

Experts fear rise in domestic violence as millions confined



Berlin, March 30 (RHC)-- With families across Europe confined to their homes to curb the spread of COVID-19, fears are rising of a surge in domestic violence.

From Berlin to Paris, Madrid, Rome, and Bratislava, associations that help victims of domestic violence have sounded the alarm after Europe overtook China to become the epicenter of the new pandemic.

The stress caused by social isolation is exacerbating tensions and increasing "the risk of domestic and sexual violence against women and children," the German federal association of women's counseling centers and helplines (BFF) warned. "For many people, their home is already not a safe place," the German federal association said.

For children, young people, and women who are victims of domestic violence –mental or physical– the current situation means "being constantly available" for abuse by the perpetrator, the BFF stressed.

Governments' decisions to close public spaces are essential in confronting the virus, but "who is seeing and hearing abused children today?" Rainer Rettinger, who heads a German child protection association, said.

In Spain, which has the second-worst outbreak in Europe after Italy, a 35-year-old mother of two was murdered by her partner last week. Elsewhere, help centers have noted a drop in calls for help -- which is

not necessarily seen as a good sign either.

"Now, violence, too, has been confined. That's what we're afraid of," says Martine Brousse, head of Parisian organization La Voix de L'Enfant (The Child's Voice). However, the risks are not limited to homes where violence was already a problem before.

On top of the stress caused by confinement, fears around job security and financial difficulties are also increasing the likelihood of conflicts at home.

According to Florence Claudepierre, head of the FCPE parents' federation in the Upper Rhine, a region hit hard by the pandemic in France; stories are starting to be heard of "parents who are cracking, who can't carry on" in families that have not previously had any problems.

Recently, the general rapporteur on violence against women for the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, Beatrice Fresko-Rolfo, pointed out that as governments pour billions into their economies and health services, they should "not lose sight of the importance of equality and fundamental human rights," following her concern about domestic violence in the region.

For her part, a UN human rights expert said that restrictive measures are taken worldwide to combat COVID-19 increase the risk of domestic violence, so governments must defend women's human rights and children and propose urgent measures for the victims of such violence.

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