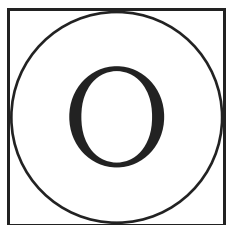


# Coronavirus: Italy lockdown trapping domestic abuse victims with perpetrators

Women are now confined at home with their abusers and are struggling to call for help, **Aurora Percannella** reports

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ver the past 24 days of lockdown, Alice\* has been forced to create a world of her own to get by. She wakes up every morning in her 10-year-old daughter's bed, tidies up the apartment, cooks and when the chores are done, she sits in her daughter's room and sews. She enjoys making bags, blankets and necklaces, and in easier times she would sell them in exchange for a little money.

For her husband, her creations are a “load of crap” and he tells their daughter not to eat her food because “it's not good enough”. Once a week, he sends her to the supermarket because he says it's too risky for him. He doesn't care if she gets sick. Every day, she treads lightly in her own home, so as not to inadvertently provoke his rage.

“I try to stay positive to cope, but the coronavirus outbreak has been a huge blow,” she says.

Confined at home with their abusers for prolonged periods of time, women like Alice have fewer opportunities to seek help or find some respite under Italy's lockdown. Severe travel restrictions and nationwide closures have isolated domestic violence survivors, and the economic uncertainty unleashed by the pandemic has prompted them to think twice before planning an escape.

“Many prefer to remain silent for now, to get through this extremely stressful time,” says Simona Lanzoni, vice president of Fondazione Pangea, which coordinates a nationwide network of women's centres and shelters.

Since the start of the outbreak, calls to domestic violence helplines have dropped sharply across Italy, sparking concerns that forced cohabitation may have made it harder for women trapped in abusive situations to pick up the phone and get help.

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The country’s national domestic violence hotline, Telefono Rosa, reported a 55 per cent decrease in calls for the first half of the quarantine. Several smaller anti-violence groups have observed a 70-80 per cent decline for the month of March, according to Fondazione Con Il Sud, which funds nine domestic violence projects across southern Italy. Lanzoni confirmed a similar trend for centres in northern Italy, but says numbers aren’t homogeneous across the country.

Some of the calls handled by hotline operators over the past few weeks shed light on the toll the outbreak and lockdown

restrictions are taking on domestic violence survivors, and how difficult it is for many to get help with few escape options available.

“Sometimes they call me from the bathroom or another room, and the line breaks up, or they will hear a noise and they suddenly hang up, because they fear they’re being overheard,” Eliana D’Ascoli, one of Telefono Rosa’s counsellors, says. “They are always in a rush, unless they are able to temporarily leave the house to go to a pharmacy or supermarket.”

D’Ascoli remembers one call in particular, from a teenage girl who contacted her after being kicked and punched by her father because she had tried to stop him from beating her mother. “She had locked herself in her bedroom, turned on the music to drown out noises and waited for her father to take his afternoon nap before calling us,” D’Ascoli says.

In one instance, domestic violence centre Lucha Y Siesta in Rome received a call from a woman who had run away from home without a copy of the form needed to justify travel under Italy’s quarantine rules. “Just as she was trying to figure out what to do, police officers stopped her, and without realising the situation, they told her to go home,” activist Michela Cicculli says.

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While Cicculli expects to see an increase in requests for





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help in a couple of months, as restrictive measures are eased, many women's groups and

organisations have turned to social media and mobile apps in hopes of better assisting domestic violence survivors during the pandemic.

For instance, Fondazione Pangea is experimenting with Telegram to make it easier for women to delete chats and messages. Telefono Rosa, in collaboration with the government, has revamped its app and chat service to ensure domestic violence survivors can speak to a counsellor without being overheard. Lucha Y Siesta is thinking of developing shareable guidelines on how to keep devices safe and recognise when they've been compromised.

“These tools have limits, but anything that breaks through this double layer of isolation – of Covid-19 and domestic abuse – is essential,” says Lanzoni.

Before the outbreak, Alice was months away from completing a financial empowerment programme for domestic violence survivors, which would have allowed her to look for employment

by the summer and move out with her daughter. For her, it’s been a lonely decade, as her husband pushed her away from family, friends and her own child.

“I kept going because of the programme,” she says. “My life is now on pause.”

*\*Names have been changed*

*Anyone who requires help or support can contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline which is open 24/7 365 days per year on 0808 2000 247 or via its website [nationaldahelpline.org.uk](https://nationaldahelpline.org.uk)*



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