

When Your Home Isn't a Safe Space. Russian Women Fear Rise in Domestic Violence as Coronavirus Quarantine Starts.

In a country plagued by domestic violence, being forced to stay at home with an abusive partner could be a living nightmare.

By [Pjotr Sauer](#)

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Pavel Golovkin / AP / TASS

The beatings started for Angelina a few months after she married and only got worse as time went by.

Last Wednesday afternoon, she grabbed all she could carry and took a taxi with her two young sons to a relative's cramped flat on the outskirts of Moscow. Her husband, a postman, was out of the house on one of his last work shifts as the Russian capital prepared for a week-long

paid holiday aimed at keeping people at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

“I just had to get out of there before the city closed down. It was maybe my last chance to leave him,” Angelina, 29, told The Moscow Times by phone, asking for her last name to be left out.

In a country where domestic violence is decriminalized and an old saying goes “If he beats you, he loves you,” human rights groups and health workers worry that a [strict](#) lockdown put in place from Monday by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin will put vulnerable women like Angelina in danger.

“As quarantine comes in, we are about to sail into a perfect storm of domestic violence,” said Anna Rivina, head of the women’s right organization Nasiliyu.nyet (“No to Violence”) Center.

The exact scale of domestic violence in Russia is not known because of a lack of official data, but a 2012 joint [study](#) from Russia’s Federal Statistics Service and Health Ministry said that at least every fifth woman in Russia has experienced physical violence at the hands of her partner at some point during her life.

And in 2017, President Vladimir Putin, backed by the country’s conservative forces, notoriously decriminalized domestic violence, a move the nation’s top human rights official later [admitted](#) to have been “a mistake.” Calls to [re-criminalize](#) domestic violence in Russia have intensified after a series of high-profile abuse cases brought the issue to the forefront. However, for many like Angelina, domestic abuse remains the daily norm.

Related article: [Moscow Orders Citywide Quarantine Starting March 30](#)

Rivina believes women in abusive relationships are entering a dangerous period.

“Men prone to abuse will be forced to stay at home all day in their small flats with their wives and children without work and an income. Tensions will rise that will transform into abuse.”

She pointed to a UN report [published](#) earlier this month that studied the impact of the coronavirus on women. Human Rights Watch said that quarantine in China had led to a “greater incidence of domestic violence for reasons including increased stress, cramped and difficult living conditions, and breakdowns in community support mechanisms.”

Nowhere to go, no one to call

Quarantine threatens to damage the social networks the most vulnerable women rely on, cutting them off from their friends and family and leaving them more dependent on their spouse, said Mari Davtyan, a women’s rights researcher who co-wrote a bill to prevent domestic violence that activists are pushing Russia’s government to consider.

“Based on our experience, women who have suffered from aggression usually find refuge with their family when their husband is at work. Now this simply will not be as easy to do,” Davtyan said.

The few shelters and community centers in Russia that offered counseling for abused women

have also had to shut their doors. One of them is the Independent Social Women's Center in Pskov, a city 700 km outside Moscow. The center's director Yelena Yablochkina said it had closed despite a spike in requests for help last week.

"Unfortunately, we now only have an online call center, but I worry that won't be enough when we are most needed," Yablochkina sighed.

Related article: [Moscow to Enforce Virus Lockdown With QR Code Passes – Meduza](#)

Moscow's only public shelter for battered women, *Nadezhda* — the Russian word for hope — also told The Moscow Times it has had to shut its doors for the foreseeable future.

Economic slowdown

The coronavirus is set to add more financial pressure to Russian households already struggling from years of conservative government spending. The economy will likely [go](#) into recession, businesses are already laying off workers or cutting back hours, and at the same time, shops are raising prices because of the weaker ruble. Promised government support has so far been low-key, focused only on the completely unemployed and families with children.

Economic recession, women rights activists in Russia say, traditionally [leads](#) to a surge in domestic violence.

"Unfortunately, when families are forced to tighten their belts, the belt gets used in a different way," Davtyan said.

Russian officials have not yet presented any official proposals on how to deal with the likely rise in domestic violence during the coronavirus lockdown.

Spain, which has been devastated by the pandemic, had launched an instant messaging service providing a geolocation function and psychological support for women who say they are being abused in quarantine.

Women's rights advocates told the Moscow Times they are skeptical the Russian government will prioritize the topic of domestic violence during this turbulent period.

"We are bad at tracking domestic violence in normal times, let alone during a pandemic," said human rights activist Rivina.

"Many women will now have to make the impossible choice between self-isolation and risking a battering or going outside and contracting a potentially deadly virus."

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