and some pocket money. That is why keeping an army that is based on obligatory recruitment is cheaper. But cheap certainly does not always mean good, especially if it is accompanied with life threatening conditions and cruelty. Obligatory Army service in Russia means that a large number of people go to the army against their will. The state uses its force to make them join the military in return they often use their force against people around them. It creates an atmosphere of hatred and violence in the Army the perfect embodiment of which is *dedovshina*². Obligatory recruitment also creates a number of other problems: in order to fill the troops military authorities often recruit people with serious sicknesses such as cardiac disorders, asthma and others. They also force people whose beliefs do not allow them to use weapons or any kind of physical force or violence³ to join the military. As a result of all the violations of basic human rights that occur during the recruitment Russian Army is being filled with people with poor health, mental and moral problems. Serving in Russian Army is a tough test even for an absolutely strong and healthy person and may have disastrous consequences for any one else. Problems of physical and mental health of the soldiers were intensified by the general atmosphere of aggressiveness and tyranny. After two years of service in these

¹ The number of years for obligatory army service has been changed several times. Today it equals two years with the exception of one year for males with higher education.

² *Dedovshina* - (from "ded" - old man) in the Army refers to the situation when soldiers who have done more years of service have priority position over "younger" soldiers. This priority "allows" older soldiers to mock, exploit and assault their younger mates.

³ Some religions (for example Buddhism) forbid any type of involvement into violent or military actions. During the last decade in Russia there was a large PR campaign for introducing alternative Army Service for those whose beliefs stand against joining military fourths or even holding weapons. Alternative ways of the army service for the followers of these religions should be regulated by the legislation on alternative army service. Draft of this legislation has been discussed by the State Duma several times but was never passed.

conditions even those soldiers who used to have perfect health before the Army often returned home as invalids and not all soldiers with health or emotional problems managed to make it through.

Mothers of the young soldiers that during the two years of army service were turned from healthy young males into neurotic invalids could not remain ignorant about the problems within the Army. For many of them Army turned into a monster that was destroying their children and as true mothers they were ready to do anything to protect their children from harm. (Here we can see a reflection of traditional Russian image of a "mother" protecting her children even if these children are already grown up males and should be able to take care of themselves.) Trying to help their own sons that were doing or were about to do Army service to fight all the injustices of the Russian military, mothers of the soldiers started to form first organizations.

The movement of soldiers' mothers started in the spring of 1988 right after approval of the law that allowed recruitment of second year students of higher education institutions. Several mothers got together in order to obtain recruitment respite for their sons and get them back to school. In 1989 women managed to attain approval of a new legislation according to which all recruited second year students were brought back to schools. In 1990 First Forum of Soldiers' Mothers was held. At this forum Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was established.

Very soon branches of the Soldiers' Mothers Committee began to appear all over the country. At first women joined this organizations in order to save their own sons and than stayed with the organization in order to help others. Here is a story about joining the Committee told by an active member of Vladimir Committee of Soldiers' Mothers:

"You won't believe it but first time I came to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers because of a call-up paper. Certainly this paper was addressed not to me but to my son. His health happened to be not very good which is not a rare thing in our times... I have heard about the Committee before. Here I was told what to do... After full medical examination it turned out that my son had a very dangerous disease. Now he is at home... working. I got some spare time and finally realized my wish to do some community work."

Along with emergence of Soldiers' Mothers movement in Russia women's organization of other type started to appear. Perestroika and democratization brought ideals of freedom of speech and human rights. As a component part of the human rights issue the problem of equal rights for men and women was also brought up to the public discussion. During the times of financial and social crisis women very often suffered more than men. They were the first one to lose their jobs during downsizing; those who were lucky enough to keep their jobs were receiving lower wages. Women had more difficulties in starting their own business because they were not welcomed into the *men's world* of emerging private business. Another important issue was violence against women: for many years in Russia domestic violence was viewed as an internal problem of the family, even worse - it was believed to be quite normal. Old Russian proverb says, "He beats you means he

loves you". Certainly the situation when women traditionally occupied positions of victims was unacceptable for feminism and its followers.

Inequalities in males' and females' positions in the society of transition economy brought to life a number of feminist-oriented organizations of women, among them the Independent Women's Forum, Feminist Orientation Center and Crisis Center for Women in Moscow and Petersburg. These organizations were lobbying issues of women's interest in media and government, provided women with necessary legal and psychological consultations, organized training and additional education courses for unemployed women, helped them in starting their own small businesses. A lot of attention was also paid to the issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Organizations like Crisis Center for Women organized rehabilitation programs for the female victims of domestic violence and rape.

We can see that movement of Soldiers' Mothers and the feminist movement were quite different from the very beginning. It is my personal opinion and it certainly might not reflect the reality but I believe that Russian movement of Soldiers' Mothers can not be related neither to feminist, nor even to human rights movements. With certain exceptions committees of Soldiers' Mothers focus their activities on working with problems and troubles of soldiers and their families and do not get involved with the issues of right equality for other population strata, including issues of equality for males and females. It is also important to note that activities of Soldiers' Mothers are culturally more acceptable than other women's initiatives. Image of a woman fighting for her children seems to be more familiar and acceptable for Russian society than image of a woman struggling for maintenance of equal rights for all citizens including females and willing to get involved into a *male world* of politics and military affairs.

Despite all the differences between various women organizations there was one problem that was important for all of them. This problem was armed local conflicts. Different organizations might pay attention to different aspects of this issue: while Committees of Soldiers' Mothers were looking at the local conflicts as at another problem of Russian Army and another threat to their sons' lives, members of feminist organizations were especially concerned with violation of basic human rights that was inevitable in a military conflict. But practically no single organization managed to remain ignorant about these unannounced wars that were going in and around their country.

Women were among the first who realized all the dreadful consequences that the local conflict would have for the country and its people. Already during the events in Abkhazia and Tadzhikistan Committees of Soldiers' Mothers started talking about necessity to reconsider existing political and ethnical situation and to stop unnecessary slaughters within own country. Unfortunately their voices as well as voices of activists of human right movement were not heard at that moment.

State authorities chose to ignore democratic ideals and human right values. For some of them political and financial interests were overweighing such values as life and peace. Military conflicts were emerging in new and new places of the former Soviet Union.

Government pretended not to notice the seriousness of the problem as long as that was possible. It tried to follow this strategy of avoidance again when in 1994 the military conflict in Chechnya started. But this time it was hard to do.

Society was already introduced to the major principles of democracy: freedom of speech, human rights, etc. People were inspired by the fresh breeze of democratic ideas that was filling their minds and souls after decades of musty silence. They were excited and no longer agreed to keep silent about endless wars that were going on in the country. People were eager to demonstrate their protest.

Feminist anti-war campaigning started with the beginning of the war activities in 1994. It was based on pacifist and non-violence initiatives such as "Women in Black" manifestation by Crisis Center for women in Moscow and Petersburg, the "Arts Against Violence" actions by the Feminist Orientation Center and the Information Center of the Independent Women's Forum and others. It is interesting to note that the "Arts against Violence" action was scheduled for December, 11, 1994 - the day of the beginning of the military intervention in Chechnya. About thirty women wrote and signed an open letter to the President, expressing their protest against the intervention and emphasizing that "lying and violence can not serve as tools of maintaining statehood and national security". It was one of the first civic protests against the war.

Feminist anti-war activities during the war of 1994-96 included public campaigning and demonstrations ("Women in Black" and "White Scarf"), media publications, distribution of information through women's networks, public reports as well as reports at various women's conferences, consulting and assisting refugees, former soldiers and members of their families.

Committees of soldiers' mothers also did not stay aside of this problem. Working with soldiers from Chechnya and with their families became a priority task for the majority women NGOs of that type. The committees of soldiers' Mothers assisted women who wanted to go to Caucasus where the Chechens have agreed to pass captured or dead soldiers only to soldiers' mothers, not to military officials. They also helped soldiers who have deserted their units.

It is important to mention that during the war of 1994-1996 Soldiers' Mothers often worked in cooperation with human rights activists and other women's organization. Members of all types of women's organizations as volunteers and members of various charitable organizations has contributed a lot of efforts to provide food, medicines and clothes to refugees from Chechnya, and to assist in the rehabilitation of those who suffered from the terrorist attacks. Together with human rights and feminist organizations committees of Soldiers' Mothers participated in anti-war manifestations and wrote anti-war letters and petitions to the state authorities.

During that period all the activities of anti-war movement (including activities of Soldiers' Mothers, feminists and also activities of human rights and a number of other anti-war movements) were given a broad media coverage. Practically every day newspapers, radio stations and TV channels reported about anti-war demonstrations and pickets organized by feminists and other activists in different parts of our country and abroad. It should be also mentioned that during the war of 1994-96 Mass Media was solely standing on anti-war positions. Often press and human rights organizations (including women's anti-war organizations) were united in their advocacy for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Not surprisingly during

the 1994-1996 war campaign the public opinion was also supporting the idea of the peaceful solution to the conflict.

In 1999 the situation has changed dramatically. Today Russian Mass Media holds predominantly pro-government position. As the polls show public opinion also supports the military solution to the conflict. TV shows us soldiers and generals talking about their willingness to fight till the end, and at the same time we hear very little about anti-war activities of Russian human rights, feminist and other women's movements. We do not see any protest marches, demonstrations or pickets. Newspapers mention Committees off Soldiers' Mothers only in the cases when their actions conform to the traditionally accepted image of mothers caring about their sons. Almost nothing is being said about anti-war activities of the feminist-oriented organizations. At first glance it may seem that the majority of Russians, including the majority of Russian women, do not view the Chechen War as a major problem facing the country; or rather, they do not view it as a problem as long as there are no explosions in the streets of their own cities or their own sons are not being sent to Chechnya. If some concerns are expressed they are usually connected with the lives of Russian soldiers so that it seems that no one is caring about the fates of civil inhabitants of The Republic of Chechnya.

What has changed since the truce in Hosavyurt in 1996? It is hard to believe that nation whose sons (as four years ago) are forced to kill (and to kill not only bandits, but civilians as well) and are getting killed themselves have put up with that. It is also hard to believe that actions of all women's NGOs now are limited to updating of the lists of dead.

There are a lot of questions that are left without any answer. Why is there so little information about women NGOs and their anti-war activities in the press today? What are the positions of women's organizations? What actions are they taking or planing to take in relation to the war in Chechnya? Do they have any difficulties promoting their actions and opinions in press? What are their relationships with the authorities? This small investigation was aimed to find answers at least to some of those questions.

First of all let me ask a rhetorical question: who should be blamed for this war? Chechen bandits? All Chechens? Russian government or may be the entire Russian society? I think that partially we all are to be blamed for the second round of the War in Chechnya.

The roots are in our attitudes. What differentiates the War of 1999-2000 from the War of 1994-1996 is that these two wars are characterized by completely different ideology. During the first campaign in Chechnya public opinion was primarily on the side of peaceful solution to the conflict and that is why all anti-war activities found wide support among the population of the country. In 1994-1996 state authorities reviled their disability to find support to their actions among the general public. Mass media as well as majority of NGOs at that point were also standing on anti-war and sometimes even anti-government positions. More than that they all were willing to express their positions publicly.

Before the beginning of the campaign of 1999 government officials did everything in order not to repeat previous "*mistakes*". The beginning of military actions was preceded by massive PR campaign aimed to change public attitude to the conflict in Chechnya. This time government managed to insure support for its ideology and its actions from mass media. Efforts of the state authorities did not go in vain. Already in fall of 1999 majority of Russians viewed Chechnya as the main nidus of terrorism in Russia. Explosions that took place in Moscow in August and September of 1999 played its part in further destabilization of the situation. Russians were forced to believe that the war is better on the territory of Chechnya than in their own towns and cities. This attitude can be perfectly expressed by a famous phrase of Vladimir Putin, who at that time was Prime Minister of the country:

"If that would be necessary we would smash them (Chechen terrorists) in outhouses."

The country was tired of wars and conflicts. Majority of the people just wanted to put an end to this endless war and believed that military solution of the conflict was the only possible solution left. Inspired by the resoluteness of the government and primarily of Vladimir Putin people started to agree that the only way to stop deaths of soldiers and civilians in Chechnya and acts of terrorism in other parts of Russia was to *clear* the Chechen Republic of terrorists once and for all. Preoccupied with the illusion of fast and easy victory they forgot that military solution means war; and war always means death, violence and destruction that will never be limited to the territory where actual armed actions take place.

As it often happened before in a hard situation of war people tried to find escape in the rise of patriotism and even nationalism. In 1999 Chechnya was turned into the symbol of the all-national enemy, a symbol that after all these years of disappointment and broken ideals managed to bring the entire nation together, made it feel strong and powerful. Russians again felt that they were a great nation that has its mission - to protect its people from enemies (here Chechen extremists or sometimes simply Chechens). This regained feeling of unity and power was very comforting and many people absolutely did not want to give it up even if it was based on sufferings of others. Not surprisingly that in this situation majority of the population was preoccupied with anger toward Chechens and expressed support to the ideas of military solutions while very little attention was paid to the voices of those speaking against the war. If during the first military campaign all anti-war or human rights pickets, meetings and other actions were widely discussed by media, leaders of civil movement and general public than in 1999 they were usually left without any attention. More than that some people understood anti-war calls not only as anti-government but also as anti-national.

In 1999-2000 talking about the problem of Chechnya people were much more concerned about lives of Russian soldiers and Russian civilians in Chechnya than about lives and wellbeing of Chechens. I do not think that this fact can be interpreted as a manifestation of Russian chauvinism. It is not a problem of Russians but a problem of wars in general. Let's remember Vietnam war and anti-war movement in US that was accompanying it. The main focus of that movement were lives of American soldiers that were "meaninglessly wasted" in the jungles and swamps of Vietnam.

Thus in 1999 anti-war ideas became unpopular. It is always hard to find support to ideas that are not welcomed by the majority. Not only state structures but also a lot of non-government establishments were refusing to support activities of NGOs holding strong anti-war position, especially human rights and feminist organizations. The only war related activities that were accepted and even encouraged by public and tolerated by the state (as I have said earlier) were those that fitted into the image of a woman caring about lives and safety of her nearest and dearest but not about political issues. Probably that is why the only information given by official sources and media on activities of women's NGOs was about Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, and to be more accurate, only about those activities of the committees that had no political motivation. Among the issues allowed to discussion were assistance in rescuing captured soldiers, collecting humanitarian aid, and sometimes number of soldiers killed.

We get an impression that women's NGO activities are limited to mollification of dreadful consequences of the war and have nothing to do with protection of human rights and fighting for the changes in the state politics. Is it really so? Probably not. But as there's no smoke without fire this impression can not be absolutely unfounded.

First of all let's take a look at the Soldiers' Mothers Committees. As it was mentioned before their primary mission is protecting Russian soldiers from harm, no matter if this harm is coursed by violence in the Army or by Chechen bandits. Today official sources try to present the war in Chechnya as an aggression of Chechen extremists against civil population of Chechnya and Russia, and what is especially interesting even Russian Army is often presented as a victim of "sly bandits". Government is creating an image of the protector and savior of the nation. And this image perfectly correlates with the images of mothers saving their sons. That is why government appears to be more or less willing to help those committees that agree to follow this general schema.

In this situation a lot of local Soldiers' Mothers committees chose to cooperate with the government structures and to deal with the Chechen problem within the frames defined by the government authorities.

And not only Soldiers' Mothers. I talked to members of other women's organization (for example women's Parliament in Novgorod, or Women's Union in Arzamas) who said that for their organizations working with the problems of Chechnya meant primarily working with the problems of Russian soldiers.

Unlike NGOs that see their primary mission in organization of political and public anti-war activities women's NGOs of this type are much more concerned with working with what I would call *individual cases*. They collect humanitarian aid for the troops in Chechnya; they search for soldiers who have disappeared in the chaos of the War. They hold on to every life, know every soldier from their region. These NGOs see their task in providing actual help for every soul thrown into the flames of the war. Here I need to clarify: *provide help to every Russian soul*. Problems of the civil population of Chechnya often (although not always) are left out of the scope of work done by these organizations while I believe that more attention should be paid to the troubles of refugees from Chechnya and civilians that stayed in the Republic. These people need rehabilitation, financial and material assistance as much or may be even more than Russian soldiers.

Members of many NGOs often decide to devote their energy to working with the individual case of every person harmed by the war because they do not believe that they can have any influence on the country's policy in Chechnya. But at the same time they know that when they go to Chechnya and help rescue captured soldiers there is at least some result.

Let me explain: I do not want the fact that some organization chose to collaborate with the Government to sound like an accusation. This collaboration does not mean that they are ignorant to the problems of Chechnya. Even though they sometimes get accused by human rights organization in mirmidioning and indulgence to the tyranny of the state it is not always the case. It is important to remember that even if these organizations avoid public involvement with political aspects of the issue they are still doing a lot for those suffering from the war. And it is quite possible that in the situation of war humanitarian aid and assistance in finding lost and rescuing captured soldiers and civilians is as important as protesting against the war in the streets and lobbying for peaceful solution to the conflict in the Duma.

Also local NGOs are usually quite small while the scope of the problems connected with Chechen war is the same everywhere. Working with individual problems takes so much time and effort that women do not have any time or energy left for participation in political action. Here is a story told by the chair of Women's Union of Arzamas Danilkina Galina:

"Why don't we organize public anti-war actions? Let me tell you that... I am a very active mother... take a very active part in the life of local community. I have two sons. When the first one was recruited he got into a bootcamp not far from Moscow. In that camp recruits were kept half-starved and commanders' tyranny was unlimited. My son wrote that he and his mates were constantly searching for food. He said he was lucky. He has dark hair and skin and Caucasians that were selling watermelons right by the gates of the camp thought that he was one of them. They used to give my son melons for free and then he would exchange these melons for bread. My son had been in the Army for about half a year when I found out the he was in the hospital. He was bitten by the soldiers of higher rank. When after two years he got back home it took us about two more years to cure all the traumas and sicknesses that he got in the Army.

All the memories about hard Army experience of my older son were still fresh when the time came for my younger son to join the Army. I did everything I could to insure that he would not get into the same camp where his brother was... Finally he was sent into the unit located right in Moscow. First everything seemed to be fine. After half a year of service he was sent to patrol streets. And that was the beginning of the troubles. It was expected that soldiers would collect money from the street sellers. Officers expected to receive share of this money. Soldiers who did not want to extort money were bitten. My son was one of them. Like his brother he was bitten and got into the hospital. He had only two choices to become a bandit or an invalid. I had to do something about it. The next day after I got his letter telling that he was in the hospital again I got on a train to Moscow. I went to the head of the Unit and to a lot of other high rank military authorities. I was ready even to go to the minister (of defense). It took me two months of pleading, bagging, and

arguing. Finally my son was transferred into a camp not far from Arzamas. It was a relatively nice place. He finished his two years there without serious problems... The time when my sons were in the Army was probably the hardest time of my life. When it was over I just wanted to forget this nightmare.

Today our organization and I personally try to provide all possible assistance for the soldiers and their parents because we know what it is like to be soldiers' mothers. We look for lost soldiers, organize rehabilitation programs for those who return from the Army, provide soldiers and their parents with legal information. We try to work with everyone who comes to our office... We simply do not have any time or energy left for anything like manifestations or meetings. I don't even know if that would make any difference."

Some of women's organization decide to work with the state not only because they want to avoid antagonism with the authorities and all related problems but also because they view collaboration with its representatives as a way to maintain their regular activities and to fulfill their mission. Tomsk Regional Committee of Soldiers Mothers is one of those.

"We work in active collaboration with oblast administration. Have support from them. We have our right for trust", says the chair of the committee Tatiana Fedorovna Sobolevskaya. She believes that collaboration with the state gives her organization opportunity to find necessary financing and to organize successful actions aimed to help soldiers and civilians in Chechnya.

"We send humanitarian aid to the soldiers in Chechnya twice a year. We also organized several trips to Chechnya for our members... There they observed the situation, collected information... We also work with the identification laboratory in Rostov."

Certainly working in such a strong cooperation with the state has its certain impact on the specific of the organization's actions. Unlike their colleagues from NGOs working independently from the Government women of Tomsk do not take part or organize any public anti-war meetings or actions. Avoidance of public anti-war statements does not mean that Tomsk women support the war. In general NGOs that are financially or politically dependent on the state structures try to remain neutral about political aspects of the situation which sometimes becomes very inconsiderable. For example first the chair of the Tomsk committee says that:

"The Government is totally responsible for the situation in Chechnya: after the Hosavyurt peace treaty Chechnya did not become an independent state and thus it should follow the law of Russian Federation... Government is responsible for the fact that Chechnya has turned in a training camp for terrorists". But few minutes later adds "I believe that the most urgent thing now is to clear the republic of the bandit", - a phrase that perfectly fits within the official state ideology.

Once again: it is important that organizations that work in cooperation with state authorities do not completely turn away from the problems of Chechnya. Although I have to admit that there are some NGOs that choose not to deal with this sensitive issue at all. They simply do not want to get involved with political issues and bring additional difficulties into their existence. For example representative of Women's Parliament from the city N said that their organization is non-political and that is why they do not deal with the problems connected with the War in Chechnya. What a nice excuse.

Not all women's NGOs and even not all Soldiers' Mothers Committees are willing to within the frames set by the state. And here is the place where the problems start.

First of all Soldiers' Mothers Committees as well as human rights organizations including feminist organization standing on anti-war positions or at least trying to influence political aspects of the conflict are often deprived from any state benefits (such as free rent of office space) that many non-political NGOs receive. Some women's NGOs chose to refuse any assistance from the government institutions in order to remain financially and ideologically independent from the state. They do not ask the state for any assistance except of protection of their basic rights to express and protect their own points of view. This is

how women from organization "Soldiers' Mothers of Petersburg" describe their relationships with authorities:

"City and oblast administrations are not very willing to work with us. Well, at least they give us permission for our public actions."

In the situation of general lack of financial resources, state refusal to provide benefits to organization's results in serious money difficulties. More than that often other sponsors (representatives of local business and even foreign charity funds) are very careful about collaboration with organizations that have conflict with local officials. But organizations like "Soldier's Mothers of Petersburg" prefer to keep their independent status in spite of all these difficulties.

Without certain financial resources women's NGOs become unable to organize anti-war actions, to publish anti-war leaflets or to place anti-war articles in press. Organizations like that often have difficulties even in paying their telephone bills. For example Soldiers' Mothers Committee in Vladimir does not receive any assistance from the state. Women work in the committee for more than 20 hours per week voluntarily. Yarilina Lyudmila Aleksandrovna, chair of the committee noticed during the interview that sometimes they even have to pay from their own pocket in order to buy tickets home for soldiers returning from the places of service. *"The only money we get to pay our bills comes from donations of the people who got our help"*.

But difficulties that women's NGOs face in their anti-war activity are not limited only to financial problems. In some cases state authorities chose to take active steps against organizations with inconvenient positions. Here the tactics may vary from denial to issue permission for public actions of the organization to actual ban on the functioning of the organization.

This is the story of Vladimir Regional Branch of Soldiers' Mothers Committee of Russia. This committee was functioning on the territory of Vladimir and Vladimir region for past 7 years. Its members helped hundreds of soldier with serious sicknesses to avoid obligatory recruitment, helped dozens of mothers to find their sons in bootcamps and even in Chechnya. Even though activities of organization were primarily focused on solving problems of Russian soldiers active anti-war position of the committee was bothering local military authorities and city administration. By the directive from the city authorities L. Yarilina - the founder of the Regional Committee was - removed from the position of the chairman. When the members of the committee disagreed to give the position of the chairman to the protege of the city administration a new committee of soldiers' mothers was created. This new committee was named Vladimir Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. It was registered at the same address as the old Regional Committee. Members of the old committee were asked to leave the office space they were using for many years. When the Regional Committee refused to follow this outrageous request a telephone line in the office was disconnected and a lawsuit was filed against L. Yarilina. There were several court hearings that did not bring any conclusion to the problem. Finally regional committee found a new office and moved out. But people in need of help still go to the Regional Committee because they believe that only there they will get actual assistance. Members of this committee are always easy to find and ready to help. At the same time finding representatives of the new City Committee was a very difficult task and it turned to be virtually impossible to find some one who has received help from it. What about Regional Branches of the Soldiers' Mothers Committee? It is still alive and even has 8 constantly functioning branches in the districts of Vladimir Region.

We see that NGOs that refuse to accept official (and the most widely spread) point of view at the War in Chechnya are risking to face a lot of barriers. Every organization is looking for its own way to avoid or to overcome these barriers. Some work within the limitation defined by them, others simply ignore the problem. And there also are organizations that refuse to notice the barriers and fight for their beliefs in spite of all the difficulties. They chose to go through all the difficulties because the experience of the first war in Chechnya has proved that even though providing assistance in finding lost soldiers and collecting humanitarian aid for the victims of the war is important it is not enough. To change current situation in Chechnya means to change the core principles of Russian political and legal system, to change the bureaucratic machine of the state. It was proved long time ago that any bureaucracy and especially

bureaucracy of totalitarian type is extremely resistant to changes and that only a very strong civil action movement would be able to turn this bureaucracy toward the interests of its people.

A large number of women NGOs understand necessity to supplement their activities with public political and legal actions that attract attention of politicians, media and entire population to the problem of the war in Chechnya. Through out the country active members of the feminist movement together with representatives of human rights organization regularly hold anti-war meetings and conferences. For example human right organization "Soldiers' Mothers of Petersburg" together with Petersburg Society of Scientists, League of Voters and young anti-fascias every Monday hold pickets against unannounced war in Chechnya.

Together with other human rights organizations women NGOs form anti-war movements and committees. Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees of Russia and Information Center of Independent Women's Forum in cooperation with Society "Memorial", Youth Center for Human Rights, Anti-violence Movement, "Democratic Union", "Human Right Network" group, Center for Development of Democracy and Human Rights and a number of other organizations established Committee of Anti-War Action. This committee organizes anti-war meetings and pickets, publishes and distributes anti-war bulletins, and lobbies for peaceful regulation of the Chechen conflict in Duma. Among the main activities organized by the committee are picket by the building of the Ministry of Defense on the 6th of February, 2000; meetings on Theatre Square on February 19 and on Pushkin Square on March 19th. Here is what the leaflets of the committee say about committee's position on the War in Chechnya.

"We are against this war because current military campaign is a result of complete absence of reasonable politics of Russian State Authorities in Chechnya during the years of 1996-1999. They have done nothing to support constructive forces and to isolate extremist groups in the republic.

We are against military actions in Chechnya since the moment when Basaev's troops were thrown out from the territory of Dagestan.

We are persuaded that further escalation of the conflict is pointless and it is necessary to start negotiations immediately... We demand state authorities to follow their primary obligations and to come up with a plan of political regulation of the conflict. Actions of the State should insure safety for its citizens and not to bring distraction and grief into the entire country.

Continuation of the War in Chechnya will only bring new countless disasters. Independent society of Russia may and must tell the state authorities "Come to reason! Stop the Madness!"

Anti-war actions of women-activists are not limited to public pickets and manifestations. Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees of Russia regularly addresses open letters to the President of Russian Federation. In these letters mothers demand to ensure protection of basic rights of their sons whose lives and health are being threatened during the time of peace. Here is an extract from the Third Open Letter:

We remember how during the War of 1994-1996 commanders used lives of soldiers that were forced to join the War in Chechnya. Graves of those who had disappeared during that war are still not found and unidentified remains of some of them are still kept in refrigerators in Rostov-on-Don⁴. This is an eternal reproach for you (Mr. President) and for the entire Russia. And now we can see how you treat lives and health of our sons now."

⁴ Laboratory for identification of remains of the killed soldiers is located in Rostov-na-Donu. Remains of some of the soldier from the First War are still unidentified.

It seems that representatives of legislative power - the so called representatives of nation's interests - as well as of executive power do not exhibit a lot of concern in lives of the population of their country. That is why activists of anti-war movement try to find justice in the third branch of state power - which is the judicial branch. In spring of 1995 more than 350 parents of soldiers killed in Chechnya during the so called "first campaign" filed suits against the Ministry of Defense asking for material and moral compensation for the harm caused by the deaths of their sons. In September of 1995 all parents receive identical "Determinations on Denial to Accept the Charges". After that several parents through the women's NGO Fund "Mothers' Right" sent individual complaints to Moscow City Court. There the original decision remained unchanged. The next instance was the Supreme Court of Russian Federation. Supreme Court Board on Civil matter abolished denial to accept the charges. Now the applications are accepted for review at Presnenskiy Court of Moscow and are waiting for its turn.

What is especially important, activists of the feminist movement express concern not only for the lives of our soldiers but also for the lives and well being of the people of Chechnya. For example Consortium of Women's NGOs works with issues of providing assistance for refugees from Chechnya and problems of adequate coverage of the War in Chechnya in press.

So we see that not all women's NGOs do their work within the official ideology of the state. There is a lot of action going on in anti-war movement. Why do not we hear about that? Simply because we (I mean majority of Russians) do not want to hear and do not want to know. All these appeals to stop the war, to protect human rights of population of Chechnya and even of those fighting in Chechen troops destroy the perfect picture of just war that we have created. We do not want to hear the cries of anti-war activists because we want to believe that we are doing the right thing and thus to believe in our country and in our government for the first time after so many years. That is why the rare voices of feminists and other anti-war activists are getting lost in this unanimous and national-wide agreement.

At the end I need to mention another important issue that has been vigorously discussed recently and that has great impact on NGOs activities. This issue is freedom of press.

It is believed that during the events of 1994-1996 the media war was won by Chechen commanders. The majority of Russian newspapers, TV and radio channels were speaking against the actions of Russian government. Media always has great influence on public opinion and at that moment played a crucial role in creation of anti-war and anti-government attitude among the general public.

In 1999 the situation was completely different. All major TV channels and newspapers were controlled by the government. In the beginning of the second campaign press did not give any critical articles and broadcasts on the government actions. The public was receiving only information that supported the general ideology of the state: "Fighting against terrorism!", "Protecting civil population of Chechnya and entire Russia from Chechen bandits" and so on. Information coming from Chechnya was also very selective. TV channels showed only interviews with army commanders speaking about successes of the Federal Army.

During the first Chechen Campaign a lot of journalists were collecting material for their reports from location of Chechen troops. Chechen leaders of the first war were very cordial with journalists and gave interviews willingly. During the current war Russian journalists usually speak from the location of Federal forces. Working on the other side can end up in a scandal. There was a lot of noise around Sergey Babitskiy, correspondent of radio "Freedom" who was doing broadcasts about Chechen soldiers and about sufferings of civil population of Chechnya. In January of 2000 journalist was arrested and accused in joining illegal bandit groupings. Than Babitskiy was exchanged on captured Russian soldiers. Two weeks later he was arrested in Mahachkala and accused of using false documents.

Journalists collecting their material from the location of the Federal forces are often shown only part of Chechen realities. Not rarely they are allowed to publish or broadcast only materials approved by the Army commanders. That is why Russian population can not get complete and fair picture of the events in Chechnya. News about battles or new acts of terrorism reaches the general audience with significant

delays. There is very little information about the number of killed and wounded among Russian and Chechen soldiers as well as among civil population of the Republic.

More than that government authorities do not even try to deny or veil the fact of censorship. Head of Sverdlovskaya Region Eduard Rossel said that information about the number of soldiers sent to Chechnya and about places of their dislocation should be classified as secret.

"You know that when people from Urals and Siberia were sending fellows to protect Moscow, Hitler did not know about that. Our press did not provide him with this information. If at this moment we'll do a favor for Basaev and let him know what army unit is being moved, where it is going and what the names of its commanders are - I would not be surprised if the train with this unit will be exploded before it will leave the train station. And you {journalists} will be morally responsible for that".

Public receive selective information not only about the situation in Chechnya but also about actions undertaken by the anti-war activists through out the country. Thus illusion of mass approval of government actions is being cultivated. This illusion turns into one of the major obstacles for anti-war advocacy of women's NGOs.

Situation of informational siege create considerable difficulties for the work of all anti-war NGOs including women NGOs. Recently it became hard to get connected to the general public through the press. This is what members of Soldier's Mothers of Petersburg say about their relationships with press.

"Usually journalists are willing to cooperate with us but recently cooperation opportunities began to decrease... because our media is 'not absolutely free'."

Women's NGOs often try to fill informational gaps themselves. For example Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees of Russia on their own created lists of soldiers killed during the second military campaign. Activists of feminist organizations and some Soldiers' Mothers Committees go to Chechnya where they collect information about true situation in the Republic. They try to bring up issues that are often avoided by officials and media: sufferings of civil populations of Chechnya, cases of Chechens kept in filtration camps and crimes committed against Chechen civilians.

Even if cases of robberies, rapes and other crimes that were committed against civil population of the Republic (and sometimes committed by Russian soldiers) are not a popular and even not always acceptable subject for discussion today, someone needs to remember about them too. This is what democracy with its freedom of speech is all about. Even if someone's point of view or some issue are not popular people still have their right to talk about them (unless it goes against the law). It means that any feminist or other women's organization should have its right to express its anti-war position and to carry on its anti-war initiatives even if these initiatives go against official ideology of the state.

Unfortunately today in Russia such essential component of democracy as freedom of speech is often forgotten. Perhaps this is the heritage of our Soviet past: we like democracy and freedom only as long as it goes together with our ideas and plans or in other words we accept freedom only for ourselves but not for others. But when freedom starts to contradict with what we want we quickly try to hush it up. Sorry but this is not what true freedom really means! I would rather call it *limited freedom of a war period* and this is the only freedom that Russian NGOs including women's NGOs are given today.

It is tremendously hard to work within the frames of this *limited freedom*. I say *limited* because organization's right to express their attitudes toward the war is greatly confined by the Government, by public opinion and by a large number of other relevant issues such as lack of financing, absence of attention from press, etc. In this conditions each organization has to look for its own way to handle the situation. Certainly the easiest one of them would be simply to pretend that the problems of Chechnya are irrelevant to the organization. But that would mean avoidance and ignorance and as we could see from everything written above these qualities are not in the nature of Russian women. Members of only one out of more

than dozen women's organizations that I have visited said that they absolutely do not deal with the problems of Chechen War.

A lot of women's NGOs tried to take a position that does not put them in antagonism with the state but at the same time allow to carry on some activities that relive troubles and sufferings brought by the war. This kind of strategy is used not only by Soldier's Mothers Committees but also by a large number of women's NGOs in the capital and especially in the regions. Certainly we can accuse these organizations in retreating of values of peace and equal rights for all people. I must admit that while doing my research I heard accusations of this types many times. But even though it is hard to disapprove, I have to note that we need to keep in mind specificity of the current situation. From the examples above it is obvious that in conditions of *limited freedom* any organization that goes against official ideology is taking a great risk. This risk may bring significant change but more likely it will greatly impede organization's existence.

Please, do not take me wrong. I believe that it is really important that some NGOs even in current situation manage to find strength and enthusiasm to carry on public anti-war protest. These organizations clearly understand that the only way to stop the war is to change general attitude toward it. They know that violence creates violence, and that aggression against Chechens will only increase aggressiveness against Russians. They are not afraid to speak up against the strategy of the Government and do not want to keep silent about all the crimes committed on the land of Chechnya. Their role is extremely important because they serve as a mouthpiece of democracy in the time of war and ideological tyranny. Unfortunately they are very rarely heard and their ideas have little impact on the events in Chechnya or on public attitudes toward it.

Organization may have great ideas but without money, without media and without public support it will hardly be able to do anything noticeable. There is also another problem: the position of a female organization usually does not receive a lot of attention in a male- dominated society like ours. Traditionally war was believed to be a *man's business* where women were only given the part of compassionate others. Women's activities that go beyond saving and curing those harmed by the war risk to be not only misunderstood but also unaccepted. It takes a lot of wisdom and understanding to organize women's NGOs activities so that they would bring some difference into the situation around Chechnya. I believe that many organizations found this balance in working with such tasks as rescuing of captured soldiers and civilians, collecting humanitarian aid, protecting of rights of soldiers. Certainly it is by far not everything that could have been done and that needs to be done. For example I strongly believe that women's NGOs should pay more at the troubles and sufferings of civil population of Chechnya and refugees from the Republic. This people must not be held responsible for the war that has destroyed everything they had. We also should not forget that they are people of Russia and that they need rehabilitation, financial, legal and other types of assistance as much or perhaps even more than Russian soldiers. Nevertheless I want to repeat once again in current conditions helping every single soldier and every single refugee, rescuing of every captured person is as important as speaking against the war at the meetings and demonstrations. At least when NGO activists save someone's life they have a result while protesting against the war at manifestations recently started to appear quite meaningless for a lot of people.

Here I want to note that it is important not to make a mistake and not to try to estimate the work of which NGO is more important. All of them are doing their part of the mission. And if someone is organizing anti-war manifestations while others are going from house to house collecting cloths and food - it is not that important. I believe that all women's NGOs that have not stayed aside from the problems of Chechnya are doing their part of the work. And I also believe that this work could have been much more successful if women's organizations were more willing to collaborate with each other and with other NGOs. To my opinion: one of the serious problems of women's movement in Russia is lack of cooperation within the movement itself. Certainly there is Consortium of Women's NGOs and members of Soldiers' Mothers Committees from all over the country get together for all-Russian Conferences. But on the level of regions different organizations often work separately strongly believing that only what they do is the right thing. When I was doing my interviews I heard one branch of Soldiers' Mothers Committee blaming the other one

for passiveness and cooperation with the state, I heard human rights activists blaming women's unions for their political neutrality and so on. This is not the way it should be. What is important is for all women-activists to work together and remember that each piece of work done by each organization has its significance and plays its part in struggling against violence and brutality - in struggling against the war in Chechnya!