

# Lifestyle

MONDAY, JUNE 10, 2019



A participant of the Wave-Gothic-Festival poses for a photo at the Victorian picnic on June 7, 2019 in Leipzig, eastern Germany. The yearly music and culture festival of the black gothic scene, that traditionally takes place over the Pentecost holidays, will run from June 7 to 10, 2019. — AFP

## Chechen women go places with female-only taxi service

Checking her blind spot, Fatima Dzhambulatova changes lanes on a busy avenue in Chechnya's capital Grozny. In this Muslim republic of Russia, she is spearheading a women-only taxi service. At the wheel of a white sedan bearing the bright purple logo "Mekhkari", the name of the service launched this spring, the 49-year-old taxi driver explains the appeal of women drivers in the conservative region. Some clients have husbands who won't allow them into a car with another man, she says, while some believe women are safer drivers, and others simply prefer riding with a member of the same sex.

In the sparse office of Mekhkari, which means "girls" in Chechen, founder Madina Tsakaeva said she got the idea after realizing she preferred to ride with female drivers, who were hard to find. "It was very rare for our city," she said. "So we did a survey on social media about what people thought of the idea of a women-only taxi." The project eventually got financial backing, the amount of which has not been made public, from the Emirates-based Zayed Fund for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, which opened a Grozny chapter in 2017. So far, Mekhkari has five drivers and a fleet of five cars.

### Into the driving seat

Libkan Bazayeva, coordinator of Grozny-based women's rights organization Women For Development, said that the idea for a women-only taxi service in Chechnya had been a long time coming. "In the Soviet era, you could count the number of women who drove on one hand, the whole republic knew them and their entire life story," she said.

That started to change about a decade ago. In 2008, Women For Development organized free driving courses for about 100 women, half of whom began driving in Grozny. Traffic policemen in the city of 270,000 were shocked, Bazayeva said, but the campaign proved "infectious" and women behind the wheel are now common.

### 'Feel safer'

The Zayed fund stressed the value for conservative Muslims of the female-only taxi company, which only takes bookings for women passengers or women travelling with children. The service "will be very convenient from the point of view of religious norms and traditions," the fund said on its Instagram account in late March, when it made the decision to approve the funding. After the end of two separatist wars with the Russian government, Chechnya has in recent years

seen a resurgence of Islam, encouraged by its leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has governed the North Caucasus region with an iron fist since 2007.

But it's not only conservative Islamic traditions that compel women in Grozny to use the service: passengers say that they also appreciate what they describe as a less aggressive style of driving. "Men drive more erratically, women are more careful. I feel safer with a woman," 29-year-old Kheda Yusaeva said, from the back seat of Dzhambulatova's taxi. Another reason women might prefer the service is to avoid conflict with their husbands over riding with a male stranger, Bazayeva said, adding that she knew of cases where a man had beaten his wife simply for having a taxi driver's phone number saved in her address book.

### 'Huge step forward'

"The appearance of women drivers in the sphere of this male-dominated profession is a huge step forward, a big accomplishment in a male world," Bazayeva said. She also said that she believed the initiative was "symbolic" of women's participation in the country's economic life, in a society where their rights are limited. Tsakaeva now has plans to add 15 more cars and is even considering expanding



A view of the Heart of Chechnya mosque is reflected on a metal panel with the silhouette of a woman wearing a scarf in central Grozny. — AFP

to offer deliveries and other services to homes of women who cannot leave the house. When Mekhkari first sought to recruit female drivers, there was no shortage of experienced applicants, Tsakaeva said.

Dzhambulatova said that most of the men she had come across on the job had been

positive, complimenting the car, gesturing with a thumbs-up and asking for the taxi's number-for their wives. "This is a desirable job for me, and I'm very interested in chatting with my clients, I get some very interesting women," the driver said, before adding: "I like being behind the wheel." —AFP

## Madonna says she feels 'raped' by New York Times profile

Pop icon Madonna said she felt "raped" by an in-depth profile of her in The New York Times, calling the newspaper "one of the founding fathers of the patriarchy." The New York Times article entitled "Madonna at Sixty" focused too much on her age, Madonna said, arguing it would not have done so were she a man. "The journalist who wrote this article spent days and hours and months with me and was invited into a world which many people don't get to see, but chose to focus on trivial and superficial matters such as the ethnicity of my stand in or the fabric of my curtains and never ending comments about my age which would never have been mentioned had I been a

MAN!" Madonna said on her Instagram account.

"I'm sorry I spent 5 minutes with her," the singer and dancer wrote about the author of the article, journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis. "It makes me feel raped. And yes I'm allowed to use that analogy having been raped at the age of 19." In the article, Madonna had told Grigoriadis that she had "felt raped" when her 2015 album "Rebel Heart" was leaked early. The author said in the piece that "it didn't feel right to explain that women these days were trying not to use that word metaphorically."

The singer said the profile was "further proof that the venerable N.Y.T. is one of the founding fathers of the Patriarchy. And I say-DEATH TO THE PATRIARCHY woven deep into the fabric of Society. I will never stop fighting to eradicate it." The Times article described Madonna in her 1980s heyday as using "her iron will to forge a particular type of highly autobiographical, uber-empowered, hypersexualized female pop star who became the dominant model of femininity across the nation."

But it characterized her current incarnation as that of a "sexagenarian claiming her space among artists two generations younger" and said the audience she per-



In this file photo Madonna poses in the press room at the 2018 MTV Video Music Awards at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. — AFP photos

formed for at the Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas appeared more enthused about the South Korean K-pop boy band BTS. — AFP



In this file photo French Designer Jean-Paul Gaultier and Madonna arrive for the 2018 Met Gala, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.