

Sexual Violence in Russia and in War: Offering Healing Through Therapy and Art

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Malicki M Beser / unsplash

In a series of photographs, a man in a military uniform rapes a young woman. She becomes pregnant. The man takes the child and stomps on the breasts of the woman, her eyes closed in death and covered with coins.

These are photographs of a work of performance art called “Dvoinya” (Twins), created by Russian artist [Vladimir Kuznetsov](#) to draw attention to the problem of reproductive violence.

“My girlfriend Nadezhda told me that she wanted to do something on the subject of reproductive violence,” Kuznetsov told The Moscow Times. “For me, as a pro-feminist, it’s natural to speak out on the topic of violence. We spent several months looking for a way to express our ideas artistically. I didn’t want just to take photos.”

Kuznetsov said the photographs also reference the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where there

are hundreds of reports of sexual violence by Russian soldiers against Ukrainian women.

This issue of sexual violence is not being discussed in the Russian press, but before the war several non-governmental organizations were formed to help women who had been abused or assaulted. And as soldiers return from Ukraine, the issue is becoming more urgent.

A Ukrainian woman, Kristina (name changed for protection), told The Moscow Times what she went through in a small town not far from Kyiv.

“My husband went to fight as soon as the war began,” she said. “When Russian soldiers burst into my house, I was with my child. One of the soldiers took me to the next room, ordered me to take off my clothes and said if I didn’t, they would shoot my son. Then he began to rape me,” she said, weeping. “Then there were other soldiers... I think there were four or five. I don’t remember exactly. I tried not to cry. I heard my four-year-old son crying.”

She considers herself lucky: The soldiers didn’t kill her son. She fled with her child to neighbors for help. Later she learned that her husband had been killed in battle. She and her son now live in Germany.

Another woman in Ukraine, Anna (name changed for protection), told The Moscow Times that she was also raped by a Russian soldier.

“I am 44. He was about 20, the age of my son. He did it again and again. When I asked why he was doing this, he said he wanted me to have his child. He got very angry when I told him my age — I thought he would kill me, but he didn’t. Later I found out that he had gotten a young woman neighbor pregnant.”

Exporting violence against women

In 2022, the Russian Interior Ministry [registered](#) 3,311 cases of sexual violence, but the unofficial number is probably much higher. An [analytical study](#) by the independent polling and research organization Levada Center revealed that 91% of Russian married women have experienced domestic violence, which often includes sexual violence.

In Russia, rape is a crime that carries a penalty of three to six years in most cases, but it is difficult to pursue and get a conviction. According to [statistics](#) from the Crisis Center for Women in St. Petersburg, up to 70% of women who have been raped go to the police, but only 10% of the accusations result in charges. As a result, it is estimated that only 1% of men who commit these acts receive criminal punishment.

In Russia there is also no law against reproductive violence — when men either force women to have sex without contraception or keep them from acquiring and using contraception — since there are no statistics on cases. Reproductive violence is closely linked to the romanticization of childbearing in Russia. Women are commonly considered to be mothers first of all, not as humans with their own desires and rights.

There are, however, several non-governmental organizations that provide aid to women. The Sisters group helps survivors of sexual assault and their relatives. The center Nasiliu.net (“No To Violence”) tries to break the silence about domestic violence in Russia. It has been declared

a “foreign agent” in Russia.

“Survivors receive help from psychologists and lawyers,” specialists at Nasiliu.net told The Moscow Times. “The main thing in the work of a psychologist with a survivor is to ‘return’ responsibility for violence to the man who committed it, to support women and teach them self-support techniques so that they can gradually return a sense of self-confidence. With regard to legal support, all our assistance is advisory. We tell the survivors where to go, what documents to collect or submit. The standard recommendation is to visit a doctor as soon as possible and to document all injuries,” a Nasiliu.net spokeswoman said.

War crimes come home

Recently the media has been filled with stories about violence against women, not only in Ukraine but in Russia, too, as men who have returned from the war commit acts of violence against their wives and girlfriends.

But specialists at Nasiliu.net said, “So far, we haven’t seen a huge rise in complaints from victims.”

They have, however, noticed that the number of calls about stalking has greatly increased: men who have returned from the war pursue their ex-wives and girlfriends.

“Stalking is another difficult topic legally, because it's not against the law in Russia, so the police usually don’t do anything to help in case of this kind of persecution,” a Nasiliu.net spokeswoman said.

Experts say that the reason there is no huge uptick in reported cases of sexual and other violent crimes against women makes sense.

“Until recently, we worked in Moscow, and the war effort has had the least impact on the capital, at least for the moment [since there are few conscripts from Moscow]. Second, the majority of the men mobilized have not yet returned home. We will see the consequences in the growth of violence, including domestic violence, later,” they said.

In the meantime, Vladimir Kuznetsov is trying to draw attention to the problem in ways that he can with his performance art and photographs. He said the vasectomy he underwent was “the most important” part of these efforts. “I think this is a way men can support women who want to protect their rights to their own bodies.”

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