ADDRESSING DIVERSE NEEDS: THE IMPERATIVE FOR SPECIALIZED WOMEN'S SHELTERS IN TURKIYE

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Abstract

Violence against women is a fundamental human rights violation and a structural issue in Türkiye, deeply rooted in patriarchal norms that legitimize and perpetuate gender-based inequalities. This violence, which manifests in various forms, threatens women's lives and limits their access to support services. While women's shelters provide essential support, the current system in Türkiye is largely insufficient in addressing the diverse needs of vulnerable groups, such as women with disabilities, migrants and women whose lives are under threat. The development of specialized, trauma-informed and holistic support models is therefore vital to help women cope with their traumas and regain their autonomy. This study analyzes the inadequacies of general guesthouses and discusses the necessity of specialization within a conceptual framework. It also addresses structural obstacles to implementation, including funding shortages, lack of expert personnel and societal resistance. To effectively combat violence, the study proposes a sustainable and inclusive guesthouse system sensitive to the differentiated needs of vulnerable groups.

Keywords
Violence against women in Türkiye, women's shelters, specialized shelters, trauma-informed care.

1. Introduction

Violence against women is a grave global issue, representing a fundamental violation of human rights and a significant impediment to public health and well-being. Violence is defined as the intentional application of physical force or power, in the form of a threat or reality, to another person, resulting in or likely to result in injury, death or psychological harm to the person exposed (WHO, 2002). Violence against women, regardless of whether it occurs in public or private life, is defined as all gender-based acts of violence that result in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm and suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (Istanbul Convention, 2011). From this definition, it is clear that the concept of violence against women is a serious problem that inherently involves human rights violations and discrimination against women. In response to this critical problem, women's shelters have emerged internationally as vital resources, offering immediate safety, essential support and crucial pathways to recovery for individuals, predominantly women and their children, who are escaping situations of domestic violence and abuse (Diner & Toktaş, 2013; Toktaş & Diner, 2015).

Within the specific context of Türkiye, the problem of violence against women is further exacerbated by deeply rooted patriarchal social structures and persistent gender inequalities that contribute to its widespread prevalence and societal normalization

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(Ünver *et al*., 2024). In Türkiye, violence against women has a deep and widespread structural origin that cannot be explained solely by individual deviations. One of the fundamental mechanisms ensuring the legitimacy of violence is the manifestation of patriarchal social structures in every aspect of daily life. This structure shapes not only men but also state institutions, the legal system and even educational policies through a masculine mindset. Thus, domination over women's bodies, their paid or unpaid labor, and women's identity becomes "normal" through social norms. Within this system, violence against women functions not merely as an individual crime but also as a disciplinary mechanism supported by gender roles. Even if social institutions do not directly produce violence, they normalize and continuously reproduce it through structures that approve or ignore it (Kaufman, 1999 as cited in Yıldırım, 2017). Therefore, in the specific case of Türkiye, violence against women does not remain merely a "problem" but continues to exist as a dark and serious tool that ensures the continuity of the system.

The recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation emerged relatively late in the historical development of the feminist movement. Especially during the early periods of struggle, which focused on women's political rights and property, experiences of violence were largely seen as a private matter and remained invisible. Consequently, the discussion of violence against women as a public and political issue was delayed until the late 1960s (McMillan, 2007 as cited in Korkmaz, 2012). However, with the rise of second-wave feminism, based on the slogan "the personal is political", it was revealed that the violence women faced in their private lives was shaped by gender-based power relations (Wharton, 1987). In this framework, violence against women was evaluated as a result of the patriarchal system and conceptualized not as an individual but as a structural issue (Schecter, 1982 as cited in Goodman & Epstein, 2005). One of the most concrete outcomes of this intellectual transformation was the emergence of the battered women's movement, based on the solidarity of women who were victims of violence. This movement was shaped by the idea of collective struggle against systematic oppression that isolated women and laid the foundations for support mechanisms for victims in parallel with feminist values (Goodman & Epstein, 2005). The emergence of the women's shelter movement marks a significant turning point where this feminist perspective materialized. The roots of the movement date back to the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, when second-wave feminism was on the rise. During this period, the struggle against entrenched gender inequalities gave rise to the need to challenge male dominance and create alternative protection mechanisms against the state's inadequacy in protecting women. The first shelters developed in line with this need (the first women's shelters established in England in 1970 and in the USA in 1973) emerged with the aim of creating safe spaces for women to escape violence (Harmon, 2024). These structures, initially run by community-based voluntary initiatives, gradually institutionalized over time, evolving from merely providing emergency accommodation to comprehensive support systems that enable women to cope with multi-layered traumas. Today, the services offered by women's shelters include multifaceted services such as emotional support, childcare services, legal and medical counseling; at the same time, programs aimed at empowering women and establishing independent lives are becoming increasingly widespread (Sharifi *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, the movement has witnessed the emergence of vital global and regional networks, most notably the Global Network of Women's Shelters (GNWS), which plays a critical role in fostering international

collaboration, facilitating the sharing of knowledge and best practices and undertaking collective advocacy to combat violence against women on a global scale (Bond & Phillips, 2001).

Violence against women in Türkiye is a deeply concerning issue, accurately defined by the United Nations as any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (CFCU, 2009). This violence manifests in various forms across the country, including prevalent intimate partner violence encompassing physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, as well as sexual violence, the tragic phenomenon of femicide, harmful practices like honor killings and early and forced marriages and the growing concern of technology-facilitated violence (Lauri *et al.*, 2023). Data consistently reveal the alarmingly high prevalence of violence against women in Türkiye, with UN reports, government surveys and independent research indicating significant rates of physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced by women across different demographics (Şenol, 2021). The particularly devastating issue of femicide sees hundreds of women losing their lives to violence each year. The impact of this violence on women in Türkiye is profound, leading to severe physical and mental health consequences (including injuries, chronic pain, reproductive health problems, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide attempts), significant socioeconomic repercussions (such as job loss, poverty and homelessness) and detrimental effects on the well-being of their children who may witness or experience abuse. The persistence and severity of violence against women in Türkiye are inextricably linked to deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and pervasive social inequalities that create a societal context where such violence is often normalized, justified and perpetuated (Sen & Bolsoy, 2017).

The journey towards recognizing violence against women as a violation of fundamental human rights gained significant momentum globally with the involvement of the United Nations, a pivotal moment that influenced the framing of this issue in Türkiye and beyond. One of the UN's first major steps in this regard was the Decade for Women (UN Decade For Women) process, which spanned the period between 1975-1985 and involved three conferences. The conferences held in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) during this period allowed women to make their voices heard internationally and marked one of the first serious attempts to address violence against women as a legal issue (Zinsser, 1990). The period when the UN began to systematically evaluate violence against women as a human rights violation began with the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, which aimed to achieve global gender equality. Although CEDAW did not directly address domestic violence, its General Recommendation No. 19, issued in 1992, ensured that domestic violence was defined as a form of discrimination and a human rights violation (Qureshi, 2013). With General Recommendation No. 19, the issue of gender-based violence in CEDAW was clarified, attempting to close the gap between the convention's definition of discrimination and the issue of violence against women (Meyersfeld, 2010 as cited in Qureshi, 2013). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which took place in 1995, was accepted as one of the most comprehensive international documents on women's rights and called upon signatory states to implement concrete policies to end violence against women (Sandis, 2006). The platform for action obligated states to provide adequately funded shelters for women and girls subjected to violence, offer health and psychological counseling services, ensure access to legal aid

and finally, support women in achieving economic independence (UN/Beijing, 1995). In this context, the social pressure initiated by the Battered Women's Movement paved the way for the United Nations to address violence against women as a human rights violation; it contributed to the development of legal, political and social mechanisms in this regard. The Decade for Women, CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration are among the most critical steps taken by the UN in this area and form the legal basis for women's shelters. Furthermore, thanks to international pressure from the United Nations and the struggle of Second-Wave Women's Movements, women's shelters are now considered a globally accepted human rights service and a responsibility of states.

In Türkiye, the second-wave feminist movement, which emerged in the mid-1980s, played a crucial role in bringing the experiences of violence against women into the public consciousness and onto the political agenda through various forms of activism, consciousness-raising initiatives and persistent advocacy for legal and policy reforms (CAWC, 2025). Early feminist initiatives included the establishment of the first independent women's shelter in Türkiye, Mor Çatı (Purple Roof), in 1990, marking a crucial step towards providing organized support for survivors outside of traditional state-controlled structures. The subsequent historical development of support systems for abused women in Türkiye saw initial efforts primarily driven by feminist organizations, followed by a gradual increase in the state's involvement through the establishment of "Women's Guesthouses" under the purview of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, as well as the development of municipal shelters in some areas (Ökten, 2019). However, these early support systems faced significant limitations, including an insufficient number and overall capacity of shelters to meet the widespread need, limited financial and human resources, a lack of specialized services tailored to diverse vulnerabilities and persistent challenges related to accessibility and ensuring the safety and security of survivors within a deeply patriarchal societal context.

2. Key Factors Leading to Specialization in Women's Shelters in Türkiye

The specialization of women's shelters in Türkiye has evolved in response to a complex interplay of historical, social, economic and regional factors. These shelters, often referred to as "women's guesthouses" or "protection houses", have become critical institutions for addressing violence against women, a pervasive issue in Turkish society. The development of these shelters reflects a growing recognition of the need for safe spaces where women can escape violent environments and access support services. This section explores the key factors leading to the specialization of women's shelters in Türkiye, including regional adaptations, services offered, target demographics, historical development and social or economic factors.

The establishment of women's shelters in Türkiye is rooted in the legal and social reforms of the early 21st century. The passage of Law No. 6284 on the Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women in 2012 marked a significant milestone, as it mandated municipalities with populations over 50,000 to establish women's shelters (Ekal, 2011; 2015). This legal framework was further reinforced by the Istanbul Convention, which Türkiye ratified in 2011, committing to combat violence against women and domestic violence (Kerman *et al*., 2020). Despite these legal advancements, the implementation of shelter services has faced challenges, with many municipalities failing to fulfill their obligations due to resource constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Tekdere & Polat, 2022; Diner & Toktaş, 2013).

The historical development of women's shelters also reflects the influence of feminist movements and civil society organizations. These groups have long advocated for the establishment of shelters as a means of empowering women and providing them with a safe environment to rebuild their lives (Ekal, 2011; 2019). However, the involvement of public institutions in the management of shelters has sometimes led to tensions between feminist ideals and bureaucratic practices, with critics arguing that state-run shelters may lack the sensitivity and inclusivity of those operated by civil society organizations (Ekal, 2011; 2014).

The specialization of women's shelters in Türkiye is not uniform across regions, as local conditions and cultural contexts influence the services provided. In urban areas such as Istanbul and Ankara, shelters tend to offer a broader range of services, including psychological counseling, legal assistance and vocational training, due to greater access to resources and expertise (Ercan & Afyonoğlu, 2023; Akkuş, 2023). In contrast, rural areas often face challenges in providing comprehensive services due to limited funding and a lack of trained personnel (Diner & Toktaş, 2013; Yucel & Kutlar, 2020). Regional adaptations are also evident in the targeting of specific populations. For example, shelters in border regions such as Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa have increasingly focused on serving Syrian refugee women, who face unique challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences (Akkuş, 2023; Albayrak *et al.*, 2022). These shelters often collaborate with international organizations to provide tailored services, including language classes and cultural orientation programs, to help refugee women integrate into Turkish society (Akkuş, 2023).

Women's shelters in Türkiye provide a variety of services designed to address the physical, emotional and economic needs of women escaping violence. Core services typically include temporary accommodation, psychological counseling and legal assistance (Tekdere & Polat, 2022; Ekal, 2015). Many shelters also offer vocational training and employment support to help women achieve financial independence (Ercan & Afyonoğlu, 2023; Akkuş, 2023). In addition to these core services, some shelters specialize in addressing the needs of specific groups, such as women with disabilities or those from minority communities (Yucel & Kutlar, 2020; Kerman *et al.*, 2020). For example, shelters in Istanbul have established programs to support women with disabilities, providing accessible facilities and specialized counseling services (Yucel & Kutlar, 2020). Similarly, shelters in regions with large refugee populations have developed culturally sensitive programs to address the unique needs of refugee women (Akkuş, 2023; Albayrak *et al.*, 2022).

The primary target demographic of women's shelters in Türkiye is women who have experienced domestic violence or are at risk of violence. This includes women from diverse backgrounds, such as Turkish citizens, refugees and migrant women (Ercan & Afyonoğlu, 2023; Akkuş, 2023). Shelters also provide support to children accompanying their mothers, recognizing the impact of domestic violence on children's well-being (Uzun & Emirza, 2024; Tunc, 2018). The target demographic has expanded in recent years to include women fleeing not only physical and emotional abuse but also economic exploitation and human trafficking (Kerman *et al.*, 2020; Koc, 2022). This broader focus reflects a growing recognition of the intersectional nature of violence against women and the need for holistic support services.

Social and economic factors play a crucial role in shaping the demand for and accessibility of women's shelters in Türkiye. Economic dependence on abusive partners is a significant barrier to seeking help, as many women lack the financial resources to

support themselves and their children independently (Yalcinoz-Ucan, 2022; Keskin & Karaman, 2020). This economic vulnerability is compounded by cultural norms that emphasize the importance of maintaining family unity, often discouraging women from seeking external help (Güven, 2014; Tunc, 2018). Education levels also influence women's ability to access shelter services. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to seek help from formal institutions, including shelters, due to greater awareness of their rights and available resources (Keskin & Karaman, 2020). In contrast, women with lower levels of education may face additional barriers, such as a lack of knowledge about legal protections and support services (Keskin & Karaman, 2020; Kerman et al., 2020).

While general women's shelters in Türkiye provide indispensable initial assistance, the intricate and diverse needs of survivors necessitate a more nuanced and targeted approach through the development and implementation of specialized shelters designed to address specific vulnerabilities and lived experiences (Sharifi, 2024). The persistent and widespread nature of violence against women in Türkiye, combined with the limitations of existing general women's guesthouses, makes the development of specialized women's guesthouses not merely a beneficial alternative but an urgent and vital necessity. The experiences of vulnerable groups, such as women with disabilities, women whose lives are under threat and migrant women, often remain invisible within the standard service models offered by general women's guesthouses and are not adequately addressed (Havali & Sepetcioğlu, 2023). Therefore, moving beyond approaches that provide only temporary accommodation, it is crucial to develop holistic, interdisciplinary and trauma-informed support systems that are psychologically, socially, legally and culturally sensitive. The type of violence each woman experiences differentiates her needs, her struggle for rights and her recovery process; thus, a one-size-fits-all service model falls short of meeting this diversity. Most existing guesthouses are largely designed for victims of intimate partner violence, offering security, custody and support mechanisms focused on relational contexts where the perpetrator is singular (Gierman & Liska, 2013). However, this structure is not sufficient or inclusive for women exposed to other forms of violence, such as sexual violence, human trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and "honor"-based violence. The development of support services specific to each form of violence is considered a best practice, emphasizing that such services facilitate culturally meaningful access to aid, provide legal, financial and psychosocial support appropriate to the specific effects of the violence experienced by the victim and ensure that service providers have access to adequate knowledge and resources.

Looking at the current global situation of women's guesthouses, it is observed that they are not limited to providing only emergency and temporary accommodation; beyond this, diversified and specialized service models are becoming widespread. Today, in many countries, in addition to general guesthouses, special structures that consider the differing needs of women have begun to be developed. Shelters are now moving beyond being just a safe haven; they are transforming into comprehensive support mechanisms tailored to the type of violence women experience, their identities and their social situations. In some countries, these structures are designed as independent shelters, while in some cases, models that provide services in a secure home environment for one or a few women are also adopted. Especially in Europe since the 2000s, specialized shelter models specific to sexual violence, migration experiences or trans identity have become remarkably widespread (Üstünel et al., 2017 as cited in Aysu, 2020). It is observed that specialized

shelters vary in both the scope of services they offer and their physical structures. Some structures focus on short-term crisis intervention, while others accompany long-term accommodation, social integration and empowerment processes. Diversified physical structures such as home-based models, station-type temporary shelters and independent living centers allow for more flexible service provision in spatial, cultural and psychosocial terms. For example, Papatya Young Girls' Crisis House (The Anonymous Crisis Shelter PAPATYA) operating in Germany is a notable example. This institution, structured for young girls aged 13-21, has experience working with migrants, particularly Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Bosnian-Herzegovinian, Albanian, Serbian, Afghan, Syrian and Pakistani individuals. Papatya is not just a housing facility; it operates with a comprehensive psychosocial support system that considers migrant identity, cultural pressure and sensitivities specific to young age (Üstünel *et al*., 2017). With its age and ethno-cultural specialization, this model constitutes a concrete example for the multi-dimensional and sensitive service approaches needed in Türkiye.

However, it is also known that these specialized women's guesthouses worldwide are numerically insufficient. Therefore, to make the services offered by women's guesthouses more inclusive, it is important to train staff on specific situations related to different types of violence and to integrate a system where all women and if possible, girls, can be protected regardless of the type of violence they have experienced (Gierman & Liska, 2013). This integration will contribute to the creation of a flexible and sensitive service model that can offer minimum protection to all women, regardless of the staff's level of specialization.

When evaluated specifically for Türkiye, it is observed that women's guesthouses struggle to keep up with these global trends and even carry many structural problems. Women's guesthouses in Türkiye are still limited in number and fall short of meeting existing needs. There is also a significant imbalance in geographical distribution; women's access to these services in rural areas and small settlements is extremely limited. Even in large cities, guesthouses are insufficient given the number of women applying, which leads to women being pushed out of the system (Havali & Sepetcioğlu, 2023). Research shows that one of the most important factors limiting the functionality of women's guesthouses in Türkiye is that these institutions are based on a service approach that prioritizes family integrity rather than being "woman-centered" (Diner & Toktaş, 2013). State policies prioritize the protection of the family institution rather than the fundamental rights of women who are victims of violence. This leads to institutions transforming into mechanisms that try to return women to the family rather than empowering them. In addition, the uninstitutionalized structures of guesthouses also jeopardize the continuity of services. The existence of many guesthouses within municipalities depends on the personal initiatives of administrators and local political climates. Changes in management can lead to interruptions in service (Diner & Toktaş, 2013). Insufficient funding directly affects both the operation of the institutions and the quality of the staff. Public institutions and civil society organizations often operate with inadequate budgets, which can lead to serious disruptions in sustainable service provision. The state's avoidance of allocating budgets in the field of social services in line with neoliberal policy preferences further deepens this problem (Diner & Toktaş, 2013). Furthermore, bureaucratic obstacles, strict application conditions and uncertainties regarding the duration of service access faced by women in the process of accessing guesthouses also constitute a serious problem. Especially for women arriving with their children, admission processes to guesthouses can be more challenging. Practices such as

some guesthouses not accepting male children above a certain age can cause women to refrain from applying (Havali & Sepetcioğlu, 2023).

Serious deficiencies are also observed in terms of security, one of the primary functions of guesthouses. Failure to ensure confidentiality, insufficient security measures and sometimes indifferent or negligent attitudes of law enforcement agencies put both women and institutional staff at risk (Diner & Toktaş, 2013). Finally, the lack of qualified personnel seriously affects the quality of services in women's guesthouses. The number of social workers, sociologists, psychologists and lawyers with gender sensitivity is insufficient. Volunteers or personnel working with short-term contracts cannot provide continuity and cannot adequately respond to the complex needs of women (Diner & Toktaş, 2013 as cited in Havali & Sepetcioğlu, 2023).

Academic and policy perspectives increasingly emphasize the critical need for specialized women's shelters in Türkiye to provide more effective and tailored support to diverse survivor populations (UN Women, 2023). Arguments for specialization highlight the importance of addressing the unique needs of different groups and the limitations of a generalized approach. Trauma-informed specialized shelters are seen as particularly beneficial in promoting healing and recovery for survivors with specific experiences of violence. However, the implementation of specialized shelters in Türkiye faces several potential challenges. These include significant funding constraints and the necessity of securing sustained financial support from governmental and non-governmental sources; staffing challenges related to recruiting and retaining qualified professionals with expertise in diverse areas of support, as well as the need for specialized training for all shelter staff; potential societal resistance arising from prevailing patriarchal norms and conservative ideologies that may oppose the establishment of women-only or migrant women-inclusive spaces and the existing lack of effective authority and coordination among the various stakeholders involved in addressing violence against women.

3. Conclusion

Violence against women is a multi-layered social problem with not only individual but also societal, cultural and structural dimensions. Effectively addressing this problem is possible through the development of a holistic social service system aimed at empowering and protecting women. Women's guesthouses constitute one of the most important parts of this system. However, existing women's guesthouses in Türkiye face numerous problems, such as inadequacy in responding to the differentiated needs of vulnerable groups, geographical distribution imbalance, lack of specialization in service content and policy approaches that do not center women.

In particular, the state's service approach, which prioritizes the integrity of the family institution over protecting women, causes guesthouses to deviate from their primary function; instead of empowering women, it directs them back to their former risky living environments. This approach reinforces gender inequalities and becomes a ground for reproducing the cycle of violence. In addition, the lack of financial independence of guesthouses causes services to become dependent on local politics and personal initiatives. The shortage of qualified personnel, physical security vulnerabilities and barriers to accessing the institution, as well as the difficulty of bureaucratic processes, are other fundamental factors that reduce the effectiveness of the service.

Thus, the development of specialized women's shelters in Türkiye is not merely an enhancement but a critical necessity for providing effective and equitable support and protection for women experiencing violence. The experiences and needs of different

vulnerable groups, such as women with disabilities, migrant women, sexual violence victims and women with children, are not adequately met by the classical women's guesthouse model. Therefore, enriching service provision with trauma-informed, holistic and culturally sensitive models is of great importance. Some European examples - for instance, the Papatya Young Girls' Crisis House in Germany or accessible guesthouses in the Netherlands - demonstrate that such specialization can yield successful results (Üstünel *et al*., 2017).

Several fundamental obstacles must be overcome for specialized guesthouses to be implemented in Türkiye. These include establishing a sustainable and independent financing mechanism, expanding gender-sensitive training for service providers and clarifying the responsibilities of local governments in this area. Furthermore, there is a need for a mental transformation at the societal level that views the empowerment of women as part of societal development, rather than a threat. The understanding that services offered to women, based on patriarchal values, are not "aid" but a right must be adopted as a fundamental principle.

In conclusion, to take a realistic step in combating violence in Türkiye, merely opening more guesthouses will not suffice. These new women's guesthouses must transform into institutions that offer safe, accessible, inclusive and professional services that consider women's unique experiences. This transformation will not only aim to cope with the consequences of violence but also bring about a social policy approach that seeks to eliminate its causes. In the long term, the widespread adoption of specialized women's guesthouses will be one of the keys to increasing women's safety, strengthening gender equality and producing lasting solutions for the prevention of all forms of violence.

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