



WORLD

As Coronavirus Piles Pressure on Families, Domestic Violence Concerns Surge

Governments are trying to find ways to protect women and children who struggle to reach authorities while locked at home



With families confined to their homes, concerns are high about domestic violence. PHOTO: INA FASSBENDER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Noemie Bisserbe* and *Pietro Lombardi*

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73

Authorities and women's groups are racing to find ways to protect women against domestic abuse as the coronavirus pandemic confines families to their homes.

In much of Europe, officials are quickly deploying new programs, as a surge in abuse reports around a region that has been locked down for weeks presages what could be a similar increase in the U.S.

In some parts of the U.S., women's groups say they have already seen an increase in domestic violence calls, as stress, isolation and the financial pressure of lost jobs and income threaten to take a heavy toll on some women and children.

"It's almost like a petri dish for violence to increase within families," says Barbara Paradiso, director of the Center on Domestic Violence at the University of Colorado Denver.

At DC Safe, a Washington, D.C.-based crisis intervention group that works with police, social services and hospitals to help domestic violence survivors, call volume has recently doubled.

"We are all hands on deck," says Executive Director Ana Natalia Otero.

Some women are barred by their partners from leaving their house even for grocery shopping. In other cases, men threaten to throw women out when they fall ill, advocates say.

Behind Closed Doors

In the U.S., more than one in three women have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner.

Women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at some time in their life



In European countries, authorities and women's groups have deployed new ways of reaching vulnerable women and children. Governments have launched online platforms and messaging services to make it easier for victims to secretly seek help.

More than 150 people used a new WhatsApp service for emotional and psychological support in Spain within the first nine days of its

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Note: Data are as of 2014
Source: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development






launch on March 21, authorities said.

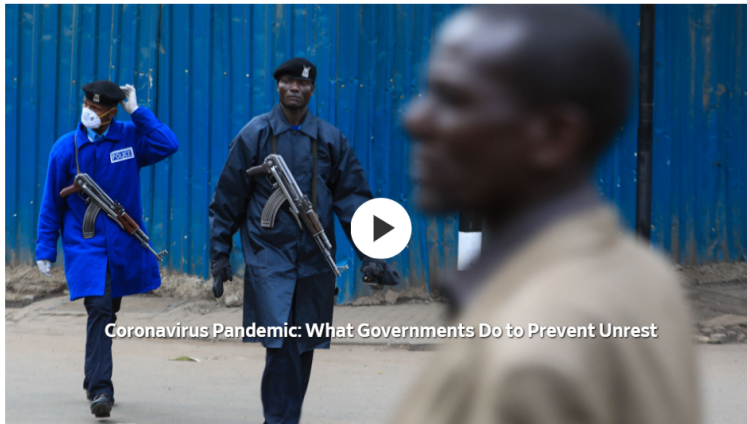
Victims there can also go to their local pharmacy and report abuse using a code word: mask 19. Pharmacists write down the woman's contact details and call police, sometimes while she is still there.

French authorities are financing pop-up counseling centers in shopping malls where victims can seek help when they leave their homes to run errands.

The French government has also promised to pay for up to 20,000 hotel nights for victims, in addition to existing emergency shelters. The government in Italy, which has been on lockdown for nearly a month, has earmarked €2 million (\$2.2 million) for housing for abused women and their children.

But fear of spreading the virus is making it harder for authorities and social workers to help victims.

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Lella Palladino, a social worker at Cooperativa Eva, a group that works to prevent violence against women and children and runs several shelters in the Campania region in southern Italy, says they recently had to turn away a woman with her two children because they couldn't be tested for the virus. The woman had fled home after being beaten up by her husband. She later found temporary shelter at a relative's house.

"We try to do what we can, but sometimes you feel powerless," says Ms. Palladino.

According to the French Interior Ministry, the number of police interventions in response to reports of domestic violence in Paris rose by 36% during the first week of the lockdown, which began March 17. It was up 32% outside big French cities, officials added.

Last week, a 6-year-old boy from a Paris suburb died after being beaten by his father while the rest of the family was out, according to the local prosecutor's office.

In neighboring Spain, where the coronavirus has spread fast and led to the world's second-largest death toll, calls to a government helpline for victims of violence against women rose by more than 12% during the first two weeks after authorities ordered people to stay at home on March 14.

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Some women's advocates believe abused women and children are struggling to reach authorities. In Italy, domestic abuse reports to police fell 44% in the first three weeks of March compared with the same period last year. Italy ordered a nationwide lockdown on March 10.

In the U.S., the National Domestic Violence Hotline says it hasn't seen a clear uptick in the number of calls it receives daily, possibly because many victims, trapped with their abusers, can't reach out, says Chief Executive Katie Ray-Jones.

In Russia, where people are required to stay at home, cases of domestic violence have increased, authorities say

Oksana Pushkina, deputy chairwoman of the committee on family in Russia's parliament, told radio station Ekho Moskvy that the order has exacerbated the issue "as the victims were left alone with their problem."

"Women hide in toilets from their men. Men also call, complaining about both children and wives. Everything has escalated," she said.

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There is no law on domestic violence in Russia and authorities don't officially track cases of domestic violence. According to Ms. Pushkina, there are only 15 crisis centers available to help domestic violence victims across the whole of Russia.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What action could communities or the federal government take to ensure the safety of people in vulnerable situations? Join the conversation below.

—Ann M. Simmons contributed to this article.











Write to Noemie Bisserbe at noemie.bisserbe@wsj.com and Pietro Lombardi at Pietro.Lombardi@dowjones.com

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