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80% of Russia's Female Murder Convicts Acted in Self-Defense – Study

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Yevgeny Yepanchintsev / TASS

Four out of five women convicted for premeditated murder in Russia had been defending themselves from domestic violence, according to machine-learning research published by the Novaya Gazeta newspaper and the Mediazona news website Monday.

Critics say Russia's 2017 decriminalization of some forms of domestic violence has eroded protections for women, while supporters defend it for allowing parents to discipline children. A recently proposed bill re-criminalizing domestic violence has been met with protests and criticism by activists claiming that it seeks to "destroy" traditional family values.

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An analysis of 2,500 premeditated murder sentences handed down between 2016-2018 found that 79% of the convicted women acted in self-defense, Novaya Gazeta and Mediazona reported.

Meanwhile, more than half (52%) of 1,700 women who were convicted for assault that resulted in death were found to have acted in self-defense, said the study published on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

Both charges carry jail sentences of up to 15 years.

Investigators have a "powerful motive" to qualify acts of self-defense as murders to meet their quotas, an unnamed veteran investigator from St. Petersburg told Mediazona.

"The main thing for law enforcement agencies is that there are no acquittals," the 20-year veteran was quoted as saying.

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The study found that 91% of 1,500 women sentenced for exceeding the limits of self-defense between 2011-2018 had been defending themselves from partners or other male relatives. Around 3% of the men sentenced under the same charges were defending themselves from female partners, Novaya Gazeta and Mediazona said.

"Judges don't understand what domestic violence is," Mediazona quoted women's rights lawyer Mari Davtyan as saying.

Calls to re-criminalize domestic violence in Russia have intensified after a series of high-profile abuse cases brought the issue to the forefront. Three teenage sisters are currently facing murder charges for killing their abusive father, while a 24-year-old historian was brutally killed this month by her romantic partner and former professor. Last year, a man was sentenced to 14 years in prison for chopping off his wife's hands in the woods.

About 14,000 women die in Russia each year at the hands of husbands or other relatives, a 2010 UN report says. According to official figures, about one in five women has suffered violence by a partner.

The Justice Ministry told Europe's human rights court last week that the scale of Russia's domestic violence is exaggerated and claimed that men "suffer more from discrimination."

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