

# **Domestic violence in the age of COVID-19 in Russia<sup>1</sup>**

**Submission on behalf of seven women's rights organisations**

**“Zona Prava”**

**ANNA - Centre for the Prevention of Violence**

**Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Associations**

**Russian Justice Initiative (RJI)**

**“YouAreNotAlone” Women's Mutual Help Network**

**The Sisters Centre**

**The Kitezh Centre**

After 6 months, when the entire world has been facing and fighting a crucial crisis, it became clear that absolutely all areas of our life has been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that almost all countries and people have got somehow affected by the virus, the impact of it can significantly vary among different groups. United Nations Secretary General António Guterres stated that ‘[we] have seen how the virus does not discriminate, but its impacts do — exposing deep weaknesses in the delivery of public services and structural inequalities that impede access to them’.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the most vulnerable and marginalised groups have been suffering the most from the pandemic and states response to it. This report is focused on summarising information on the situation with domestic violence during the lockdown period between March and May 2020, shared and reported by different sources. The first chapter will introduce general aspects of the situation with domestic abuse in the mentioned period, including providing the reader with some statistics and other public statements on the issue. In the second chapter, lockdown restrictions and their impact on victims of domestic abuse will be discussed. The third chapter will give an overview of the measures taken by some NGOs in respect of increasing domestic abuse during the quarantine. The measures adopted by the authorities will be considered in the last chapter. Following this, some general conclusions will be introduced.

## **I. Domestic violence in the age of COVID-19 in Russia (March – May 2020): general aspects**

In the Russian Federation, the first COVID-19 restriction measures were taken in Moscow in the beginning of March, when Moscow Mayor declared a state of high alert over the coronavirus. In the next two weeks, the same state was declared in the other constituent entities of Russia. By the end of March, cinemas, theaters, museums, cafés, and restaurants had been closed across the country. All public events were canceled. People were not allowed to gather

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<sup>1</sup> This report was drafted by Svetlana Gromova and Olga Karacheva, attorneys-at-law at St Petersburg Bar Association and supplemented by women's rights organisations “Zona Prava”, ANNA - Centre for the Prevention of Violence Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Associations, Russian Justice Initiative (RJI), “YouAreNotAlone” Women's Mutual Help Network, The Sisters Centre, The Kitezh Centre.

<sup>2</sup> ‘We are all in this Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery’, available at: <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>.

together in large groups. According to the executive order of the President of Russia of 2 April 2020, which officially remained in force until 12 May 2020, but in fact until the end of May at least, the period of non-working days was introduced. Following this, many Russian regions took a series of lockdown measures, including mandatory self-isolation either for all people, or for groups of people, such as elderly people; restriction on movement, and many others, with the stated intention of protecting lives.

Many families have been locked together in their apartments, which very often are not that big. Although homes usually seem to be a safe place for many people, especially in the challenging times, they became opposite for some of them. In early April, the UN Secretary-General Guterres stated that ‘[m]any women under lockdown for #COVID19 face violence where they should be safest: in their own homes’.<sup>3</sup> He also pointed out that there has been a sharp rise in domestic violence in almost all countries and ‘urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19, and outlined several actions that can be taken to improve the situation’.<sup>4</sup>

Talking about the statistics in domestic abuse in the time of the quarantine in Russia, the following numbers have been reported by some NGOs working in the field of domestic violence.

### ***Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Associations***

According to the information provided by the Consortium, between March and May 2020, there were 353 complaints in total, with 104 in March, 111 in April, and 138 in May. It is also notable that the number of requests for assistance in the Central Federal District, including Moscow, doubled in May compared to the average monthly requests.

### ***The Sisters Centre***

During the period between March and May 2020, the Sisters Centre was providing assistance to victims of domestic and sexual abuse remotely over email or phone. In total, they received 481 requests by email for these three months, while in the last year there were only 316 requests. The number of email requests in April and May of 2020 almost doubled compared to the same period in 2019. Due to the quarantine measures, the hotline did not work from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March to the 6<sup>th</sup> of April. Given this, in April, there were 88 calls to the hotline compared to 105 in April of 2019; the statistic for May could not be provided due to technical issues. As the Sisters Centre pointed out, the majority of requests was not directly connected to increasing domestic abuse.

### ***The ANNA Centre***

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<sup>3</sup> ‘UN chief calls for domestic violence “ceasefire” amid “horrifying global surge”’, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Upon the introduction of lockdown measures, there was a growing number of calls to ANNA-based All-Russia Hotline for women experiencing domestic violence. The overall number of calls for the period from March to May 2020 was 8,682. After the introduction of lockdown measures in March, there were 2,437 calls registered by the Centre. In April, the total number of calls were 2,682. In May, the number of calls increased to 3,563 calls.

69.5 % of the women called to the hotline noted that the situation at home got worse during the lockdown period. In addition, 3.8% of the women said that for the first-time violent incidents in their homes took place during the lockdown period.

### ***‘Zona Prava’ Project***

In March 2020, ‘Zona Prava’ Project opened a hotline for victims of domestic violence. To improve women’s access to legal advice, the line is operated via popular messengers (WhatsApp and Telegram). From 31 March to 11 June 2020, there were 150 requests for assistance received by phone, messengers, or email.

### ***‘You are not alone’ Project***

The project reported 1,352 requests for assistance in April of 2020, and 2,038 in May, with the average monthly number of requests around 500-700.

### ***Stichting Justice Initiative (Partner Organisations in the North Caucasus)***

In the North Caucasus, two partner organisations reported a sharp increase in requests for assistance in April and May 2020. Requests for legal assistance increased by 100% in April and May 2020 in situations of domestic violence, with a higher incidence in complaints of sexual violence, such as marital rape. In all cases, clients were suffering from chronic situations of domestic violence that had lasted many years, but which had intensified during the quarantine period.

### ***Pskov Independent Social Women’s Centre***

According to the information from Pskov Independent Social Women’s Centre, there were five times as many requests for assistance in April and May 2020 as those between January and March 2020. Moreover, calls to the Pskov hotline from April to May 2020 increased by 200% compared to the period between January and March 2020. In April and May, the Centre assisted 94 women and children in different ways: 3 resided at the shelter; 15 were consulted over the hotline; 18 received legal consultations; 27 received psychological consultations; 31 received material aid (food).

**To summarise**, all mentioned NGOs reported an increasing number of requests for assistance from women during the lockdown. However, the nature of these requests is different. Many of

them concerned chronic situations of domestic violence, which had intensified due to the quarantine measures. However, there were also cases when women reported about the first-time abuse that happened in this period. Some women sought psychological help as due to the lockdown, traumas they went through had got worse. There were also requests from those women who lost their jobs. It is also notable that all possible means of communication were employed by the NGOs in order to provide women with necessary assistance.

Some response to the situation with domestic violence in the time of COVID-19 was also made by the officials, including the state authorities, Russian Human Rights Commissioner, and regional ombudsmen.

### ***Members of the State Duma, Deputy Prime Minister***

Following the increasing number of domestic violence cases, as reported by the NGOs, members of the State Duma, who are also co-authors of a draft law on the prevention of domestic violence, asked a Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova to assist in adoption of measures aimed at the protection of victims suffering from domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> In their letter of 21 April 2020, they suggested a series of measures to be urgently implemented in order to protect victims of domestic violence during the lockdown period. This included providing sufficient numbers of shelters; developing an action plan for victims to ensure they have access to health care, providing legal or psychological assistance; establishing contact points for victims; ensuring that victims of domestic violence can seek assistance without being held accountable for violating lockdown measures. Ms Golikova forwarded the letter to the Minister of the Interior, Minister of Health, Minister of Labour, Minister of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, and to the head of the Federal Press and Mass Communications Agency, instructing them to carefully work out the issue and adopt measures if necessary.<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that in the middle of April, the Federation Council stopped working on the draft law on the prevention of domestic violence. Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko stated that they would come back to the draft once the coronavirus pandemic was over.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, she doubted that there had been an increase in domestic abuse as she believed that families united in order to go through this crisis.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Russian Human Rights Commissioner, Regional Ombudsmen***

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Members of Parliament suggested urgent measures to combat domestic violence during the isolation period’, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/22/04/2020/5e9f0a669a79478af08dfa86>.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Golikova instructed the Ministry of the Interior to deal with domestic violence during the isolation period’, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/07/05/2020/5eb3da4a9a7947f971cd1523>.

<sup>7</sup> ‘The coronavirus suspended the work on a draft law on domestic violence’, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4323846>.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Matvienko disagrees with the human rights defenders that there is the rise in domestic violence in Russia’, available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8259403>.

In early May 2020, Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatiana Moskalkova in her interview to RIA Novosti news agency noted that according to the information provided by NGOs, the reported cases of domestic violence had more than doubled since 10 April 2020 (from 6,054 in March 2020 to 13,000 in April 2020).<sup>9</sup> She also noted that the Office of Human Rights Commissioner had registered a few requests to their hotline. The small number of cases could be explained by a fear of victims to use gadgets as it might be not safe for them, as Moskalkova suggested. However, there is no specific statistic on domestic violence cases during the quarantine on the official website of the Human Rights Commissioner.<sup>10</sup> In her another statement, she also pointed out that victims of domestic violence should be allowed to leave their homes when seeking assistance without any special permit.<sup>11</sup>

The rise in requests concerning domestic abuse was also reported by the ombudsman for St. Petersburg Alexander Shishlov, based on the information provided by St. Petersburg NGOs and state social institutions.<sup>12</sup> According to St. Petersburg Institute for non-discriminative gender relations Shishlov referred to, since the beginning of the year, there had been a growth of reported domestic violence cases (482 in January; 652 in February; 795 in March; 852 in April).<sup>13</sup> The numbers of requests for assistance in March and April rose by 20% and 30% respectively.

### ***Ministry of the Interior***

However, according to the statistics published by the Ministry of the Interior on their official website on 14 May 2020, the number of domestic violence cases registered by the authorities in April 2020 dropped by 9% compared to April 2019; in particular, the number of cases of intentional infliction of serious, less serious, or light harm to health decreased by 14,6%, 17,1%, and 3,3% respectively.<sup>14</sup> Two weeks earlier, they reported a decrease of 13% in cases on domestic violence for the first quarter of 2020 compared to the last year.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, they also highlighted that during the quarantine, the police were visiting people placed on a watch list, ensuring their compliance with the law. It is also notable that in the end of March, the Government Commission on the prevention of offences, chaired by Minister of the Interior, issued a document the second part of which was focused on measures needed to be adopted for

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<sup>9</sup> 'Since 10 April, domestic violence has increased two and a half times in Russia', available at: <https://ria.ru/20200505/1570971794.html>

<sup>10</sup> 'Information on complaints received on hotlines between 30 March and 15 May 2020', available at: [http://ombudsmanrf.org/news/corona\\_v/view/informacija\\_o\\_postupivshikh\\_zhalobakh\\_po\\_telefonam\\_Acirclaq\\_uogorjachej\\_liniiAcircraquo\\_s\\_30\\_marta\\_po\\_15\\_maja\\_2020\\_g](http://ombudsmanrf.org/news/corona_v/view/informacija_o_postupivshikh_zhalobakh_po_telefonam_Acirclaq_uogorjachej_liniiAcircraquo_s_30_marta_po_15_maja_2020_g).

<sup>11</sup> 'Moskalkova called to revoke special permits for victims of domestic abuse', available at: <https://ria.ru/20200505/1570974736.html>.

<sup>12</sup> 'COVID-19: human rights protection during the coronavirus pandemic (5 May – 11 May 2020)', available at: [http://ombudsmanspb.ru/ru/11052020\\_covid\\_19\\_zaschita\\_prav\\_cheloveka\\_v\\_uslovi](http://ombudsmanspb.ru/ru/11052020_covid_19_zaschita_prav_cheloveka_v_uslovi).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> 'Criminal rates remain stable in the Russian Federation', available at: <https://мвд.рф/news/item/20164906/>.

<sup>15</sup> 'Operating environment in the country is under control of law enforcement', available at: <https://мвд.рф/news/item/20087647>.

the prevention of domestic violence, however, not specifically in the context of the COVID pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

## **II. Lockdown restrictions and their impact on victims of domestic violence**

Given the spread of the coronavirus, a series of different restriction measures had been imposed in almost all countries, including Russia. As mentioned above, each constituent entity of Russia declared a state of high alert over the coronavirus, with different measures adopted to stop the spread of it and protect people's lives. It should also be noted that these measures do not differ greatly from region to region. Nevertheless, the lack of single federal legislation and the lack of a unified approach to the restriction measures and a large body of different regulations instead misled many people and made them more vulnerable in the given circumstances.

One of the most serious lockdown measures imposed by all the regional governments concerned the restriction on movement. In some regions, so-called regime of self-isolation was mandatory to all people in the region, in other regions just to some groups of people, such as elderly people. This lockdown measure meant that people were not allowed to leave their homes without obtaining a special permit from the authorities. For instance, to obtain a permit in Moscow, Moscow Region, Tatarstan, Nizhniy Novgorod, Krasnodar Region, Krasnoyarsk Region, and some others regions, a person had to register on a special website, a phone application, or just call a special number and provide the authorities with a good reason to go out. In case when a person left home without such a permit, this person could be stopped by the police and get fined. However, a mandatory regime of self-isolation for all people was adopted not everywhere in Russia. In Saint Petersburg, for instance, people could lawfully go out without any permit; mandatory self-isolation was imposed only on elderly people.

As Pskov Independent Women's Social Centre noted, the problem of domestic violence has become more pronounced during the pandemic period. In conditions of self-isolation families were forced to stay in the cramped conditions of their homes, and while it was very good if living conditions provided the option of staying in separate rooms, the majority of families did not have this luxury. In these conditions, the risk of violence among family members rose significantly. Moreover, it became much more problematic for victims of domestic abuse to request help as their abusers were constantly nearby. In particular, due to the constant control, they were not able to call hotlines, police, or other services. Moreover, falling incomes also led to higher anxiety and destabilisation of people's emotional state, which might also give rise to domestic abuse.

The COVID-19 pandemic had also affected the work of police offices, courts, hospitals, and other social institutions. Even though the police and hospitals have been in the front line of the fight with the coronavirus, their provision of public services was changed during the lockdown period. For instance, the Ministry of the Interior informed general public on their official

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<sup>16</sup> 'Head of the Ministry of the Interior instructed to provide victims of domestic violence with the information on support centres', available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/04/2020/5ea6bbe39a794786798c6ab8>.

website that they had suspended personal appointments from 27 March 2020 and advised people to apply to the police over a special service on the official website, by using other means of electronic communications, or post instead.<sup>17</sup> Such a statement gave rise, however, to some concerns that victims of domestic abuse might be denied urgent assistance in case of emergency. Nevertheless, responding to the letter of 9 NGOs concerning the necessity to adopt measures aimed at protecting victims of domestic abuse during the lockdown period, the Ministry of the Interior assured that they were taking all necessary measures to prevent offences happening during the coronavirus pandemic, including domestic violence incidents, and promptly react where required. Moreover, they highlighted that persons who left their homes in case of emergency should not be held accountable for that.<sup>18</sup> The work of courts was also different for the period of the lockdown. Most of cases were suspended, with a few of them having been heard remotely; applying to the courts was possible only electronically or per post. Many cases on separations, child custody, or domestic violence got frozen, which might have made the already troubled relationship even worse and more dangerous.

It should also be noted that many hospitals suspended provision of elective care, largely focused on working with patients allegedly suffering from COVID-19 instead. It became problematic for many people to seek medical care even in urgent situations, which, however, do not relate to the virus. In light of the general atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, the lack of sufficient and clear information as well as necessary assistance made some people even more vulnerable. In particular, it concerns women suffering from domestic violence.

For instance, the ANNA Centre noted that given the lack of the government's explicit instructions on possible violation of the lockdown in case of domestic violence, some women were afraid to leave their homes and escape aggressors as they thought it was unlawful due to the lockdown restriction to stay home. Moreover, in some cases aggressors threatened women with calling the police. This lasted until 27 May 2020, when the Ministry of Interior made a public announcement that those who broken the lockdown regulations in case of emergency, including situations of domestic violence, should in no way be held responsible for it. As noted in another source, in those cases where women tried to call the police, their attempts were rather unsuccessful as the police were too busy with monitoring of the implementation of the lockdown measures; in some situations, the police suggested that victims of domestic abuse came to the police office by themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Some problems also arisen in cases of victim's evacuations; they became more complicated or delayed because taxi drivers could not obtain quarantine permits. Moreover, due to the

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<sup>17</sup> 'Ministry of the Interior clarifies that personal reception of citizens has been suspended', available at: <https://мвд.рф/news/item/19862727/>.

<sup>18</sup> Official response of the Ministry of the Interior to the letter from NGOs of 12 May 2020, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4357087>.

<sup>19</sup> 'Police refused to come as the entire force is on the quarantine', available at: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/05/16/violence/>.

quarantine measures, some shelters and crisis centers were forced to temporarily close and were not able to welcome new clients.<sup>20</sup>

All these examples clearly demonstrated that the lockdown restrictions negatively affected women who had been suffering from domestic abuse or were at risk of it. The lack of a state comprehensive policy aimed at the prevention of domestic abuse and protection of victims made the situation even worse as women did not often know where they could seek help or were not able to get this help. Moreover, the COVID pandemic significantly affected the work of NGOs focusing on assisting victims of domestic violence as they were not able to provide women with required assistance in full. As a result, the enjoyment of human rights by women was limited.

### **III. Measures taken by NGOs in response to increasing domestic violence**

The COVID-19 pandemic and state responses to it deeply affected people and organisations all around Russia, including NGOs working in the field of domestic violence. In the early lockdown period, many NGOs faced difficulties which disturbed or even suspended their activities. However, the NGOs managed to adapt to the new requirements and resume their work. These adjustments had to be carried out in the conditions of a constantly growing number of calls for assistance on the part of victims of domestic violence. Therefore, most NGOs had to find possibilities for capacity enhancement in order to handle increasing hotline calls or for relocation of the victims when needed.

#### ***The ANNA Centre***

The All-Russia Hotline for women subjected to domestic violence was unable to handle a rapidly growing number of calls caused by the lockdown. The hotline was unable to provide all the women seeking help with assistance under the former schedule (from 07:00 a.m. to 21:00 p.m.). It was difficult for the survivors to get through, and the hotline counselors were able to provide only 20% of the women with counseling services to a full extent. Therefore, from 2 June 2020, the hotline has switched to 24/7 operation.

The ANNA Centre also started the work on the creation of a comprehensive chatbot with several assistance scenarios available. The chatbot is aimed at assisting women who are unable to access the All-Russian Hotline.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Isolation with the aggressor. What is happening to victims of domestic abuse during the quarantine', available at: <https://zona.media/article/2020/04/10/quarantineviolence>.



In addition, a programme of emergency sheltering and humanitarian assistance for survivors was launched. In the Rostov-on-Don region and in Moscow women subjected to violence were provided with sheltering.

However, in the Rostov-on-Don region it was difficult to ensure shelters to victims, since accommodation sharing without COVID-19 testing was not safe, while a separate accommodation for each family was too expensive. Moreover, it was not possible to rent additional accommodation since rental services did not work. In this region there is no crisis centre for women. It was also difficult to provide shelter in Rostov-on-Don to victims coming from around the region, since movements were restricted, and the victims and the staff of the ANNA Centre could not get necessary permits. They were forced to move without permits risking sanctions. Staff members and volunteers obtained only 8 out of 30 permits requested.

### ***The Sisters Centre***

The operation of the hotline was suspended from 15 March to 6 April 2020. After the work of the organisation was resumed, the hotline switched to the operation on public holidays and Saturdays. The organisation also launched counseling via social media concerning the lack of access to medical help, difficulties to find a job, and the growing vulnerability of women. In social media, the Sisters Centre published contact details of crisis NGOs working during lockdown. Face-to-face counseling was replaced by online consultations, which allowed victims from different regions to get help.

### ***The Kitezh Centre***

The Kitezh Centre has adopted a series of measures, such as urgent instructions on the work during the pandemic (organisation of observation, urgent medical tests, safe supply with food, and provision of medical help), 24/24 phone counselling, collaboration with hotels for accommodation of victims, additional flat rents, and an additional staff responsible for accommodation. The Centre provided shelter to 35 women.

### ***Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Associations***

The organisation distributed information to the public on protection from domestic violence during the quarantine. It also provided victims of domestic abuse with free legal assistance during the COVID pandemic.

### ***“Zona Prava” Project***

The Project provided counseling by phone, email and messengers. All applicants received free legal consultations, and a number of cases were followed-up by lawyers of the project. Two

instructions on how to act in the situation of domestic violence during lockdown were prepared by specialists of the Project and published in media<sup>21</sup>.

### ***“You Are Not Alone” Project***

The project created a chatbot working via Viber, with comprehensive information about relevant specialists in a particular region, shelters, NGOs, journalists, and instructions on how to proceed in different scenarios. Information about the project and the chatbot was spread in media.

### ***Stichting Justice Initiative (Partner Organisations in the North Caucasus)***

In the North Caucasus, 9 client evacuations were carried out for those most at risk in April-May 2020, which were complicated or delayed because taxi drivers could not obtain quarantine permits. 70 telephone consultations were carried out in May, of which the majority concerned situations of family violence, including against children.

Since NGOs anticipated and later witnessed a growing number of calls for assistance from victims of domestic violence under the lockdown, they decided that it was urgent to draw attention of the public authorities to the problem. Therefore, in the end of March 2020 nine Russian NGOs working in the field of domestic violence<sup>22</sup> sent an open letter to the Russian Government and to governments of all the constituent entities of Russia urging them to take measures in order to protect victims of domestic violence during the lockdown period.

The NGOs notably referred to a statement made by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences Ms. Dubravka dated 27 March 2020. The NGOs called upon the authorities to take specific urgent measures in order to deal with the situation of increasing domestic violence under the lockdown. In particular, the NGOs proposed the following measures: i) ensure sufficient capacity of shelters and organisations temporarily used as shelters (such as hotels); ii) publicly condemn domestic violence and disseminate information about available services at the federal and regional levels; iii) instruct the police officers on their duty to promptly react to reports on domestic violence and ensure the victims’ safety; iv) not to punish victims of domestic violence in cases of breaches by them of quarantine rules; v) create a focal point of immediate response to reports on domestic violence which would provide assistance in obtaining medical, psychological and legal help, and ensuring the victims’ safety.

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<sup>21</sup> ‘What to do if you are facing domestic abuse’, available at: <https://takiedela.ru/news/2020/04/30/instrukciya-o-domashnem-nasilii/?fbclid=IwAR28yz3BpkwL0-BTZIEf8sHg-8nkTPHw3CFkviw4hW32qzGVYz0BgvhQ9vw>

<sup>22</sup> Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Associations, ‘Zona Prava’, ‘Nasiliyu.net’ Centre, Sisters Centre, ANNA Centre, Stichting Justice Initiative, Kitez Centre, ‘You Are Not Alone’ Network, ‘Crisis Centre for Women’ Association.

In the open letter, the NGOs also noted that they continue to remotely provide legal and psychological counselling and expressed their readiness to participate in planning and implementation of any measures aiming at ensuring safety of the victims in the crisis conditions. They also listed contacts of NGOs which provided assistance to victims of domestic violence during the lockdown.

#### **IV. Measures taken by the federal and regional authorities in response to increasing domestic violence**

As mentioned above, on 31 March 2020 the Government Commission on the prevention of offences, chaired by Minister of the Interior of Russia issued a document the second part of which focused on prevention of crimes in the context of family and domestic relations.<sup>23</sup> This Commission made a number of recommendations to federal agencies and regional authorities, with deadlines for their implementation and reporting. Notably, the following was recommended : (i) to the Ministry of the Interior of Russia - consider gathering additional statistical data on crimes in the context of family and domestic relations, and on the results of the work of the police with regard to their prevention (until 1 December 2020); (ii) to the Ministry of Labor of Russia - to analyse the work of regional social services for victims of family violence, including crisis centres for women, and of NGOs which put in place efficient models of prevention of family violence (until 1 June 2020); (iii) to the Ministry of Health Care of Russia - to consider speeding up the procedure of medical forensic expertise of bodily injuries; (iv) to regional ministries (directorates) of the Interior - to initiate criminal proceedings *ex officio* pursuant to Article 20 § 4 of the Code of Criminal Proceedings of Russia in cases falling under Article 116 § 1 of the Criminal Code of Russia (battery), where there are grounds for this; to inform citizens on crisis centers for women by publishing information about hotlines for victims of domestic violence and on available crisis centres for women at police stations (until 1 May 2020); (v) to regional heads of executive - to consider establishment of crisis centers for women as a safety measure for the period of resolution of a conflict, including family conflicts which caused violence; enhance measures aiming at publicly condemning unlawful behavior in the family context; consider support of NGOs working on prevention of domestic violence, and enhance control of quality of services provided by NGOs; publish information about hotlines and crisis centres for women on regional official web sites (until 1 June 2020).

It should be noted that this document did not explicitly mention any lockdown context. However, most deadlines defined by the Commission for implementation of its recommendations and reporting back are relatively strict and fall under the lockdown period. Moreover, adoption of this document was largely reported in media in the context of the

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<sup>23</sup> Available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior of Russia: [https://мвд.рф/мвд/sovorg/prav\\_kom/com\\_work](https://мвд.рф/мвд/sovorg/prav_kom/com_work).

problem of the growing domestic violence under the lockdown.<sup>24</sup> This suggests, as some specialists pointed out, that this document was adopted by the authorities taking into account the alleged growth of domestic violence during the quarantine.<sup>25</sup>

However, a member of the State Duma and one of the authors of the draft law on domestic violence stated that one month after the adoption of this document, regions did not take any measures recommended by the Commission.<sup>26</sup>

It seems that steps suggested in this document are important to fight the problem in general, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. However, the implementation of the suggested measures is yet to be assessed, but it is already clear that such recommendations cannot replace a comprehensive and binding legislation on domestic violence.

Measures taken by the authorities for protection of victims of domestic violence during the quarantine can also be assessed on the basis of information provided by federal and regional agencies in response to the NGOs' open letter mentioned above.

At the federal level such a reply to the open letter was given by the Ministry of the Interior of Russia.<sup>27</sup> The Ministry stated that in order to prevent worsening of the situation, the police is carrying out a set of relevant preventive measures. In particular, the police visit persons who are on a watch list, interrogate their relatives on their behaviour, and engage their responsibility in case of signs of offences. The police also inform victims on available social services. The Ministry emphasised that the police react immediately to all reports on crimes, including those concerning domestic violence. The Ministry also clarified that persons who breached the quarantine regulations in case of emergency are not to be sanctioned for such breaches.

The Russian Human Rights Commissioner made requests to the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Healthcare following the open letter. The results of these requests are not made available to the NGOs so far.

On 22 May 2020, St. Petersburg regional authorities published information about available services for victims of domestic violence on the regional "Gosuslugi" (state services) website<sup>28</sup>. The information included contact details of NGOs and women's organisations (Crisis Centre for Women, Nasiliu.net, "Zona Prava" Project, ANNA Centre), list of local emergency rooms as well as general information on domestic violence and recommendations for victims.

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<sup>24</sup> 'The Commission of the Ministry of the Interior recommends domestic non-violence', available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4333183>; 'The Governmental Commission instructed establish crisis centres for women-victims of domestic violence', available at: <https://zona.media/news/2020/04/27/centers>.

<sup>25</sup> See 'The Commission of the Ministry of the Interior recommends domestic non-violence', available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4333183>.

<sup>26</sup> See 'The Commission of the Ministry of the Interior recommends domestic non-violence', available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4333183>.

<sup>27</sup> Letter No 3/207706218993 dated 12 May 2020.

<sup>28</sup> See 'Куда обратиться пострадавшим от домашнего насилия во время самоизоляции', available at: <https://gu.spb.ru/news/kuda-obratitsya-postradavshim-ot-domashnego-nasili/>.

Similarly, in mid June 2020, federal authorities published some general instructions on how to deal with domestic violence on the federal “Gosuslugi” website. It is noteworthy that this was framed as a ‘crisis situation’, but not ‘domestic violence’. Moreover, there was no information about shelters or crisis centers<sup>29</sup>.

At the regional level, only twenty-two out of eighty-five constituent entities of Russia replied to the NGOs’ open letter. Out of those twenty-two regions, the authorities of one region considered the open letter as inappropriate and declined consideration (Arkhangelsk Region). Three other regions (Republic of Karelia, Republic of Mari El and Republic of Tatarstan) forwarded the open letter to relevant authorities for consideration, but no substantive replies were provided by the time of drafting of the present report.

Replies of the other eighteen regions vary significantly.<sup>30</sup> In most cases replies were given by regional ministries or directorates of the Interior, and by ministries or committees responsible for regional social policy (Altai Region, Kirov Region, Krasnodar Region, Primorsky Region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Republic of Buryatia, Stavropol Region, Khabarovsk Region). In some cases, replies were given only by ministries or directorates of the Interior (Amur Region, Vologda Region, Perm Region and Republic of Udmurtia). In other cases, only ministries or committees responsible for regional social policy or regional governments replied (Vladimir Region, Republic of Komi, Volgograd Region, Kamchatsky Region, and Krasnoyarsk Region).

Six regions informed that they took additional measures to prevent domestic violence and protect victims during the quarantine (Altai Region, Perm Region, Primorsky Region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Republic of Buryatia, and Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)). Eight regions stated that they had hotlines for victims of domestic violence (Altai Region, Kirov Region, Perm Region, Primorsky Region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Republic of Buryatia, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), and Khabarovskiy Region). Ten regions mentioned that they had shelters for survivors of domestic violence (Altai Region, Vladimir Region, Kirov Region, Krasnodar Region, Perm Region, Primorski Region, Republic of Udmurtia, Khabarovskiy Region, Volgograd Region, and Kamchatsky Region). However, capacity of these shelters varies significantly.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, from most replies, it was unclear whether the shelters continue to accept new victims during the quarantine.

Six regions mentioned that they published at police stations information about available social services for victims of domestic violence (Altai Region, Krasnodar Region, Perm Region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Republic of Buryatia, and Khabarovskiy Region).

Six regions explicitly mentioned that they took into account information provided by NGOs in the open letter (Perm Region, Primorsky Region, Republic of Buryatia, Republic of Komi, Volgograd Region, and Krasnoyarsk Region). Two of them noted that they ordered to publish

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<sup>29</sup> See ‘Меры для предупреждения кризисных ситуаций’, available at: [https://www.gosuslugi.ru/domestic\\_abuse](https://www.gosuslugi.ru/domestic_abuse).

<sup>30</sup> See Annex.

<sup>31</sup> See Annex.

at police stations information about NGOs contained in the open letter (Perm Region and Republic of Buryatia).

As to statistics concerning domestic violence during the lockdown, two regions submitted that there were no requests for shelter during the quarantine (Vladimir Region and Khabarovskiy Region). One region noticed that there was no rise in crimes concerning domestic violence in January-April 2020 (Kirov Region). Two other regions noted a drop in such crimes (Vologda Region - in January-March 2020; Krasnodar Region - in January-April 2020).

In some regions, human rights ombudspersons took certain actions to facilitate protection of victims of domestic violence during the quarantine. For instance, the Ombudsman for St. Petersburg noted that due to the lockdown the shelters were closed in St. Petersburg, but that four hotels in St. Petersburg offered more than 20 rooms for accommodation of victims. The Ombudsman also published on his website contacts of relevant public institutions and NGOs.<sup>32</sup>

In the Arkhangelsk Region, on 21 May 2020, the Ombudsman held a hotline on domestic violence providing legal and psychological counselling. The Ombudsman noted a rise of domestic violence during the lockdown.<sup>33</sup>

Taken into account the above information, one may conclude that the authorities appear to recognise the problem of domestic violence in general, and its possible aggravation due to the lockdown measures. This constitutes a positive change in their perception of domestic violence. However, the authorities' responses appear to be sporadic, and their efficiency is yet to be assessed. In the absence of a comprehensive legislation on domestic violence, it appears that the authorities were unable to provide truly effective protection for the victims all around Russia.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that the global impact of COVID-19 on the situation with domestic violence has been not fully understood for the time being. However, emerging data demonstrate that in the existing situation many problems are getting intensified, which is exactly what is happening with domestic abuse. It goes without saying that the adopted restriction measures have affected women's ability to seek help and protect their rights in different ways as was demonstrated above. The state of fear and uncertainty as well as the lack of information might significantly limit a possible action plan and increase the risks of the worst-case scenario for victims of domestic abuse. Unfortunately, the state response to the problem of domestic violence during COVID seems to be not really sustained, progressive and promptly enough. It should, however,

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<sup>32</sup> 'COVID-19: human rights protection during the coronavirus pandemic (5 May – 11 May 2020)', available at: [http://ombudsmanspb.ru/ru/11052020\\_covid\\_19\\_zaschita\\_prav\\_cheloveka\\_v\\_uslovi](http://ombudsmanspb.ru/ru/11052020_covid_19_zaschita_prav_cheloveka_v_uslovi).

<sup>33</sup> 'Outcomes of the hotline "How to keep the piece in family', available at: [http://ombudsmanrf.org/news/v\\_rossii/view/itogi\\_gorjachej\\_linii\\_na\\_temu\\_Acirclaquokak\\_sokhranit\\_mir\\_v\\_semeAcircraquo](http://ombudsmanrf.org/news/v_rossii/view/itogi_gorjachej_linii_na_temu_Acirclaquokak_sokhranit_mir_v_semeAcircraquo).

be noted that there have been some positive changes in the state policy on the prevention of domestic violence. At the same time, the COVID pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the lack of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of domestic violence and protection of victims in Russia puts women at a greater risk and limits their enjoyment of human rights.

NGOs are reporting that even though the COVID-19 related restrictions have been alleviated by the middle of June, women still have been facing severe forms of domestic violence as a result of the pandemic. For instance, according to local women's rights defenders and social media reports, a young mother of three was beaten to death by her husband on 15 June in Gudermes (Chechnya). Local activists reported that her husband wanted to punish her for spending some of the funds provided by the Government as part of a national coronavirus response measure (approximately 10 000 rubles can be provided to families per child between the ages of 3 and 16). The victim was buried the following day without an autopsy having been performed. Three days after the incident, the Chechen Prosecutor's office, responding to the information on social media, assigned the investigative committee to carry out a procedural check. As of 19 June, no arrests had been made.

NGOs also report intensification of stalking and other forms of domestic abuse as well as the lack of police's responses to women's requests for protection. It should also be noted that due to the existing health risks associated with COVID-19, some women might still try to minimise social interactions and therefore, be reluctant to report about domestic violence to the police or seek medical help. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term effect on women's access to justice, which should be taken into account by the authorities when considering the law or policy response to domestic violence.

The above clearly demonstrates that the Russian authorities should adopt legislation against domestic violence, provide for measures of protection, such as restraining orders, and prosecute all incidents of domestic violence ex officio. The authorities should also ensure that during COVID-19 pandemic women have access to justice, in particular:

- i) ensure sufficient capacity of shelters and organisations temporarily used as shelters (such as hotels);
- ii) publicly condemn domestic violence and disseminate information about available services at the federal and regional levels;
- iii) instruct the police officers on their duty to promptly react to reports on domestic violence and ensure the victims' safety;
- iv) not to punish victims of domestic violence in cases of breaches by them of quarantine rules;
- v) create a focal point of immediate response to reports on domestic violence which would provide assistance in obtaining medical, psychological and legal help, and ensuring the victims' safety.





**Annex. Summary of replies of the regional authorities to the NGOs' open letter**

<b>No</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Reply of the Ministry (Directorate) of the Interior</b>	<b>Reply of the regional government or the Ministry (Committee) responsible for social policy</b>
1.	Altai Region	Police works as usual, including with regard to domestic violence. Seven social institutions (psychological help to victims of domestic violence in the remote mode). Police inform victims about these services.	Social hostels in seven social institutions (total capacity - 72 persons). A crisis centre for women (education to specialists and counselling for victims (psychological, legal – by phone and messengers)). Complaints on domestic violence are considered as urgent. Two hotlines - psychological help (one of them 24/24). Two annually actions against gender violence. During the lockdown the authorities enhanced information campaign about available social services for victims of domestic violence.
2.	Amur Region	On 9 April 2020, the regional government adopted a plan of measures in the interest of women for 2020-2022 (including support measures for NGOs which provide shelters and social and psychological help for victims).	N/A
3.	Vladimir Region	N/A	Information about protection of minors from violence. One shelter for women (10

			places). During lockdown (to date of 14 April 2020), there were no requests for social services from victims of domestic violence.
4.	Vologda Region	The authorities take measures aiming at prevention of domestic violence. In the first 3 months of 2020, there was a drop in number of crimes concerning domestic violence. Despite the lockdown, the police work as usual.	N/A
5.	Kirov Region	In January-April 2020 - no rise of domestic crimes. Police provide assistance to victims.	One shelter. Three hotlines for elderly and children, domestic violence can be also reported. Support for NGOs. Propaganda of family values and healthy lifestyle. On 2 March 2020 the regional authorities adopted a plan of measures for implementation of the national strategy in the interests of women for 2020-2022.
6.	Krasnodar Region	General information on activities of the police on prevention of domestic crimes. Collaboration of the police with the regional crisis centre for women. Leaflets “Your husband beat you up – call us!” at police stations. In January-April 2020, there were 192 complaints on domestic	One crisis centre for women. It is sufficient.

		violence. The number is on drop due to prevention measures.	
7.	Perm Region	Three public crisis centres for women and one NGO. Their capacity is sufficient. There was a cross-agency meeting on collaboration of different state agencies and of an NGO in cases of domestic violence. Hotline with psychological counselling, and an All-Russian helpline. On 22 April 2020, the Ministry of the Interior ordered to publish these hotlines numbers at police stations. On 7 May 2020, there was a working meeting on the implementation of orders of the Governor on prevention of domestic violence during the lockdown. Victims can report crimes through the website of the Ministry of the Interior, including by using their mobile phones. Information provided in the open letter was forwarded to police stations for publishing.	N/A
8.	Primorsky Region	Recommendations from the open letter are taken into account. Police have duties in accordance with the law.	One shelter (an NGO). "Social patrol" (in 6 cities and towns) – in emergency cases comes to households. Hotlines. During lockdown a psychological hotline was put in place.

9.	Republic of Bashkortostan	Activities of the police are conducted in accordance with the law. The police inform the victims about crisis centres and a hotline.	A booklet was issued for victims of domestic violence during the lockdown. In November 2019, a cross-agency meeting on problems of domestic violence was held. It appears that the regional authorities are working on creation of a website for victims of domestic violence, and are planning to regularly outline this problem in media, develop crisis centres for women and hotlines. The authorities are also planning to hold every three months “hotlines” on domestic violence led by various specialists.
10.	Republic of Buryatia	On the basis of the open letter the Ministry of the Interior issued a booklet to be placed at police stations; information from the open letter was transmitted to police stations for publishing.	The authorities are considering measures concerning domestic violence during the lockdown. One shelter for women (NGO). Two hotlines (children). 7 videos with propaganda of non-violent family relations were published on the ministry’s website.
11.	Republic of Komi	N/A	Information contained in the open letter was forwarded to social institutions and services for publishing.

12.	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	N/A	31 social institutions continued working during the lockdown. On 9 April 2020, an urgent “mobile” service was created to react to urgent matters related to domestic violence (in collaboration with law enforcement). During the lockdown, hotlines were enhanced (6 hotlines). Psychological counselling is provided. From 17 March to 2 April 2020, there were 257 calls on mobile crisis service and hotlines.
13.	Stavropol Region	The open letter was rejected as inappropriate.	There is no possibility to open shelters. 3 social institutions (counselling).
14.	Republic of Udmurtia	Police work in accordance with the law. Two shelters (for 28 persons in total).	N/A
15.	Khabarovsk Region	Two shelters (one public, one NGO). Information on shelters is made available at police stations.	One public shelter – there was no applications since the lockdown. Hotlines.
16.	Volgograd Region	N/A	Various activities on propaganda of family values. One shelter. Information contained in the open letter is

			transmitted to social institutions.
17.	Kamchatsky Region	N/A	Two shelters (public and NGO (religious)) – unclear if they work during the lockdown. Various activities (including mediation in cases of conflict situations).
18.	Krasnoyarsk Region	N/A	Collaborating with NGOs and providing them with grants. Information contained in the open letter was forwarded to the Ministry of the Interior.