

Coronavirus pandemic Hong Kong / Health & Environment

# Covid-19 toll on marriage: divorce inquiries on the rise as stay-home measures push Hong Kong couples off the edge

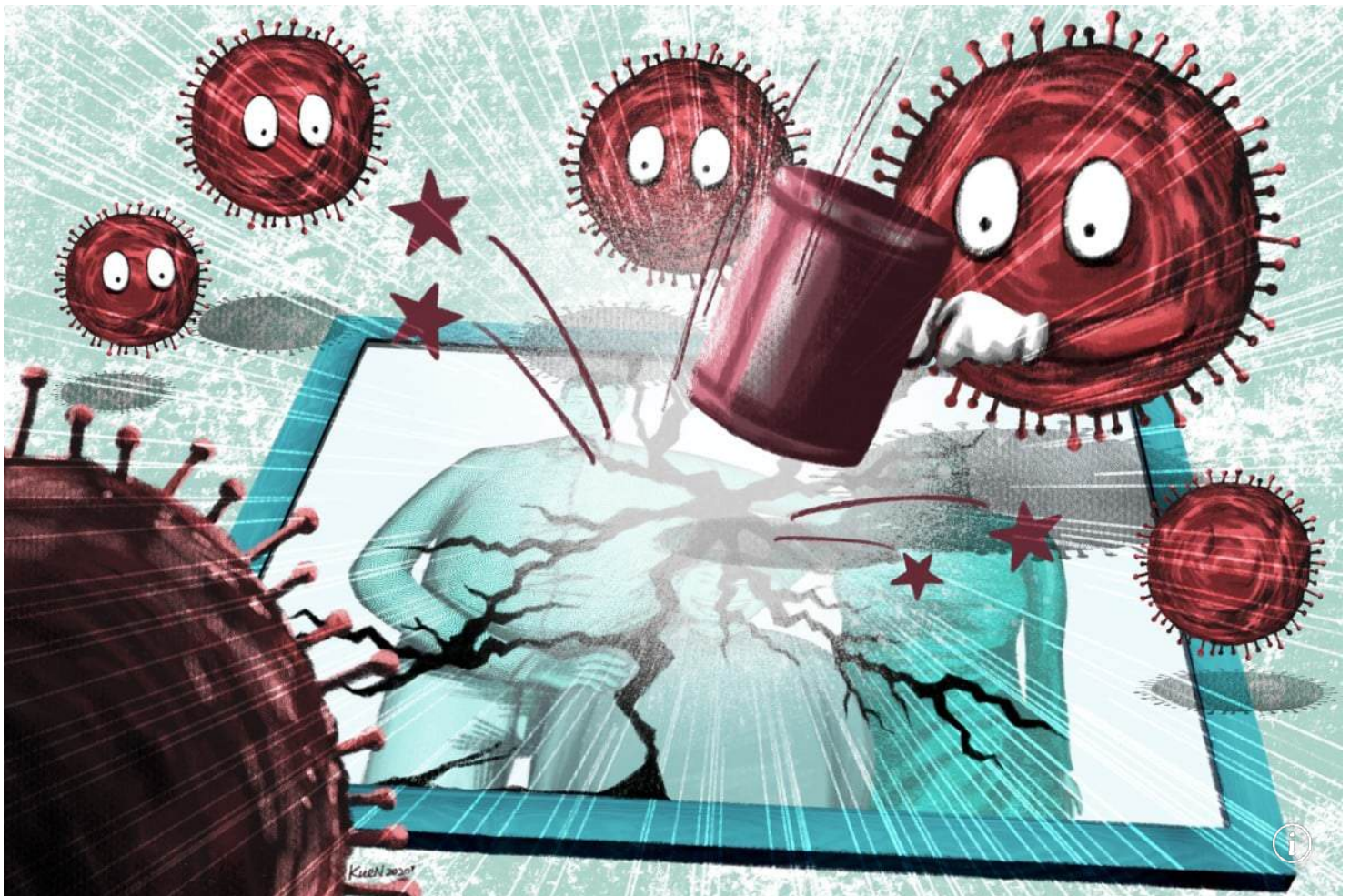
Couples cannot cope being cooped up at home, minding kids for an extended period  
Helplines flooded with calls, family lawyers say more clients asking about divorce

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**Fiona Sun**

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Confined to their 100 sq ft space in a subdivided flat in Hong Kong amid the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), Wendy Cheung and her husband quarrelled numerous times over hygiene, money and caring for their son.

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Finally, she decided it was time to get a divorce after eight years of marriage.

The distress caused by the fear of coronavirus infection, confinement measures and social isolation has taken a toll on couples. Cooped-up Hongkongers have been flooding hotlines with calls seeking help with conflicts at home, while family lawyers say they have received more divorce inquiries.

Cheung, in her 30s, says she and her husband had problems in the past, but she always put up with them. Her busy schedule left her no time to think seriously about the state of their marriage.

But the pandemic proved the final straw. Cheung, a waitress, had no work since the outbreak started. Her husband, in his 40s, lost his job in construction. The couple found themselves trapped in their tiny home with their son, a Primary One pupil whose school remains closed.



Hong Kong family lawyers say they have received more divorce inquiries amid the coronavirus pandemic.  
Photo: Shutterstock

They squabbled more often, sometimes over cleaning and disinfecting their home, with the conflicts occasionally escalating into pushes and shoves. Even worse, she says, their son witnessed it all.

Cheung started making discreet inquiries about divorce at help centres last month, although she remains anxious about how she will support herself and her son, given the city's battered economy and a gloomy job market.

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However, with the family court closed since January 29 because of the pandemic, she has been unable to apply for a divorce petition.

Cymie Chan Mei-yin, Cheung's caseworker at the Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (HKFWC), says: "Given the current situation, she can neither deal with her marriage problems nor plan for the future. Everything is uncertain."

The coronavirus has killed more than 270,000 people and infected more than 4 million worldwide. Hong Kong has recorded more than 1,000 cases and four deaths.

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Divorce has been on the rise in Hong Kong in recent years. Statistics show there were 20,321 divorces in 2018, up about 5 per cent from 19,394 in 2017.

A government report on marriage and divorce trends in Hong Kong showed that in 2016, there were 109,316 divorced or separated men, or 3.7 per cent of the total male population, and 197,623 divorced or separated women, or 6.1 per cent of all women.

The family court accepts adultery, unreasonably bad behaviour, separation, and desertion as grounds for divorce.



The pandemic ... is a testing time for fragile relationships

— Sharon Ser, family law specialist

Leading matrimonial lawyer Anita Yip Hau-ki expects a surge in the number of divorce petitions when the family court reopens on May 13. “The Covid-19 pandemic will be a triggering point,” she says.

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Family law specialist Sharon Ser says she has had numerous divorce inquiries since January, when the pandemic struck Hong Kong.

She has been receiving at least two to three divorce inquiries every day, compared with an average of one a day previously.

She says divorce inquiries usually peak after the Christmas and Lunar New Year holiday, a period when people evaluate the past year and consider making changes.

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“The pandemic has definitely been a catalyst for change in many areas of people’s lives,” she says. “It is a testing time for fragile relationships.”

Lawyer Dennis Ho Chi-kuen has received divorce inquiries from both men and women describing how the pandemic hit their marriages.

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“Some relationships broke down after the couples were confined at home and had to take care of their children,” he says. “There are also couples whose pre-existing problems worsened during the pandemic.”

Leading family law barrister Azan Marwah says: “The pandemic has caused a great deal of distress and anxiety to families, leading to more domestic violence and the breakdown of relationships.”

The closure of the family court prevented people from filing divorce petitions and seeking protection in cases of domestic violence, he says. With legal aid also halted temporarily, many have been left vulnerable.

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“This is the time when people need the protection of the courts the most,” he says.



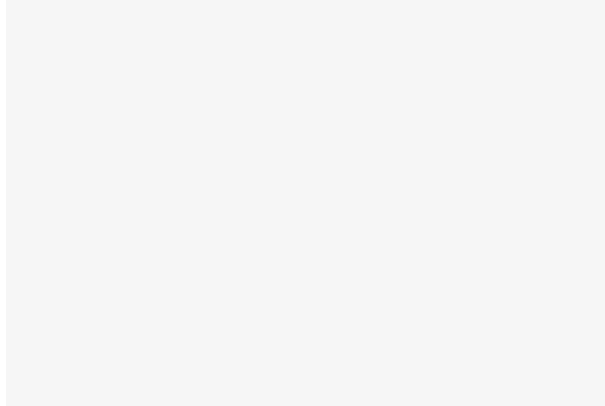
The pandemic creates existential uncertainty and a heightened sense of anxiety in many people, who find it challenging to support their partners through their mental health challenges and create a sense of normality

— Dr Quratulain Zaidi, clinical psychologist, MindnLife

Housewife Wong, in her 30s, says her unfaithful husband’s apathy towards her and their three-year-old daughter amid the pandemic made her feel their six-year marriage was over.

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The pandemic made her so anxious that she could barely function in her daily life. She has not left home since January, relying on her friends' help with shopping for food and necessities, and her obsession over hygiene makes her wash her hands so often that they turn red.

She says her husband, a construction worker in his 40s, had an affair and rarely returned home since the end of last year. He used to send her a few thousand dollars every month, but stopped in March, leaving Wong with no option but to borrow from friends.

Feeling betrayed and abandoned, Wong has decided to seek a divorce and custody of their daughter.

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Dr Quratulain Zaidi, clinical psychologist at MindnLife, says she has seen more clients seeking counselling for relationship problems amid the pandemic.

“The pandemic creates existential uncertainty and a heightened sense of anxiety in many people, who find it challenging to support their partners through their mental health challenges and create a sense of normality,” she says.

With more than 10 years’ experience working with families and couples, she says staying home and caring for children doing school work online have put extra stress on relationships, leading to more disagreements and dissatisfaction with partners. Separation, brought about by quarantine and travel restrictions, is also hard on some couples.

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