

Shattered by rape

Ukraine rape victims suffer in silence as the stigma around the violent act still persists.



Activists protesting the rapes in Ukraine in front of the Russian Consulate in New York. — AFP

WHEN war erupted in Ukraine and reports that Russian soldiers were using rape as a weapon of war began to surface, Yulia Sporysh wasn't sure she was the right person to help.

But urged by partners at Divchata, a small NGO that mainly works on health education for girls, she set up a hotline in April to advise and support victims.

Ukrainian officials as high up as President Volodymyr Zelensky were accusing Russian troops of widespread and systemic sexual abuse and Divchata was ready to take calls from victims.

Yet after three months of war, the phone has barely rung at all.

"There's still huge, huge stigma. There's this idea the victims might have brought it on themselves," Sporysh told AFP, explaining why people may not be coming forward.

"We have requests from relatives and from volunteers," she added, "but not directly from victims".

Moscow's invasion has spurred a wave of allegations of sexual violence perpetrated by its troops in Ukraine.

Zelensky said in April that Russian troops who withdrew after trying to capture the capital Kyiv had left "hundreds" of rape victims in their wake, including children.

AFP has spoken with at least one woman in the south of the country who said she was raped by several Russian soldiers.

Kyiv announced this week it was initiating the first legal proceedings against one of Moscow's soldiers for sexual violence.

Too ashamed

Still, activists tasked with helping people whose lives have been shattered by rape are first having to persuade them to break their silence.

"Victims, for the most part, are not ready to report to law enforcement and some of them are not even ready to receive specialised

medical treatment," says Yuliia Anasova, a lawyer with La Strada.

The well-known rights group, which also has a phone number for the war's rape victims, has received just over a dozen calls in relation to 17 people — including one man.

"He says he is too ashamed to see a doctor," Anasova told AFP.

Everyone who reached out said they were raped by Russian soldiers, mostly in their own homes, she said, but only three had filed official complaints.

"They are even less ready to go to the police than to seek medical treatment," Anasova said.

The lawyer said Ukraine's often poorly trained investigators have recently modernised how they

work, but still subject victims to several interrogations and medical examinations that contravene international recommendations.

A dedicated police unit that has been working in the Kyiv region has identified 13 victims of alleged sexual abuse by Russian soldiers, Deputy Interior Minister Kateryna Pavlichenko said.

Information, not emotion

But military psychologist Natalia Zaratska believes it's too early for police to go out looking for victims.

"It would make more sense to talk to them in six months, when they have a better handle on their memories," she told AFP.

"For a criminal investigation,

you need information, not emotion."

Still, Zaratska believes there is "urgent" work to be done. She understands victims need support but she also believes "they won't come to us".

"So we have to go to them."

That's why she goes at least three times a week to Bucha, outside Kyiv, a town whose name is now synonymous with harrowing allegations of atrocities carried out by Russian soldiers, including summary executions.

Hushed talk of sexual violence carried out by Russian soldiers has permeated all corners of the town where residents were found shot dead with their hands bound behind their backs after their occu-

piers withdrew.

"A doctor told me that for one month, the ambulance only picked up women who had this problem," 45-year-old plumber Volodymyr Strilets told AFP in Bucha.

Andrei Halavin, the priest who presides over the local Orthodox church, is navigating how best to steer the conversation with believers.

Keeping silent

"It's best not to talk about it," he told AFP in Bucha draped in black clerical robes. "People have to get on with their lives".

But he sought to reassure congregants that victims had not transgressed their faith.

"I have to tell them that it is not a sin to have been raped."

Zaratska, the military psychologist, said she started going to Bucha to talk to residents about their experience of Russia's occupation and soon was referred to rape victims.

She said the volume of complaints meant that the three psychologists working in the region were nowhere near enough. "Twelve or 16" are needed, Zaratska she said.

Again, she said, the victims were often hesitant to broach the subject of their experience.

"It's only when they are around someone who understands that in wartime, rape is a form of torture," she said.

She said they also needed to be reassured their testimonies would be handled with sensitivity.

Several officials have controversially made public graphic details of rape and sexual abuse allegations, including Ukraine's human rights ombudswoman who left the post after describing an incident in which a young girl was violated with a kitchen utensil.

"It's totally unethical," said Zaratska. "It can create a second trauma. If society were more sensitive on this issue, we might hear from victims more." — AFP