

## **CROSSING A RAGING RIVER ON A SHAKY BRANCH: CHECHEN WOMEN REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES**

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### **Abstract**

The Chechen War was a brutal conflict that has created, by some estimates, more than half a million refugees worldwide. An important goal in this research was to understand the life story and the lived experience of eight Chechen women refugees who survived the war in Chechnya. A descriptive phenomenological process coupled with a critical feminist approach were used in this interpretive study. The experiences of Chechen refugees, and especially Chechen women, have often been neglected in research on the war. When their experiences have been considered, Chechen women have been conceived of primarily as either helpless victims with little or no agency or as fanatical suicide bombers inspired by radical Islam, or both. Through rich descriptions, these participants unveiled the extent to which they were generative (concerned for the future and future generations). Generativity has been positively associated with well-being as well as social and political engagement. Interviewees revealed experiences of loss and anxiety during the war, and of struggling to survive. Once they arrived in the United States, participant experiences included economic hardship and cultural dislocation. Alongside these experiences, the women also experienced resistance, resilience, and generativity. The following nine major themes emerged from participants' phenomenological life stories: Losses, War Trauma, Resistance, and Resilience, Struggling to Create a New Life, Faith, Gender, Ethnicity, and Generativity. Analysis of the narratives revealed similarities between Generativity and the themes of Faith and Ethnicity. This study presents an *Integrative Interpretive Framework* for understanding the lived experience of Chechen women.

### **Introduction**

War has devastating impacts to society, thus learning from the lessons of war is critical to helping create a better future. Since the mid-1980s, academics such as Tickner (1992), Elshtain (1995), and Enloe (2000) have called attention to the importance of gender in peace and conflict studies. This increased attention has led to several studies of women's diverse experiences during and after war (Altinay, 2004; Cockburn, 1999; Giles, 2003; Goździak, 2009; Machanda, 2001; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). Central to the importance of "gendered" war and peace studies is the study of effects of war, which undeniably involves large numbers of civilians, including women and girls (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). This study reveals the meaning-making and significant realities of a group of Chechen refugees who has experienced violence and war firsthand. Today, there are nearly twenty million refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2017); so

investigating the plight, realities, and struggles of refugees is more important than ever to help foster improved responses and interventions by all who are involved in this crisis. The purpose of this research is to improve our understanding and further our discovery regarding these fragile populations, so that individuals, agencies, and organizations can learn about refugee challenges from the perspective of the refugees themselves. We often don't hear refugees' stories from their own perspectives; and this study addresses this knowledge gap by giving voice to the refugees who shared their stories and realities

## **Chechen War and Chechen Refugees**

The Chechen War (1992-2002) was an example of a brutal conflict that epitomized Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's (2005) conception of a "state of exception," in which a constant state of suspension of law and rights turns human beings into mere "bare life" that can be killed with impunity. Freedom House (2006) reported that an estimated 200,000 Chechen civilians died as a result of the war, while an estimated 20,000 Russian soldiers died (Levin, 2006). Because of the horrific conditions in Chechnya, much of the population has fled. Between 400,000 and 600,000 people were displaced as a result of the 1994-1996 war, and another 600,000 during the period from 1999-2003 (Nichols, 2000). Even today, the refugee crisis continues, with between 400 and 800 mostly Chechen asylum seekers a day attempted to cross the Belarus-Poland border during the summer months of 2016 (Gorbunova, 2017). The "bare life" experiences of Chechen refugees have often been neglected in research on the conflict. This is especially true in the case of Chechen women. When their experiences *have* been considered, Chechen women have been conceived of primarily as either helpless victims with little or no agency or as fanatical suicide bombers inspired by radical Islam, or both (Speckhard, Tarabrina, Krasnov, & Mufel, 2005).

Much of the available research on refugees, including Chechen women has been psychiatric and based on a PTSD or trauma model, rather than being grounded in a conflict analysis model. These psychiatric data see women primarily as traumatized victims without considering their lived realities and their unique worldviews. It has been argued by many researchers that Western psychology is not well-suited to serving refugees, partly as a result of its lack of regard for cultural differences (Goździak, 2009). It is our hope that the current study gives readers an authentic glimpse into the realities of refugees as they share their perspectives in relation to where they are and where they are coming from. It is our hope that progress can be made in how individuals, agencies, organizations, countries and even leaders approach and perceive refugees.

Redressing the limitations of the trauma model with refugees has led to the current study and its focus on a phenomenological framework to (1) understand these Chechen women refugees' realities, (2) facilitate in refugee assistance as a means to enhance cultural competence (Ahearn, 2000) (3) and to discover the needs of these unique group of women refugees as a means to improve how individuals, humanitarian agencies and/or organizations, as well as leaders and countries respond to the needs of refugees.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This was a critical feminist qualitative study, utilizing a phenomenological approach. By emphasizing "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) through such tools as narrative interviews, qualitative methods are able to help illuminate the multiple realities of refugee experiences.

Communication interaction is often seen as a struggle between marginalized groups and those of more dominant control. To come to understand the human condition, critical feminists believe it is important to study the lived experience of the people in their contexts and bring their struggles to the surface, with the ultimate goal to promote change and improve the human condition.

The goal of critical theory is to come to an awareness of power and its constraints on communication and interaction in a way to demolish it, so to have a more equal status among members in a society. The assumption is that people who become aware of the oppressive sources in society will actively resist them to acquire equity. Critical feminist theory highlights women's unique issues by giving voice to women's experience, providing insights into their realities, and making their concerns visible (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). This study sought to accomplish these ends for the women interviewed.

Phenomenology seeks to consider human experience from a perspective that is as free of the researcher's cultural heritage as possible, and to find the "essence, structure, or form of human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially descriptive techniques including disciplined reflection" (Valle & King, 1978, p. 10). In the interpretivist approach, the researcher is interested in localized groups and not universal generalizations—it is an emic approach. Phenomenology suggests that individuals create meaning through experience and realities are revealed through sharing perspectives.

## **Background on Chechnya and Chechens**

Chechens have been in the North Caucasus since at least the seventh century (Derluguian, 2005). A series of brutal Soviet collectivization movements by Communist Party officials, including deportations carried out with horrific levels of violence, led to the establishment of a national memory that mobilized the Chechens to fight against the Russians when the Soviet Union collapsed. The resulting years of war started in 1992 (Johnston, 2008). Chechen history has also been shaped by its relationship to Islam. Chechnya is predominantly Muslim, dominated by Sufism, the mystical form of Islam that rejects sharia law in favor of societal law. Sufism encourages independent, individual relationships with God, and as such fits in well with Chechen society's anti-hierarchical, individualist, and egalitarian nature, which helps explain its appeal to Chechens and its lasting effect on the Chechen people, especially the women interviewed for this study.

To understand women's refugee experience it is important to understand the position that women occupied in society before, during, and after the war (Palmary, 2005). Women's traditional role in Chechen culture is proscribed by traditional Chechen values and cultural norms. Although women participate in the public sphere, femininity is primarily associated with the roles of wife and mother. Preserving women's (and thereby family) honor often resulted, before the war, in attempts to exclude women from the public sphere, with controls placed on women's public behavior. This idea of femininity positions women in the essentialized role of biological reproducers (Anthias, Yuval-Davis, & Cain, 1992). During the war, however, many women had to become the sole breadwinners in the family because they were perceived as less of a threat in public life, so they were able to move about more freely in public spaces, in contrast to Chechen men, who often risked their lives by simply stepping out the front door of their homes. (Conley, 2004; Szczepanikova, 2015). The result is that women went from being primarily associated with domesticity (even when they were also working), to being primarily in

the public realm, supporting themselves and their families.

### **The Chechen War and Its Effects**

Over a decade of war left Chechnya devastated. Since 2002, when Russia's FSB, or state security bureau, took over in Chechnya, the Russian government has been referring to the situation in Chechnya as "normalized". These normalizations were part of the Russian policy of "Chechenization", a process by which a Chechen-led, Russian-backed administration was installed and many Russian soldiers left Chechnya. However, throughout this period, battles between rebels and the remaining soldiers occurred, as well as extreme human rights abuses. Despite increased stability in the region, arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and kidnapping continued with no consequences for those who carry them out (United Nations, 2009).

In the Chechen "state of exception", indiscriminate violence and unaccountability created a state of terror and destruction that is almost incomprehensible. The women who arrived in the US as refugees had experienced the ultimate 'bare life'— the loss of everything: home, community, culture, and basic dignity. Chechen women were traumatized, raped, and killed with impunity during the war (Speckhard, et al., 2005). Women lost relatives and were targeted for interrogation, torture, and disappearances by the military. The increase in women suicide bombers led to a government policy of full-body searches on all Chechen women, a particularly humiliating experience for Muslim women to endure (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006).

### **Research Implications**

Recent work in psychology and healthcare have set a precedent for the kind of study conducted here. Many recent studies have begun to look at refugee women in a broader context, taking into account gender, political elements, and cultural and class identity (Adams, Gardiner & Assefi, 2004; Guruge & Khanlou, 2004; Whittaker, Hardy, Lewis, & Buchan, 2005). Some of these studies have utilized semi-structured and life story interviewing. This supports the decision to use the Life Story Method in this study.

Working from a sociological perspective, Sideris (2003) described how Mozambican women in her research viewed their experience of war and exile as depriving them of their sense of cultural and social belonging. Eisenbruch (1991) also noted that the refugees he worked with felt both social loss and nostalgia as a result of the emphasis on integration in their host countries. He calls this sense of loss "cultural bereavement" (Eisenbruch, 1991). Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield (1995), in their work on Uganda, noted how political and social realities structured the meanings people attributed to their experiences and traumas, and the ways in which these traumas and their effects were reported. These realities also affected the support available and the therapies considered appropriate. Significantly, while cultural bereavement and loss of sense of purpose were themes expected to be found in the Chechen women interviewed, these themes were largely absent. Although the women interviewed were nostalgic, they were also determined and confident about maintaining and transmitting their culture.

Goździak (2009), in a study of Kosovar women at Fort Dix, found the women framed their experiences in political and religious contexts. She argued that Kosovar women's self-identities were much more related to being spouses and siblings of Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA)

soldiers, or to having been dissidents, than to what they were seen as by their Western mental health care providers (traumatized victims). Pavlish (2005) used narrative interviews of 14 Congolese women to identify six action responses: refiguration, advocacy, resistance, resignation, sorrow, and faith. Heeding the call to include women's experiences in studies of war and peace, this study sought to explore the factors that sustained the women and helped them survive with hope for the future. Keyes & Ryff (1998) found, for example, in study of over 2000 Americans, that well-being was connected to generative concern for the next generation, emotional support for the young, and seeing the self as generative. With these thoughts on personal and cultural efficacy in mind, the researchers turned toward qualitative methods.

## Method

### Participants

Purposive and convenience sampling was utilized to select women for the study based on relevant experience. Trusted Chechen women as well as trusted aid workers were used to locate participants. Because phenomenology is concerned with getting extensive information from a small sample, rather than more limited data from a large sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), a limited number of participants were recruited: eight Chechen women. These women ranged in age from twenty-four to fifty-three, were refugees, and had survived the war in Chechnya. They all were located in the U.S. during the time of the interviews. These women qualified as an excellent sample given the in-depth approach of phenomenology. Blumer (1969) argued that "seeking participants...who are acute observers and who are well informed...A small number of such individuals brought together as a discussion and resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample" (p.41). Unlike surveys that often provide a snapshot view, phenomenology allows participants to provide in depth rich descriptions into the phenomenon. Table 1 below provides an overview of the participants

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Name	Age	Marital status	Children	Education level
Amina	24	Single	0	Some university
Nuura	24	Single	0	Some university
Zeyna	29	Divorced	0	University graduate
Farema	30	Single	0	University graduate
Laila	31	Married	3	High school
Ifoda	38	Divorced	2	Some university
Dagmara	40	Married	3	High school
Kurbika	53	Married	3	Master's in Education

## **Processes**

In this study, phenomenological interviews were designed to gather the critical data that illuminated the lived experiences of Chechen women refugee war survivors. The Life Story Method, advocated by Atkinson (1998), Rosenthal (1993), and Chaitin (2002) was used to collect information, and the approach developed by Moustakas (1994) was used to guide the analyses of data. The thematic open-ended questionnaire utilized by the first author who served as the interviewer was general and allowed latitude on any topic participants desired: "Please tell me your life story; whatever you think is relevant". Given the freedom to choose their own topics for discussion, all participants chose primarily to describe their experiences of the war and their current daily challenges.

Stage one in the study involved collecting basic biographical and demographic information such as age, education, and marital status. This was supplemental information to the main phenomenological study.

## **Member Checks and Double Coders**

As part of the phenomenological process and feminist commitment of this project, bracketing was practiced throughout the interview phase as to avoid assumptions and prevent bias from entering into the analysis. Furthermore, collaboration was used through member check-ins with the participants by allowing them to confirm accurate meanings and the second author of this current study served as a double-coder of the data and advisor to ensure trustworthiness by confirming the accuracy of placement of items in the categories referenced in this current study. The data was analyzed utilizing Moustakas' (1994) approach, which involves eight distinct steps that lead toward a composite description of the essence of the experiences described by the participant. The thematic elements are described in the findings below.

## **Data Analysis and Presentation**

The data analyses included a composite description of the interview responses using the method developed by Moustakas (1994) and a thematic analysis of the findings upon completion of that process. The eight steps of the process are described below.

### **Step 1: Horizontalizing, reduction and elimination**

The first step in Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological data reduction involves treating every expression of the participant as a relevant, important statement. By weighing these statements as equal, between 75-150 "horizons" were discovered per interview.

### **Step 2: Reduction and elimination**

Through the process of reduction, horizontal statements were organized into those that met the following requirements: (a) Does the statement contain information essential to understanding the experience; and (b) Can the researcher abstract and label the statement (Moustakas, 1994). This process resulted in a series of individual, non-repetitive statements.

### **Step 3: Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents**

In this step, invariant constituents that resulted from the process of reduction and elimination were taken and grouped into similar themes through careful scrutiny of the invariant constituents. The following are examples of three of the themes identified from one participant's interviews with invariant constituents grouped underneath:

#### Theme 1: Loss of pre-war life

- Childhood life was happy/ I felt personal freedom and support from family.
- Life as child was no different from other children's lives.
- My family and I felt safe before war.

#### Theme 2: Loss of home, possessions, and physical structures

- My city was destroyed and it changed life forever.
- It was not safe to go outside and much of life was lived hiding.
- Dreams become impractical.

#### Theme 3: Torture, violent death, sense of incomprehension

- It was not a supportive environment to share sad or fearful feelings.
- Men were taken from families and killed.
- Family members were carelessly killed or taken.

Such themes formed the groundwork for the descriptive writing that followed in the remainder of Moustakas' (1994) method. While the themes above were derived from just one interview with one participant, each of these themes (as well as others) were reflected in the composite description of the eight participants as a group.

### **Step 4: Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes**

In this phase the invariant constituents and themes were analyzed against the original participant transcript to ensure that resulting themes were explicitly expressed or were compatible. Any themes that were neither expressed nor compatible were deleted (Moustakas, 1994). The textural themes that began to emerge in this process were, for example, losses, war trauma, and struggling to create a new life.

### **Step 5: Construction of an individual textural description of experiences**

In this stage, individual textural description of the experience that included a number of verbatim examples were generated.

### **Step 6: Construction of individual structural descriptions of experiences**

The next step involved the creation of an individual structural description of the experience. This description "provides a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). While the textural description describes "what" happened, the

structural description describes “how” the participant experiences the phenomenon.

### **Step 7: Construction of textural-structural descriptions of experiences**

This description includes both the “what” of the textural description with the “how” of the structural description. It incorporates the invariant constituents and themes of the earlier phases of the data analysis.

### **Step 8: Construction of a composite description of experiences**

The final step of Moustakas’ (1994) approach to phenomenological data analysis is the construction of a composite description of the experiences of all eight of the research participants. This final description includes only the themes that all eight participants in the case study had in common and focuses on the essences and meanings of the participants’ shared, lived experiences of the phenomenon.

### **Group composite themes of participants**

The overarching composite description that best captured the reality of the majority of the women, based on Step 8 of the Moustakas approach, can best be summarized and captured by this participant’s narrative as follows:

“Chechnya was a great country where we all felt free. I never believed the war would happen. It was an unbelievable experience. My beautiful city was destroyed and my life changed forever. I lost people who were important to me and was challenged on a daily basis to survive and to keep my sanity through all the war atrocities. Destruction became normal and I questioned my previous goals and dreams. I had to make changes in those goals to suit my situation and support myself and/or my family. I was either discouraged from sharing my feelings and/or felt it inappropriate to show sadness. I also had examples around me of strong women and a people who cherished their heritage and faith. Without my ethnic pride and faith, I might not have survived. I had to leave my country as a survival tactic. I had to be resourceful and find my way to stay and work in the United States. Now it is extremely important that I continue in my faith and pass on my Chechen roots. I hope one day to return to my country.”

### **Themes**

Nine major themes emerged from the women’s life stories: losses, war trauma, struggling to create a new life, resistance, resilience, gender, ethnicity, faith, and generativity, which appeared to be correlated to the identity themes of faith, ethnicity, and gender. Within these major themes, the interviewees revealed experiences of loss and of living in extreme fear and anxiety during the war, of struggling to survive, and of fearing for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Crucial experiences for participants once they arrived in the United States were economic hardship, lack of support, posttraumatic stress, and longing for home. However, alongside these experiences the women also manifested resilience and generativity stemming from their survival.

**Theme 1: Losses**

As Amina, (24 years old, single), put it, “The war broke our lives”. As a group, the women spent very little time discussing their lives before the war, yet for all but one, Ifoda (38 years old, divorced mother of two) it was seen as an idyllic time. For Ifoda, there was “no life before the war. The war was my life.” In regard to her felt experience of the loss of humanity Farema (30 years old, single) stated the following:

People are still disappearing, right now, still. Human rights are not protected at all; a human life is worth nothing, still. Your word doesn't count at all, you just submit to tyrants, dictators. I think today human dignity and self-esteem have fallen down so low. You cannot express yourself easily today. It's very scary, because people are losing their moral values.

**Theme 2: War trauma**

For the women interviewed, the Chechen war experience was one that exposed them to extreme violence, uncertainty, and cruelty. Violence was random and inexplicable. Specifically, they experienced living in fear of rape and violence, the threat of cleansings and disappearances, and the incomprehensibility of war. Such chaos took a heavy toll on the way participants viewed their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. In recounting her experience of the war and its impact on her psyche, Nuura (24, single) stated the following:

It was very common at the time, that at night somebody would come knocking on your door; you could open the door and be seized. Your family would not be able to find you—dead or alive. They would not have any idea where you were taken. There were many cases like that, thousands and thousands. Some people in masks came to your house and took your relatives. You wouldn't know either it's Chechens or Russians. You just cannot find your father, your brother, or mother. When I was fifteen or sixteen years old, I realized that I hadn't heard of anybody who died naturally.

**Theme 3: Resistance (Preferring not to)**

Like Melville's (1980) *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the women engaged in everyday acts of resistance by simply “preferring not to” participate. Many of the women interviewed resisted by insisting on the importance of how they looked. From a western feminist perspective this may seem counterintuitive, but for these women, their identity as women involved beauty and caring for themselves, and not allowing that beauty and self-care to be taken from them was one way they fought back. As Farema argued:

It was our weapon, we were resisting. And it was making lots of people angry. When the soldiers came, they saw it and they were always saying, “You live in basements, but dress as queens!” Of course, it was irritating them; they are stealing everything from you, but you cannot be broken.

**Theme 4: Resilience**

Some of the major sources of resilience for the participants were family and social support. Dagmaara (40 years old, married, mother of three) stated this perspective bluntly:

I will explain... if I want to kill myself, I just imagine my husband and children and how they will feel. So, you make yourself move on, your family makes you do that. And it helps you to live, despite all these wars.

Work and education were also significant sources of resilience and coping, helping the women to see themselves not just as war victims but as people who had the capacity to learn and effect change. Ifoda tells of her experience working with the wounded during the war:

Every time I visited these people, every story would leave a trace in my heart. I couldn't stay indifferent listening to their stories. I considered it my responsibility to those people: to do something in order to change the situation for the better. It keeps me going.

**Theme 5: The struggle to create a new life**

As refugees before and after arrival in the United States, the women in the survey experienced a great deal of stress around practical issues of language, work, and money. Cultural dislocation was also a prominent theme in their struggle to create a new life. Kurbika (53 years old, married, mother of three) spoke of the difficulties of establishing a new life in a new setting, even under the best of circumstances:

People here are very kind to us, but it isn't home. I can't speak the language or go on the street. I work at a store, bagging things, just to get out, but I was a teacher in my country. I'm not complaining. I'm glad I'm safe, my family is safe, but it is strange.

**Theme 6: Gender**

Many of the Chechen women refugees arriving in the US see positive aspects to their traditional roles in Chechen society and wish to preserve those aspects in their present life. However, they recognize (especially the young and unmarried women), the burden that traditional Chechen values can and have placed on their past and present lives. As a function of ethnicity, the women understood themselves to be bearers of culture, and saw many cultural mores and even restrictions as signs of their superior culture.

Dagmaara said, "A woman should be a good mother, a good wife. She should be clean, be faithful to her husband, not like what's normal here. It's just everything is a little more strict. There were a lot of limits." Zeyna also spoke of the sense of responsibility she has as a woman regarding moral behavior: "Women in our culture are more under control than men. In everything. In behavior, in words, in actions. There is more responsibility on the women. We are proud of this responsibility." This feeling regarding gender was not universal, however. Some women felt their gender had kept them from doing more or different things with their life. They were troubled by the restrictions placed on them by society.

**Theme 7: Ethnic identity**

Chechen traditions and cultural values were seen as critical to the women's sense of themselves and as imperatives to be passed on to future generations. The women viewed themselves as keepers of the culture. Respect for elders, responsibility, and following societal rules were all seen as essential elements of Chechen-ness that needed to be handed down. In this sense, it was highly correlated with generativity. Dagmara makes this connection in the following statement:

I love my people very much, I love this culture dearly. I admire many things in my culture and my nation, even in the way of life of my ancestors, their philosophy, how strong and wise they were. How reserved they were. They would never fight or take a weapon for no reason. I want my children to know this. As a woman, I have the most important role in preserving it.

Ethnicity was also viewed as problematic in terms of how the women were perceived and treated by the outer world, but not in terms of how the women viewed themselves. Most of the women spoke of the difficulties they faced when confronting the prejudices of the Russians. Some spoke of the acceptance they feel among Americans without regard to ethnicity. Only one, Nuura, also found herself questioning Chechens as a group, "When I was still living in Russia, in Chechnya – I sometimes didn't get on well with my people, with Chechens. Now I would probably have even less contact.

**Theme 8: Faith**

Despite larger concerns about Islam and politics, all the women identified their faith as among the most important factors in their resilience, survival, and generativity. They adhere to the Sufism that most Chechens practice. And all agreed that the great majority of Chechens are not sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalism, but they fear for their country now that the current government has begun imposing Sharia law. Dagmara gave voice to a common feeling among the participants, as follows:

It is Islam that helped me. Belief in God helped me, it made me stay alive until today. I know that God has created a lot of things, I know it was my fate and only God can help me. It played a very big role. I pray five times a day... If I didn't believe in God, I would have hung myself. If I hadn't known that it is a crime, I would have done so many silly things.

**Theme 9: Generativity**

As individuals, the women all had unique personalities, some sounding more positive than others, yet all spoke of hope, of giving back, of a responsibility toward the future. The common threads in all their generative assertions were a hope of return, ethnic pride, and faith. Despite the fact that return was highly unlikely for most of the women, love for their country and the hope of return kept all the women looking toward the future, both of their countries and themselves, wanting to transmit the best of their country to their children, or in the case of those without

children, wanting to transmit the best of themselves to their county. Zeyna (29 years old, divorced) stated this clearly

I really want to go back home and be a part of our government. Because I want to be capable of changing something for the better, to make changes and do what I consider to be important not only for myself, but what also will be a contribution for my republic, which I love dearly despite everything. I think every person has to do something not only for their family, but also for their people.

In terms of passing the Chechen culture along to their children, the women were universal in the notion that no matter what paths their lives take they should make that effort. Further, the women indicated a strong need to continue to regenerate themselves in their own self-perceived ethnic and faith identities. Zeyna speaks to this in a way that is reflective of the opinions surveyed:

There is always a risk for small nations to dissolve among other big nations. As we have such a beautiful culture, such beautiful and wise laws, I think it is just a crime to forget things and disappear in somebody else's culture. I think we should take all the best from other cultures, but never forget our own.

### **Discussion and Implications of the Study**

This critical feminist, phenomenological study, utilized life story research to investigate the lived experience of Chechen women refugee war survivors. The following nine major themes emerged from the women's life stories: Losses, War Trauma, and Resistance, Resilience, Struggling to Create a New Life, Faith, Gender, Ethnicity, and Generativity.

In this study, one can see the women's agency through some of the major themes uncovered in the research: Preferring Not To, Resilience, Ethnic Pride, Faith, and Generativity. These themes all went alongside the themes of losses and terror that could, and do lead to trauma, despair and passivity. But the women found ways to assert their agency and hold on to their values in the midst of all their suffering.

#### **Preferring Not To**

For these women, their acts of "preferring not to" included asserting their femininity, feeding starving Russian soldiers, continuing to fight for work and education, and challenging Russian soldiers' against tremendous odds in the middle of a massacre. "You are having your war", they seemed to be saying, "but we will not be a part of it". These moments were an expression of resistance to dehumanization and objectification, and an assertion of agency and humanity. They will not be afraid of the future because of what happened in the past.

#### **Resilience**

Some recent contributions include a study of resilience in survivors of the Khmer Rouge (Overland, 2011) and a study of Afghani women refugees' coping strategies (Welsh & Brodsky,

2010). In general, studies of this kind have focused on refugees' narratives of resilience. The current research project identified the resilience of Chechen women and joins the challenge to the normative emphasis on war trauma by adding information on their resilience.

### **Ethnicity**

In direct opposition to writers like Tishkov (2004), who argued that Chechen identity is primarily a byproduct of war, the women interviewed all identified strongly as both Chechen and Muslim. They pointed to language and cultural practices as being fundamental to who they were. Islam was a part, but not all, of that ethnic identity. As women, whether they had children or not, they all saw themselves as responsible for carrying on the cultural and religious teachings of previous generations and transmitting them to future generations.

### **Islam**

Religion is cited as a common source of support for many refugee groups. (Halcon et al., 2004; Jones, Zhang, & Meleis, 2003). Faith in Islam was viewed by the women as a critical mainstay and support and was a dominant theme in their life stories. This is in contrast to stereotypical perceptions of Islam involving Chechen Black Widows and of crazed fanatics killing for Allah. On the contrary, these women felt great respect for all life and it was belief in God's mercy and, in some cases, God's judgment that allowed those who considered violence to refrain from it. The fact that none of the women questioned their faith, and that each woman's faith was strengthened by the role of God in their lives was interesting. This study adds to the research that suggests supporting refugee faith could assist in positive outcomes.

### **Generativity**

Having hope for the future has been found to be a protective factor in refugee groups, especially young people (Goodman, 2004; Lothe & Heggen, 2003). An important aspect of the women's generativity involved their faith and ethnicity, and the desire that valued Chechen traditions and identity be passed to the next generation. The women believed it was their responsibility to ensure their success in America in order to maintain their traditions and one day return to Chechnya.

### **Interconnections Between Themes**

Figure 1 and Table 2 below provide an integrative theoretical framework for the current study. One can see an illustration of the theoretical interpretive framework, which developed organically as a result of the phenomenological, critical feminist approach to this research project. As suggested by the figure below, every theme was impacted by every other theme. For example, it appears that deep faith in Islam combined with their pride as Chechens and their sense of responsibility as Chechen women to transmit Chechen values. This, in turn, gave the women a strong sense of their inherent value as human beings, while faith and ethnic pride helped support their agency and find moments of resistance where they could resist their oppressor through acts of personal assertion, kindness, and humanity. In this way, a critical

feminist perspective allows one to see the influences between agency, faith, ethnicity, gender, and generativity in the phenomenology of the lived experienced of Chechen women refugees.

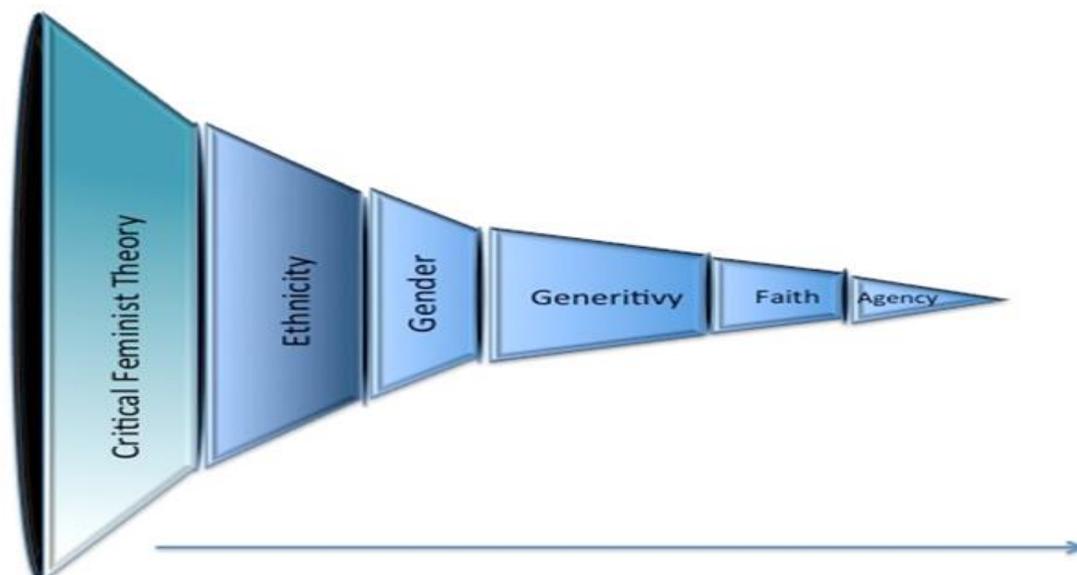


Figure 1: A Phenomenological Understanding of the Lived Experiences of Chechen Women

Table 2: Lived Experiences of Chechen Women: Major Themes

<b>Feminist Theory</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Generativity</b>
Focuses on gender	The women saw their gender as source of strength	Ethnicity was a source of pride and strength	Faith helped the women survive by giving them hope for the future	The women saw themselves as actors capable of resistance and change	Generativity is supported by gender insofar as gender is related to the responsibility to transmit culture
Is committed to empowerment	Viewed themselves as bearers of ethnic pride	Mores and traditions sustained the women through the war and beyond	Faith is a critical element of Chechen culture	The women viewed their actions as supporting their survival and their own and their families' futures	Generativity is supported by faith insofar as faith helped with survival as well as the importance of transmitting faith
Highlights the agency of the excluded & knowledge is situated	Saw themselves as responsible for transmitting culture, faith, and ethnic pride	Needed to transmit ethnic pride and culture	Desire to transmit faith, and faith seen as an element of Chechen culture	The women felt empowered to resist and act as subjects, not mere objects	Ethnicity was related to generativity

## **Implications for Research and Theory**

As critical feminists, one must challenge common stereotypes of women refugees by incorporating their resistance, resilience, and agency into our understandings of their experience. A key task for the future is to incorporate narratives of resilience, resistance, and generativity into treatment and assistance programs. The key assumptions of this study align with the work of peace and conflict feminist scholars (Bandarage, 2008; Borer, 2009), recognizing that women are complex actors in armed conflicts. Participants' voices and stories were honored for both the suffering and survival of women war refugees and the assertion that more of their realities ought to be more represented in research.

By examining the survival of Chechen women following the armed conflict in Chechnya, the study addresses the need to incorporate cultural sensitivity into programs designed to assist Chechen and other refugee populations. The findings of this study can help inform health and community development programs for refugees in diaspora and those returning to post-conflict zones. Researchers should recognize the need for interaction between the cultural context and individual experiences, rethinking theory about trauma and its consequences to affirm the resilience and generativity of individuals (Walsh, 2002).

## **Significance for the Field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution**

There has been a shift in contemporary conflicts from conflicts between nations to intra-state violence where civilians are the primary targets (Kienzler, 2008), and these armed conflicts cause not only violent deaths but also forcible displacement. While men still account for the highest number of direct deaths in armed conflicts, children, women, and all displaced persons are the groups most vulnerable to the overall impact of wars (Human Security Report, 2009-2010).

First, this critical feminist focus on Chechen women refugees highlights the previously undocumented reality of these women's experience of conflict. Secondly, this research allows for a more complex understanding of the women's roles as agents in their own lives, an understanding that allows for an approach to those who suffer as a result of conflict that moves beyond the trauma model to allow for a cultural and gendered approach. These women refugees embody the figure of "bare life", yet they could engage in acts of agency, of "preferring not to", thus demonstrating that resistance and generativity are possible from the position of "bare life". This research suggests that it is important to learn how this agency and generativity is supported.

This study recorded the lived experiences of the participants, and suggests possible theoretical perspectives for future studies concerned with the well-being of conflict survivors by focusing on factors that encourage generativity. It contributes to the field of conflict analysis and resolution by responding to the need for contextualized studies to understand cultural responses to conflict, and of what factors may foster generativity in refugees and in post-conflict situations.

## **Further Research**

Future research could further address differences in generativity and life experience themes between male and female Chechen refugees. It is possible that male refugees will share many of the same concerns as the women regarding generativity. Interviewing men could lend insight into

men's relationships to the specific factors that influence women's generativity, such as ethnic pride and religion. Further research could also be undertaken in a community with a larger population of Chechens. Future studies could also further explore the factors that promote generativity for refugees. It would be useful to uncover more specific cultural values and practices from the country of origin that promote generativity.

## Conclusions

Given the refugee crisis of refugees in contemporary times, the high cost of refugee assistance programs, and the necessity of redeveloping war torn countries individuals working with these populations need a better understanding of refugees from their own perspectives. It is the authors' hope that this study provides the reader with a better understanding of how this particular group of refugee women viewed their lives, and how identity factors such as ethnicity, religion, and gender, related to feelings of generativity.

Feelings of generativity or the hope for future generations, has been shown to be a critical factor in social involvement and may be instrumental in motivating these women to rebuild their lives and societies. This research offers an important exploration of the lives of Chechen refugee women war survivors and factors related to their generativity. Given the importance of faith and the strong identification with their ethnic identity, and the correlation of these identity elements with generativity, this research suggests that programs designed to support faith and ethnicity might help create a space where generativity can be a more likely outcome, both for refugees and those who return to post-conflict societies. This study also lays important groundwork for developing more theoretical research on refugee generativity.

The women in this study experienced a significant dialectic in life. The life they knew was destroyed, and they were driven by the need to cross the river of their past suffering to get to the other side: their future. For these refugee women, the lived experience of being a Chechen woman meant living every day with the memory of war, struggling to adapt to a new culture while maintaining a strong Chechen identity, and choosing to care for the future. In crossing this dangerous and raging river, Dagmara one of the women summarized it best and she exemplified many elements of the other Chechen women's' experiences, including loss, danger, and fear for self and others, as well as the drive, in the face of it all, to keep living in her statement as follows:

We had just married, we got a lot of presents—you cannot take it with you. You leave it all there. We walked for days. Eventually we reached the river. The bridge had been washed out; this is a mountain river, very strong. Everybody got over the river, women, and children. My husband's brother came back for me . . . the men were helping us to get over. I was afraid that this man would fall. And you cannot help them; it's a very strong river. I was afraid. But Allah helped us, and everybody stayed alive. We got over . . . It felt like . . . like we were still alive. And like we needed to keep living.

Like the literal branch Dagmara crossed the river on, this narrative study revealed that the shaky branch that helped all the women cross from despair and suffering to generativity was composed primarily of two twines: their faith and their strong sense of ethnic pride.

The challenge for critical feminist conflict analysis and resolution is to find new narratives for understanding the workings and effects of conflict. This requires reaching across disciplines and creating coalitions of knowledge and political action, to explore the many moments of

agency, resistance, and generativity. This academic engagement requires that one pushes the boundaries of the discipline of conflict resolution and analysis in order to find new ways of hearing and exploring the stories of those who suffer, survive, and find ways to be generative despite their experiences of war and crisis.

This research has profound implications for individuals, agencies, organizations, and/or countries that aid, support, or may be responsible for refugees, as it provides perspectives of refugee experience from their own perspectives. This study may have transferability to other refugee populations, since refugees may share many common experiences, so further studies are encouraged in this area. This study identified gender as an important consideration and it is noteworthy that the experiences of women refugees may differ from those of men and children. Other studies are encouraged to work to unveil refugee realities, so their struggles and challenges are brought to the forefront of international attention and their needs are addressed rather than diminished, ignored, or forgotten. The refugee crisis we face today may very well be among the most challenging human crises in contemporary times and it is the hope of the current researchers that an improved understanding and deeper discovery into refugee perspectives and realities will render better alternatives and interventions to address this crisis.

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