

## The Notion of Honor and Institutions: The Case of Public Women's Shelters in Turkey

(Work-in-progress. Please do not quote or circulate.)

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Honor has been a term that we have so frequently heard in the recent years in relation to crimes, usually enounced in relation to another term, *töre* (custom). As scholars pointed out (Sirman, 2004; Eldén, 2004), the distinction between the two was aimed to maintain a relationship of hierarchy between Turks and Kurds, in the sense that while honor was defined to be a (positive) value in the case of Turks, Kurds were attributed to act in line with *töre*, described as stripped of agency and acting within pre-defined boundaries/structures. On the other hand, feminists tried to challenge the positive approach to the notion of honor in the field of law, arguing that it has in any case inflicted on women a secondary position. They criticized what is called *haksız tahrik* (unjust provocation) in the law, which usually leads judges to consider crimes to protect honor as a viable motivation and therefore to diminish the sentence that they accord to guilty men.

Honor killings and legal field, however, is not the only place that we can observe how the bureaucratic field retains its commitment to the notion of honor. Even though honor/or honor violence was not my specific focus, the research I conducted in mainly two different women's shelters run by municipalities (in 2008 and 2009; and in shorter periods in one other municipality shelter and in the shelter of Purple Roof) revealed that the notion was one of the defining features of the relations between residents and staff. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to demonstrate how honor becomes as a characteristic of the hierarchical relations between citizens and officials in the public institutions in Turkey today. (It is more of an empirical description than a theoretical discussion).

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Before going deeper into discussion, let's briefly say how women's shelter in Turkey has become primarily public, that is, established and run either by municipalities or the Institute of Social Services and Child Protection (114 public shelters, vis-à-vis one NGO shelter<sup>1</sup>). I maintain that in Turkey, two moments in feminist movement's ways of formulating their demands about the shelters bear significance to understand this:

- 1) The process at the beginning of 90s, where feminists demanded that the shelters that they will establish would be funded by municipalities or central state. Since the authorities has been reluctant to provide funding, this demand revealed unfruitful except for the case of *Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı* - Istanbul (Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), and for a shorter period for the case of *Kadın*

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<sup>1</sup> The number is based on the records of Family and Social Policies Ministry. URL: <http://www.kadinistatusu.gov.tr/tr/html/19175/Kadin+Konukevleri>, accessed March, 20, 2013. Here I base my argument on these numbers, yet we know that at least four other NGO shelters exist: two are run by a philanthropic organization, Şefkat-Der, and host women who are exposed to domestic violence; and two other are run by Ankara Kadın Dayanışma Derneği and Van Kadın Derneği, and host women who are victims of human trafficking.

*Dayanışma Vakfı* - Ankara (Women's Solidarity Foundation) and with ebbs and flows in those cases too.

- 2) The process since the beginning of 2000s: The state has been more and more envisaged as the responsible in establishing and running the shelters, expressed in the declarations of the General Assembly of the Women's Shelters and Counselling/Solidarity Centres each year. This was a demand that was developed as a response to the lack of adequate funding. Yet, amalgamating with the state's tendency to control the shelters, this second tactic lead to the current picture we have at hand, that is the centralization (and further monitoring) of shelter work through the establishment of KOZA – that is, centralized counseling centers under the direction of Family and Social Policies Ministry that is envisaged to receive all victims of violence and to guide them to shelters (without the knowledge of which you can't let that woman leave the shelter definitely, etc.)

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So, the point that honor becomes as a characteristic of the hierarchical relations in the public shelters is all the more striking if we consider that women's shelters are a product of feminist movements in all over the world, which has a double function in feminists' vision. For sure, it was a place of solidarity, providing temporary refuge for women from threats of violence. But concomitantly, it was to serve as a base for political thought and action "by illustrating so clearly their present state of dependence upon others: husband, family, the state or charity for material basis of daily existence" (Dobash and Dobash, 1996, p. 60). In this sense, the criticism of hierarchical relations among residents and between staff and residents is an intrinsic part of the feminist shelter model. From this perspective, any notion that would serve as a basis for legitimating hierarchy would, at least in theory, be unacceptable.

Researches show that the distancing of feminism turns shelter into a rule-ridden hostel, and the bare disciplining tendencies would easily invoke criticism in the shelter more or less in every country. The "types" of shelters that Dobash and Dobash (1996) identify in the case of US (philanthropic, organizational and bureaucratic, therapeutic), in this sense, points to the fact that there are many shelters that are devoid of feminism in the European or North American contexts as well, and to legitimize disciplining, other discourses come up. In this sense, in the case of the municipality shelters that I examined, I argue that the distancing of the feminist point of view in public shelters has created an institution based on the idea of controlling its (female) residents; **and then, besides other existing discourses (like philanthropic or psychological), the notion of honor came to play a role in the maintenance of hierarchical relations in the municipality shelters.**

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Here I will discuss one main quality of these hierarchical relations in the shelters, and this concerns the control over the residents by some rules. While talking to residents, **it was possible to see that they likened the shelters to the family not only in an intimate sense (that is, replacing their family by taking care of them, *sahip çıkmak*), but also in the attitude there towards controlling the women's behaviour.**

These were related, of course, to “security measures”, with the main purpose being to keep the address secret and to keep women away from perpetrators, something found in most shelters around the world.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand it differed from shelters run by feminists in that they implemented a curfew (and now the new regulation in 2013 made this into a written rule) and obliged the women to hand in their mobile phones to the staff.

(Of course the women who had found jobs were less subject to these rules, but the women who did not work (with whom I spent most of my time during the day) usually experienced a feeling of distress. Especially in Shelter B, the women were expected to stay in the shelter all the time during the first month of their stay, and if they had legal procedures to complete they were asked to go to court or other institutions in the car provided by the municipality and accompanied by a member of staff.)

Here, it should be emphasized that in the minds of residents and staff, these measures of security (or rather control) was not dissociated from the notion of honor, defined in relation to women’s (legitimate or illegitimate) sexuality. In this sense, the categorical opposite of **women’s shelter** was the **brothel**<sup>3</sup>. For instance, in Shelter B, one of the staff complained to me that she felt insecure on her way to the shelter, saying: “you know how the neighbours and the men sitting in the coffee shop see this place”.

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**The control measures in the shelters are clearly seen if we look at the accounts of residents. On the other hand, in their point of view, to be staying in a place other than your own home was already a problem, and it was a choice (or a necessity) to be justified strongly. Therefore, distancing yourself from prostitution was more or less a “must”.**

This concern explains why Asya (from shelter A) explained almost as soon as she met me that she had had to pass the night on the street before coming to the shelter, so had taken refuge in the bus terminal, where she had rejected offers by men for tea and food before arriving “safely” in the shelter. Concerns over the fact that others in society could see the shelter as a “non-honourable space” could even have an impact on the decision to leave an abusive relationship:

*(Ashhan – Shelter A)* My elder brother did not support my decision at first. He had friends who were policemen ... and they talked badly about shelters. ... Then I had no other choice, I said to myself ‘if I know how to protect myself, no one can do anything to me’, so I got some money from my sister and I left home.

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<sup>2</sup> The practice of keeping the address of the shelter secret has also been criticised, especially by coloured women in the US: “Many women of color associate the process of entering shelter with ‘going into hiding’, and with the loss of more primarily cultural alliances. ... The isolation of the shelters from the communities in which women live and the secrecy surrounding the shelters also may intensify the burdensomeness of crisis work. This may take the form of power struggles over the monitoring of women and the maintenance of the confidential location, or it may take the form of staff, as well as residents, feeling disconnected from the community” (Haaken and Yragui, 2003, p.65).

<sup>3</sup> Asli Zengin worked on brothels run by the state....

On the other hand, in one of the first interviews I conducted, a woman who had formerly stayed in a shelter run by the Social Services (which she had left so as to rent an apartment with a co-resident, but when this failed had had to apply to the municipal shelter) explained that she was content with the practices in the current shelter (in comparison to the former shelter she had stayed in):

*(Beril<sup>4</sup> – Shelter B)* In the other place, you could do anything you wanted, you could go out any time day or night. It wasn't a disciplined place like it is here. ... I don't know, here it is really comfortable, relaxed (**rahat**). Above all, the ban on using mobile phones is great. The restriction on going out is very good. There, there were women who used to use mobile phones. There were women who went out after midnight. No one said anything to them, as there were no security personnel after 5pm. [...] I don't know, this shelter is very comfortable.

In this account there is a clear sense of security due to the practices of the shelter. On the other hand it was also possible to see both in Afife's and Aslihan's accounts that the ways the residents dressed and their relationships to men were also under control, and this was a source of distress for women:

*(Afife – Shelter A)* In your home life you have to get permission from your husband, you can't go out without permission. It is as if you are tied to him. Actually it's a very bad situation. It's more or less the same thing here as well. You can't go out. For instance, I want to wear short-sleeved t-shirts, they don't let me, they want to protect me but still... I want to wear short-sleeved t-shirts, I want to go out...

*Berna (about a remark made by Aslihan)* Why do you say it is difficult to get permission to go out during the day?

*Aslihan (Shelter A)* It is difficult. Some women go out and flirt with men. Once there was an incident involving me. I used to go out of the shelter to look for a job. I ran into the boyfriend of a friend of mine and he told me that he wanted to talk to me about something. ... I went and we just had a cup of tea, it didn't take any more than five minutes. ... But someone saw me, and they asked me to leave the shelter. ... Thanks to Fidan abla (*a former resident who worked in the shelter as a night attendant*), who talked to the manager, I was allowed to go on staying in the shelter.

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### **A wider perspective - legislation:**

Here it might be argued that these stories cannot be treated as isolated cases, but reflect a wider perspective. Indeed, the government agencies are also careful not to detract

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<sup>4</sup> She was someone at the beginning of her twenties, very joyful. Started recounting her life story as soon as I asked her how she arrived in the shelter. Probably she recounted her story many times, since she has been to Social Services' residence as a victim of incest. After residence, she had been to a shelter. I always thought that she tried to give me a message here, by saying that the shelter was « rahat ».

from the shelters “honourable” image. Article 9 of the Regulation<sup>5</sup> passed in 1998 with regard to shelters run by the Social Services (to which municipalities are also subject) states that women involved in prostitution will not be accepted in the women’s shelters. Article 14 of the same Regulation also states that women staying in the shelters should get permission before going out.

As Dubois (2010) has argued with regard to the Caisse d’allocations familiales in France, the street-level bureaucrats do not have any set of written rules on how to implement the regulations, and they usually refer to their own personal experience in their dealings with clients. **As can be seen in the examples above, the staff in the shelter drew on their own experiences when deciding how to implement formal rules.** Some of the staff acted in a formalistic way, asking residents to sign a paper each time they left the shelter (once they had got permission from the manager) so as to ensure that they would not be held responsible were the residents not to return or if there were any other problems. But some other, for sure, resorted to already existing approaches, that is to keep women within the boundaries of honor, and involved in checking the dresses of women or trying to keep them from seeing men – which does not in any case directly show that the women is engaged in prostitution (even though this is a legitimate reason – by law – to expel the woman from the shelter). **But which shows that when the founding perspective of shelters (that is, feminism) is lost when the question of violence against women gets to the level of a “public policy”, i.e. public shelters, the official point of view and the point of view of the staff feeds into each other, and in this case results in the construction of public women’s shelters as “honourable spaces”.**

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### **Some last words:**

The question that can be asked here is that “isn’t these public shelters are just the perfect match for those women who want to stay within the boundaries of the given honor codes?”

It was indeed possible to observe that the residents’ partly overcame their worry that others see the shelter as a non-honourable space by presenting themselves as **“under the protection of the State”** (*devlet koruması altında*). Over the course of my fieldwork I witnessed several cases where the residents asked the directors of the shelter to phone their families and tell them that their daughter/sister/wife was under the protection of the State. And so the fact of residing under the roof of the State helped to alleviate some of the prejudice against their decision to stay in the shelters.

From the point of view of residents, the decision to leave an abusive relationship was, therefore, not only about making a decision, but also about making others accept that decision as righteous in terms of honor codes. Therefore, contrasting the shelter to a brothel, emphasizing that your honor has been protected, can be seen to be as additional burdens when dealing with a situation of violence.

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<sup>5</sup> Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu’na Bağlı Kadın Konukevleri Yönetmeliği, 12.07.1998, no.23400.