

Russia's Sole Sexual Assault Center Struggles to Make Ends Meet

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Sisters is the only center in Russia that specializes in helping sexual assault victims.

Russia has only one organization that exists specifically to help victims of sexual assault, and today, its fate hangs in the balance.

[The Sisters sexual assault recovery center](#) in Moscow is eking out an existence, depending on modest donations and barely able to cover the rent and phone bill for Russia's only dedicated helpline for victims of rape.

"We were close to shutting the center down several months ago," Maria Mokhova, the center's director, told The Moscow Times in a recent interview.

"No one was being paid, and only a few of us were still working. If anyone had come and told us to leave the office, we would have left. We had no more strength to fight."

In 2014, Russia's courts convicted 4,720 people of rape and sexual assault charges, according

to Supreme Court statistics.

But the official statistics are far from reality, said Mokhova, as only 5 percent of sexual assault victims who call the center take their cases to court.

The Sisters center was opened in 1994 by women's rights advocates who realized that the psychological trauma caused by sexual assault had not been treated properly for decades under Soviet rule.

It occupies a small office in an ordinary high-rise apartment building on the northern outskirts of Moscow. It has a room for the helpline operator and another containing several armchairs that is used for individual counseling.

The office walls are covered with social ads and drawings done as part of therapy by those who come to the center for help.

Mokhova, a microbiologist by training, joined the center in 1996. She saw an advertisement in a newspaper, showed up at a volunteer training course and ended up staying, she said.

"There's no word like 'woman' in the center's name because it is clear that sexual assault can be committed against a woman or a man or a child," the director said. She declined to say how often men and children turn to the center for help.

A Phone Call Away

Today, the center's main activity is the helpline for sexual assault victims.

The center has run many different projects during its existence, but the helpline is the only one that endures, said Mokhova. It receives calls from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day.

"As soon as there is a single possible case of sexual assault, we have to be on the line to provide help," she said.

The center's helpline is operated by women only: Social research and Sisters' experience have shown that it is psychologically easier for callers to share their experience with a woman, regardless of the caller's gender.

The helpline operators are volunteers who work two five-hour shifts a week or more, depending on how many volunteers are available at any given time. Every center employee has to help staff the helpline, except for the male lawyers.

Seven people were working at the center during the visit of a reporter from The Moscow Times earlier this month. Sisters' core team is 25 people who have worked at the center from time to time through the years, Mokhova said.

Calls to the helpline are strictly confidential and anonymous, and are not recorded. No journalists are allowed into the room where the helpline operator works.

The approach is based on more than simply keeping the clients anonymous. Sexual assault trauma issues in part from the attacker's wish to gain total control over the victim, said

Mokhova. Afterward, the victim feels a dramatic lack of control over their life and the world around them.

"We allow the caller to regain ownership of their life. They call, we pick up the phone. The callers tell us their names, we listen. But we don't record the conversation, we have no right to interfere in their personal life. We have to show them that they are in charge of their lives and actions," said Mokhova.

The helpline operators do not invite callers to visit the center for personal consultations, it has to be the caller's own decision. And that decision is a leap in a person's therapy: By doing so they get their life back in their own hands, said the director.

A Friendly Voice

"It takes courage to call, courage to admit what has happened, and even more courage to come here," Svetlana, one of the center's psychologists, told The Moscow Times. Svetlana asked for her second name to be withheld, citing security concerns.

In her opinion, the most important part of the job during the phone sessions or personal meetings is to convince the sexual assault victim that what happened was not their fault.

"They blame themselves for what happened. Moreover, others blame them too. Doctors and police officers blame them and laugh at them, but it's never the victim's fault. The attacker is responsible," says Svetlana. "Sometimes we just need to tell people that to make them feel much better."

Along with the phone conversations, she helps the center's clients in person. Six years ago, a friend of hers invited her to join the volunteer training. She had always been interested in practical psychologist's work so she stayed.

"It may seem very specific, but psychologists work with this kind of trauma in the same way as with any other. There's no difference," said Svetlana.

She has never taken a break, although it is common among the staff here, and when a volunteer wants a change of scene and a rest, the center lets them go.

All volunteers regularly participate in group training sessions to prevent emotional burnout.

"To help people who call, I have to wear my professional hat. I won't be able to help if I associate myself with them, if I simply listen to them as another human being," said Svetlana.

Running on Fumes

For many years Sisters was financed largely by international charities, including the Soros Foundation, Ford Foundation and MacArthur Foundation, Mokhova said.

"What is happening now is the shutting down of the donors market, with donors leaving Russia," she said.

In December 2014, Sisters was on the verge of collapse. It owed 300,000 rubles (\$4,800)

for office rent and utility payments.

For the whole of that year, the center had survived solely thanks to employees' enthusiasm, said Mokhova.

Help finally came from the Yabloko liberal party, which started an online petition in April calling for help for Sisters. The petition was signed by 45,000 people in two months. Seeing this and realizing what the scale of support for the center was, its leadership decided to carry on.

The center organized a social media campaign, and soon after a prominent charity foundation, [Nuzhna Pomoshch](#), contacted Sisters and offered to put the center's request for donations on their site and promote it.

Currently the center only receives private donations, said Mokhova. This year, Sisters applied for two presidential grants for NGOs, but to no avail. It plans to apply for another one in November set up by the Economy Ministry.

Sisters is the only center in Russia that specializes in helping sexual assault victims, the director of the ANNA National Center for Violence Prevention, Marina Pisklakova-Parker, told The Moscow Times.

There are many different crisis centers for women in Russia, both private and state-run, including shelters for women in difficult situations where people can stay for several weeks. But these establishments are generally geared toward victims of domestic violence. Sexual violence is considered part of that, but most of the centers' employees do not know how to treat it specifically.

"We don't have a government-sponsored help system for sexual assault victims in Russia," said Pisklakova-Parker.

"It's widely acknowledged that people should see a psychologist after an assault. But usually the victim has to do it on their own," she said.

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