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Women's shelters and private shelters discursive struggle: separatism, security and social change

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ABSTRACT

The increase in private shelters for women escaping men's violence in Sweden prompts an analysis of discursive struggles on separatism, violence, and safety. The analysis of websites and interviews with representatives from private shelters and women's shelters show that the woman-to-woman approach is important for women's shelters whereas private shelters frame their use of male staff as a practical necessity or a way to show women that there also exist 'good' men. Women's shelters articulate the importance of knowledge about men's violence for counteracting normalization of violence and self-blame, while private shelters emphasize therapeutic knowledge and interventions. To provide safety, women's shelters articulate the importance of a homey atmosphere and 'inner safety', where private shelters emphasize security; shell protection, perpetrator profiles, and risk assessments. The women's shelters position their work within a discourse of social change, whereas private shelters emphasize their lack of political ambitions, with profit-making as their primary motivation. Should public funding continue to be funnelled to private shelters, rather than to women's shelters, it will undermine women's shelter's dual role of providing refuge and contributing to social change. Should the private shelters discourse prevail it will likely alter the support provided to victims of violence.

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Introduction

According to neoliberal logic, marketization is an attempt to optimize the delivery of welfare services by encouraging private companies to compete with local governments and NGOs in delivering publicly funded welfare (Heffernan 2006). The marketization of Swedish welfare picked up speed during the late 1990s in areas such as education, healthcare, and social work, and in the 2010s private companies begin to compete with women's shelters for public funds to provide shelter to those subjected to violence. In 2012, private companies comprised eight per cent of shelters and in 2019, that proportion had risen to 37%. Given that private shelters can often accommodate more clients than women's shelters, their total share of available shelter placements is close to 50% (Socialstyrelsen 2020). Implications of shelter marketization has not been analysed, but studies in other areas, such as addiction treatment and residential care for children and youth (Sw: HVB), suggests that marketization reshapes the discourse on social problems and what solutions that become intelligible (Herz and Lalander 2018; Lundström, Sallnäs, and Shanks 2020). Arguing that

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the neoliberal logic embedded in marketization may 'alter the aims, aspirations, and affiliations of a range of professional groups and fields' (Garrett 2010, 87), we believe that an analysis of shelter marketization is important, both in terms of how it may affect the understanding of problems and the organization and content of the support given. Most women's shelters were founded on a feminist understanding of men's violence and has tended to offer a separatist space focusing on women's safety, sharing experiences, and empowerment (Dobash and Dobash 2005; Edwards 2002; Lehrner and Allen 2009). Therefore, our interest lies in exploring how such ideals are negotiated in a contemporary marketized shelter context. How present are such ideals in women's shelters today? And what ideals do private shelters espouse? Using interviews and the websites of women's shelters (non-profit) and private shelters (for profit), the aim of this study is to analyse differences and similarities in women's shelters and private shelters articulations on separatism, violence, and safety.

Understanding the shelter context

Women's shelters emerged through the formation of local woman-to-woman groups during the 1970s in countries like Sweden, the UK, and the USA, as a way to provide support for women subjected to men's violence, after a lack of provision of such support by public actors was identified (Dobash and Dobash 2005; Wendt Höjer 2002). The shelters provided a separatist sanctuary space in which to discuss experiences, obtain advice, and find temporary shelter to avoid violence. The movement was informed by collective empowerment ideals, rather than individual therapeutic ideals (Enander, Holmberg, and Lindgren 2013; Helmersson and Diss 2017; Lehrner and Allen 2009; McDonald 2005).

The support for women subjected to men's violence and the woman-to-woman separatist approach is attributed to a feminist understanding of men's violence as the ultimate expression of patriarchy and a technique employed to uphold it. Separatism in this context is a strategy of distancing from men rooted in a radical feminist understanding of society (Anderson 1994; Coote and Campbell 1982), although the extent to which an explicit (radical) feminist perspective was evident in Sweden differed between shelters (Edwards 2002).

In men's violence against women, the women's shelter movement (WSM) identified a connection between individual experiences and gendered social structures. The woman-to-woman support and feminist theory provided a basis for knowledge production from which the WSM, as a social movement with a political voice and agenda of social change, could challenge the 'acceptability' of men's violence and the social structures that allowed such behaviour (Dobash and Dobash 2005, 28; Enander, Holmberg, and Lindgren 2013, 10).

Research indicates that the WSM has transformed in different ways, but there is no consensus about whether such changes have weakened (Fleck-Henderson 2017; Lehrner and Allen 2009) or strengthened (Arnold and Ake 2013) the movement. The Swedish WSM saw a split in 1996 in which the original organization (Roks) held onto its feminist and volunteering ideals and the other (SKR, now Unizon) adopted a discourse of gender equality and welcomed professionalization (Enander, Holmberg, and Lindgren 2013). Helmersson's study (2017) suggests that, in general, the Swedish WSM has been bureaucratized through its collaboration with municipal governments and has gradually come to resemble a public service provider rather than a social movement with a political voice (see also Markowitz and Tice 2002).

According to Swedish law, the municipal social services have a formal responsibility to provide support to women subjected to violence 'from someone close'. Following an investigation into the needs of the woman, the social services may approve temporary placement in a shelter. Historically, such shelter has been provided by local non-profit women's shelters, because very few municipalities have shelters of their own,¹ but now private shelters are also available. Social services pay for the stay, and it is up to the social worker to decide what shelter should be used.

Based on the existing literature, private shelters for those subjected to violence are not common outside of Sweden. While such shelters emerged some 20 years ago in Sweden, they have attracted little attention from scholars. In a recent study (Lauri and Lauri 2023), we concluded that private shelters present themselves as different from women's shelters by claiming to be (more) flexible, tending to the needs of the social services rather than the needs of those subjected to violence, and accommodating and being knowledgeable in regard to a wide(r) target group. In a survey by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2020), private shelters' responses suggest that, in comparison to women's shelters, they are more likely to provide individual housing and round-the-clock staff, but the staff are less experienced in social work and less likely to undertake training, such as university courses in gendered violence. Private shelters reported having guidelines for cooperation with the social services and for security, alarms, and camera surveillance more often than women's shelters.

Methods and material

Because the focus of this study lies in analysing discourses on separatism, violence, and safety, we turn to discourse theory and follow Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) understanding of hegemonic discourse as something that appears to be fixed and as a matter of fact, yet is temporary and filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. This leads to a constant struggle over meaning. A discourse is always open to change and in need of constant avowal to be reproduced.

To capture different understandings of safety, separatism, and violence, we engage in the concept of *articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105). An articulation is a meaning-making process that places signs in relation to each other. The meaning of a sign is constituted by how it is distinguished from other signs. During this articulatory process, other possible understandings are excluded. A focus on articulation helps us to untangle how meaning is reshaped, as well as how different understanding or concepts become linked and how new meanings can be incorporated into certain concepts. In practice, this means that we focused on which specific words that were used in connection to the articulation of separatism, violence, and safety.

To capture how meanings become stabilized, we make use of the discursive analytical tool *chain of equivalence* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 93). This helps us to untangle how different signs are linked to each other and how different words, ideals, and concepts are understood and given meaning vis-à-vis each other, because meanings are relationally produced. In practice, we were attentive in how different words became connected to each other, and as such created new meanings.

Discourse theory thus serves as our analytical toolbox for untangling how the shelters make meaning of their work, and how they attach meaning to their practices, and hence express and form the discourses of safety, separatism, and violence.

Empirical material

This article builds on 20 semi-structured interviews with representatives from shelters for those subjected to violence. Nine of the interviews were conducted with representatives (mostly owners) of private shelters (five women and four men) and eleven with representatives (mostly paid staff) of women's shelters (four of these interviews had two participants, hence a total of 15 participants from women's shelters, all women). We also collected web-based material from 11 additional private shelters and 10 women's shelters. In total, we gathered empirical material from 41 shelters.

The private shelters were selected by searching on the internet for 'protected housing' (*skyddat boende*), the most frequently used term for shelters providing housing for women subjected to violence. When conducting such a search, the top results comprise sponsored links, i.e. those who pay to have their website promoted. We emailed an inquiry to each shelter asking them to participate in our study, starting from the top in the search results and continuing until 10 private shelters had agreed to participate (Private Shelter Interviews 1–9,

one opted out; referred to in the analysis as PS-I-1 through 9). Those who did not respond or turned down our request were then selected to become part of our web material; in total, comprising 11 websites from private shelters (Private Shelter Websites 10–20, referred to as PS-W-10 through 20). We also conducted 11 interviews with 15 staff at women’s shelters (Women’s Shelter Interviews 21–35, WS-I-21 through 35). These were selected so that shelters connected to both major national umbrella organizations for women’s shelters were included (seven Unizon, two Roks, and two independent). We contacted women’s shelters directly and asked them for an interview. In addition, we collected material from 10 women’s shelter websites (two Unizon, eight Roks) (Women’s Shelter Websites 36–45, WS-W-36 through 45). The majority of interviews were conducted over the phone or by video phone call due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical considerations have been important during the research process. Prior to each interview, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, our actions to keep their participation confidential, and that they could, at any point during the interview or afterwards, withdraw from participation. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing the material and using codes for the participants. The interviews with women’s shelters have been approved by the Swedish ethical review authority (DNR-number: 2020–04499).

During the interviews, we asked questions about their ways of working, their approach to separatism, how they work to create safety and security for those seeking protection, how they see their work from a wider societal perspective, and about their strengths and weaknesses. The duration of the interviews ranged between 21 and 108 minutes and all were transcribed verbatim. We extracted written parts from the webpages that described the characteristics of the shelters and their way of working. Although interviews and websites belong to different genres, we regard them both as text in the sense that they are both part of providing the discourse with meaning (Howarth 2000).

In the first step of the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the material by individually reading the transcripts and webpage material several times. After that we collectively discussed our readings and narrowed down the aim. In a third step, we extracted all parts of the empirical material that dealt with the aim. After that process, we each conducted a deep reading of these extracts and then discussed our interpretations. We agreed upon three preliminary analytical themes. Next, we continued the analysis in an iterative way, taking turns writing up the findings in an abductive process, going back and forth between the empirical material and the analytical framework. The quotes were selected because they represent the general analytical point being made, with the ambition to use quotes from several different sources. In some instances, we have also included quotes that illustrate differences and variation.

Results

The approach to men: from separatism to ‘not all men’

In trying to capture the discourse on separatism, the shelters were asked about their approach to men, in relation to both staffing and staying in their shelters. All the women’s shelters refrain from having men as staff or volunteers in their shelters. One interviewee said: ‘in the support work, it’s woman-to-woman’ (WS-I-25) and another hypothesized:

If you call a women’s shelter [...] and suddenly, a man answers, that simply wouldn’t work. (WS-I-29)

While the interviewee above did not see men providing support as possible, another (WS-I-34) explained that separatism is the foundation for sisterhood and woman-to-woman support, that it has been from the start 40 years ago, and ‘that whole argument would crumble if you brought in men’. However, something that has changed since the start of the WSM in relation to separatism is that today many women’s shelters welcome trans women. Some of the women’s shelters that we

have interviewed do also explicitly state that they include non-binary people and people that have experiences of being gendered as a girl/woman, for example: ‘we usually clarify that we meet cis women, trans women, non-binary people, girls and children with experience of being gendered as a woman or a girl’ (WS-I-30).

Among the private shelters, we found a different approach. One said that in his company they have a janitorial department for doing maintenance on the buildings ‘and there it’s all men [...] and of course, they help out with the clients’. (PS-I-1). To PS-I-1, this was not a political statement or something that he seemed to reflect upon; rather, it was related to practical reasons. Another private shelter said that they have men on their staff, and when asked if the women who live at the shelter ever object to that, PS-I-4 responded:

That’s extremely rare. It can happen occasionally that someone has a question around this, but once you get the answer and get to meet us it usually becomes clear.

Some women are hesitant yet are expected to accept men at the shelter. Most of the private shelters we interviewed had men on their staff, and it has ‘never been a problem’ according to PS-I-8, who argued that, although 98% of abusers are men, the majority of men are ‘actually good guys’. Having men on their staff serves to show that ‘there are good guys in this world too’ (PS-I-4), and that it is ‘important to showcase good men too’ (PS-I-7). One of the women’s shelters, made a similar comment:

We’re always around when the janitor comes, but he’s the nicest man in the world, super understanding and helpful, so it becomes like a small step, that there’s like, a man who’s nice and calm and helpful who’s not perceived as threatening. (WS-I-35)

We understand such articulations as connected to a discourse of ‘not all men’ are (potential) abusers. It could also be interpreted as a question of role models, the importance of showing the world that ‘good men’ exist, or preparing the women for living in a society where men exist. This is quite different from most of the women’s shelters, which maintain a discourse in which male staff are unthinkable. Some women’s shelters connected the issue of a male presence with fear:

It’s absolutely not everyone who generalizes their fears to include all men [...] [but if] you’ve been exposed, and you’re severely traumatized [...] that undermines trusting a man. (WS-I-29)

WS-I-35 made a similar argument:

If you’ve been heavily exposed [...] you’ll feel discomfort around men [...] that’s why I believe it’s important to have separatist spaces.

These quotes illustrate an understanding that women’s experience of men’s violence will generate a general distrust of men and, consequently, separatism is a way to avoid discomfort. In a similar fashion, WS-I-28 said that they always give the women at the shelter a heads up ‘if we’re bringing in a male craftsman’ to work there. WS-I-28 also added that having a male counsellor may complicate things for women who are in the process of escaping sexual violence because the boundaries can become unclear when they ‘seek confirmation and intimacy from a male counsellor’.

What environment is the absence of men intended to create? According to WS-W-40, a separatist shelter is like ‘a sanctuary’ for women and children. Another women’s shelter also used the term sanctuary, which would not be possible ‘if we were to add men to the mix, (WS-I-34)’ and WS-I-31 called their shelter a ‘relaxing oasis where you can gather strength’.

As described previously, separatism has been a longstanding ideal within the WSM. In some contexts, separatism entails a distancing from men in general (Anderson 1994), while in others, it is practiced in specific arenas, such as women’s shelters (Dobash and Dobash 2005; Enander, Holmberg, and Lindgren 2013). The private shelters expressed no such ideal, which is not surprising given their lack of roots in (radical) feminism. Rather, they articulated an understanding of good men as role models or that gender is unimportant, where the latter resonate with the contemporary

will not to see or talk about gendered aspects of violence (Carbin 2021). Although some of the quotes from women's shelters above resonate with separatism, separatism was not expressed as a strategy for women to distance themselves from men in general, but rather to produce a temporary safe space for women who have been subjected to violence.

Are there also different approaches and understandings regarding the accommodation of men? All but one (PS-W-17) of the private shelters, and most of the women's shelters, also accommodate men. Some of the private shelters explicitly state that they accept men, like PS-I-7, who said that they accommodate 'men or women', while others stated that they accept 'a varied target group' (PS-W-12) or 'anyone' (PS-W-20) in need of shelter. 'We exclude no one, [. . .] we accept those who are threatened, regardless of gender', said PS-I-6, and PS-I-5 stated: 'sometimes we had over 50% men in need of some kind of shelter'.

The women's shelters phrased it differently. One shelter (WS-I-32) said: 'we've had two or three men here throughout the years', while WS-I-22 said that they cannot accept men because 'at the moment the shelter is a collective residence, so we want to avoid mixing men and women because it's too sensitive'. WS-I-28 described that they have 'a man in a separate apartment, but that's the first time for us'. WS-I-21 said about men: 'It's the same, they too can live in a violent relationship', and WS-I-23 explained why they are considering accommodating men: 'Unizon is really explicit about that, that we also work with men who have been exposed [to violence]'.

Although several of the women's shelters, and all but one of the private shelters accommodate men, they articulate it differently. The private shelters make no excuses for admitting men, rather it is framed as 'anyone' or 'everyone', thus articulating values of inclusion and equity. The women's shelters, however, have only recently started (considering) admitting men, and seem to make a point of how uncommon it is, using phrases like: 'the first time' and only 'two or three'.

Knowledge of violence, CBT and blame: from structural explanations to therapeutical ideals

When trying to capture the discourse on violence, it becomes evident that integral to the work of the women's shelters is a specific discourse concerning *knowledge* of violence. One women's shelter (WS-I-26) said that, when recruiting people to work at the shelter, they do not emphasize a specific profession, such as social worker, but instead seek 'someone who is knowledgeable about violence'. On a similar topic, another women's shelter respondent (WS-I-33) said that it is about 'not being questioned', and WS-I-32 added: 'exactly, and the knowledge about violence [. . .] contributes a lot to feeling safe'. Several women's shelters articulate this on their websites, such as WS-W-43 which states: 'we have trained staff with plenty of experience of working with violence in close relationships and honor-related violence and oppression'. Previous research also suggests that women living in shelters valued the 'advocates' knowledge on violence which enabled them to avoid self-blame (Hughes 2020). Similarly, knowledge about violence was a central ideal articulated by the women's shelter respondents in our study, and a guiding ideal in their support for the women. One shelter (WS-I-32) said that it is central 'to not put any blame [on the woman]' and another (WS-I-34) said: 'society blames the woman, so coming to a place where that blame is relocated to where it belongs, makes it safe'. A third (WS-W-37) states that: 'Violent men exist in all social classes and it is never your fault when you are subjected to violence'.

Different ways of responding to the problem of gender-based violence can tell us something about how the problem of violence is constituted (Bacchi 2009). Putting the blame 'where it belongs', frames the problem as residing among men. This means retaining a distance from the discourse of 'victim blaming', which places responsibility on the female victims and constructs violence as a private and hidden problem (McDonald 2005).

Among the private shelters, some mention knowledge on violence, like PS-I-3, who said: 'the majority of my employees have studied at least 15 university credits on violence in close relationships'. However, more apparent among private shelters is an emphasis on therapy. Respondent PS-I-4 said: 'Many of us are trained therapists, educated in various kinds of interview and support

techniques'. PS-I-3, 4, 6, and 7 stated that they provide therapy from educated therapists, PS-I-6 and 7 with knowledge of CBT, CBT with kids (PS-I-7), MI (PS-W-13 and 17, PS-I-7), PTSD (PS-W-11), trauma-informed care (PS-I-7, PS-W-11), and mental illness (PS-W-17). When discussing the staff at his private shelter, PS-I-1 said: 'Mostly their background is in elderly care, assistant nurses, like care work'. Other examples of professions mentioned by the private shelters include social workers (PS-I-2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 and PS-W-10 and 13), psychologists (PS-I-2 and 8), behavioural scientists (PS-I-5), and 'a licenced medical doctor, specializing in psychiatric care' (PS-W-11).

It is clear from the above that the private shelters adhere to a discourse of violence which centres around psychological aspects and therapeutic care as the favoured approach for handling it. Thinking with McDonald (2005), we see such an approach as 'pathologizing', in the sense that it characterizes something as unhealthy and as a medical issue. McDonald argues that therapeutical models stem from understanding violence as a symptom of unhealthy relationships or families, and that the therapy is used 'to enable survivors to cope with their situation' (Ibid.: 278), with the implicit aim that women will work on themselves.

Markowitz and Tice (2002, 949) have argued that a therapeutic vocabulary tends to focus on personal shortcomings, thereby shifting the focus away from the structural dimensions of violence. Such discourses can be understood as locating the problem of VAW at an individual level (Lauri 2019). In addition, one representative from a private shelter stated:

You tend to focus a lot on 'has the woman been subjected to violence?' meaning physical violence, but a lot less on the mental health of the man. If you check those women who were killed, like half of those men had a background of mental ill health. (PS-I-3)

From such a perspective, understanding men's psychiatric condition becomes an intelligible solution to the problem of men's violence against women.

Although the women's shelters also provide individual support to women seeking shelter, it is articulated differently. As one respondent (WS-I-25) said: 'we don't do therapy or treatment, we provide support to women so they can leave the violence and get on with their lives', which contrasts with findings in other contexts (e.g. Lehrner and Allen 2009). Several of the women's shelters emphasized empowerment, a women's shelter (WS-I-27) said: 'we work a lot with empowerment in the sense that we say this is your life and your story'. Another women's shelter (WS-I-31) touched upon similar issues when stating: 'the most important thing for the safety of the woman is to empower her after her experiences of violence'.

According to McDonald (2005, 278), an empowerment perspective on 'domestic violence services' aims to 'support women's self-determination; to equip them with the skills to recognize and take control of domestic violence'. This aspect of empowerment can be linked to the importance of working to 'strengthen her from the inside, not just engage her in something or another, but more about building her life' (WS-I-22). WS-I-33 argued that 'the feminist understanding of violence or like, the gender power structure, has been pivotal in the women's shelter movement'. In a similar vein, a respondent stated:

It's our understand of society that it isn't gender equal, it's organized in an unjust way where men have more power than women, and we think it's important both to support each other and to change that social order. (WS-I-31)

These quotes illustrate how a feminist perspective on violence against women (VAW) is connected to the women's shelters' broader work for social change (Dobash and Dobash 2005) and following McDonald (2005), this can be understood as a social movement perspective on domestic violence services, characterized by feminist ideals and work for social change. A respondent (WS-I-34) said: 'our contribution lies in us sharing our knowledge and standing on the barricades', and one of the websites says: 'we educate, inform, and debate about violence against women and girls' (WS-W-37).

As McDonald (2005) argues, a social movement perspective is often connected to a structural understanding of the problem of violence. As one of the participants said:

‘Men’s violence against women is a structural matter’ (WS-I-35). Such a structural perspective understands the violence as arising from patriarchal structures (McDonald 2005) and in our material it is seen both as an explanation for the violence and as what unites the women working at shelters and the women seeking protection. As a women’s shelter (WS-I-32) said: ‘we live in a patriarchy, under different conditions, where men have another role, and that unites us, our struggle with our position in society’. We see this understanding as connected to an agenda of social change and political voice (Dobash and Dobash 2005).

The private shelters expressed a different understanding of their role. Some argued that they ‘are nothing other than an extension of the social services, we have no political interests in this’ as opposed to women’s shelters ‘who are more independent and engaged in social change, which is something I think you have to respect’. (PS-I-1). PS-I-2, an employee of a large corporation, said about their shelter that: ‘this is not our main thing, it’s merely one slice of the cake’, while several others made it clear that they are corporations with shareholders and, because of that, profit is their most important motivation for running a shelter. Respondent PS-I-1 said that his previous ‘business started to do poorly so I had to find something else’. In one case, a representative of a private shelter, formerly employed at a women’s shelter, articulated that the reason was not profit, but she believed that women’s shelters had ‘a lot of limitations’ that could be dealt with better by a corporation (PS-I-3), such as round-the-clock staff.

In sum, the understanding of violence against women is filled with different meanings and the work with violence ranges from a structural to an individual understanding. The women’s shelters fill the discourse and connect words and ideals in a chain of equivalence, such as ‘knowledge of violence’, ‘feminism’, ‘patriarchy’, and ‘struggle’, whereas the private shelters use terms such as ‘mental illness’ and ‘PTSD’. These different understandings imply different solutions and different ways of working with VAW ranging from the work of the women’s shelters, which is saturated with empowering ideals, to the private shelters’ work, which has a therapeutic and individual focus.

Negotiations of safety: from a homey atmosphere to shell protection

Safety has a central place in our material, but it encompasses different meanings. One recurring aspect of creating safety for the women’s shelters is the notion of a homey environment. When describing safety, a women’s shelter respondent (WS-I-31) said:

This is not an institution, and you can tell that there are people here, there are drawings and other objects and many would say that, visually, it looks like any other room [...] It’s important for us to provide an appealing environment where it’s as easy as possible to share difficult experiences.

Safety is linked to normality and articulated in opposition to an institution. Women’s shelter respondent WS-I-35 described the importance of creating ‘a calm, safe, and welcoming atmosphere’ because the women seeking protection are ‘really sensitive to moods and emotions’. WS-I-31 argued that it is of utmost importance for the women to feel that ‘this really is my home’, in terms of being in control of who is allowed to visit, etc. The women’s shelters are commonly described as having a ‘homey atmosphere’ (WS-W-38) where you can live as though you were in an ‘ordinary home’ (WS-W-36). Thus, the women’s shelters link safety to words like ordinariness, safety, calm, home, home-like, homey. Similarly, an interview study with shelter residents and women’s advocates working with shelters identified a ‘homey’ atmosphere as central to providing a sense of safety at shelters (Hughes 2020).

While a few of the private shelters emphasize the notion of home, they do so to a much lesser extent compared to the women’s shelters. Private shelter respondent PS-I-19 said that they write on their website that they provide ‘Homey, cozy apartments’ and on a website (PS-W-10) it is stated that ‘when we decorate the apartments, our goal is to create an environment where we would like to live ourselves’. What is striking is that safety is articulated in terms of

security among the private shelters. Safety is described as having access to ‘protective measures like alarms, reinforced windows, and camera surveillance’ (PS-W-11) at the shelter. Respondent PS-W-19 describes its facilities as being equipped with ‘shell protection in the form of locks and alarms’ and that ‘every apartment is equipped with hand alarms’. Another private shelter (PS-W-17) underlines that:

Our residence lives up to a very high security standard, with an advanced alarm system, surveillance cameras, reinforced windows, and a siege room for more serious situations.

A private shelter website (PS-W-15) states that it offers the ‘highest security standard’ and PS-W-20 that ‘everyone should be able to feel safe in our accommodation’ and therefore it is ‘equipped with shell protection, a local security policy, and well-established security routines’. The interviews with the private shelters reinforce this picture. To mention a few, private shelter respondent PS-I-1 said that they have ‘direct alarms connected to guards on call’, PS-I-7 that they have ‘secure exits’, and a third (PS-I-3) that they have ‘direct alarms to the police’, an ‘alarm for the yard’, and ‘nighttime staff on call’, as well as ‘video cameras’. Respondent PS-I-6 shared that they have ‘alarms, unbreakable glass, and camera surveillance’. Thus, the private shelters articulate safety as a question of security and shell protection. A technical approach to safety in public spaces has been argued to overshadow the power aspects of violence and unsafety (Listerborn 2002; Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015).

A focus on security is further strengthened by how the private shelters articulate their competence. Respondent PS-I-4 said that all their personnel are trained in ‘personal protection and executive protection’ and above all else have experience of the security business, that security is their ‘cutting-edge competence’, and that this is often requested by those who hire them. PS-I-8 highlighted that ‘protection’ is his shelter’s primary focus, and that he is:

Educated and certified Chief of Security, so I’m...well, others claim that I’m one of three with this security competence in Sweden, to do high-risk jobs and protection.

The same pattern of highlighting security-competent staff is evident online. The tagline of private website PS-W-11 is ‘cutting-edge competence in protection and security’ and the website states that its ‘security coordinator has long experience in the police and long experience of working with defensive protective measures’. We argue that the language used by the private shelters when describing safety recalls the work of secret services, the police, safety guards, and bodyguards. Thus, the private shelters are filling the discourse of safety with the meanings of security, surveillance, and shell protection.

Even though risk assessment is articulated as central by both the women’s shelters and the private shelters and was used by almost everyone in our study, in the form of standardized protocols such as FREDÅ, PATRIARK, and SARA, the private shelters frame the use of risk assessment in a slightly more securitized language. A website (PS-W-14) states that ‘we emphasize measures around security awareness and risk management’, another (PS-W-12) explains that it has ‘a high level of security combined with active support measures and risk assessments’, and PS-W-20 highlights that it is certified in this area. Some went a bit further and stated that it is also important to create a ‘perpetrator profile’ (PS-I-3) and PS-I-4 said that they make ‘a very extensive analysis of the perpetrator’. From a discursive horizon, the words connected to safety by the private shelters – in a chain of equivalence – such as perpetrator profile, security awareness, risk assessment, etc., reshape the discourse of safety into meanings of security.

The discourses of safety at the shelters are filled with quite different meanings, from the women’s shelters’ notions of a homey atmosphere to the private shelters’ focus on security, shell protection, and surveillance. The question of shell protection and surveillance is also linked to different understandings of the women’s ability to move freely. On a private shelter website (PS-W-18) it is stated that its clients’ ‘contact with the surrounding world principally happens through the contact person’ in order to provide good and secure protection. Respondent PS-I-4 told us that their shelter also ‘provides protection outside the shelter’ and that:

We're there with our clients all the time. We don't leave them alone unless we're completely sure they can be alone [...] If they're meeting a friend at the movie, we tag along, [...] If they go for exercise or grocery shopping or to a café with a friend, anything really, we're there.

One respondent (PS-I-6) disclosed that they 'take their phone and lend them another phone' to maintain security. More than one respondent (PS-I-4, 6, and 8) highlighted the importance of balancing protection at the right level to enable each woman to 'drop her guard and live more of a normal life' (PS-I-4) or, as PS-I-8 put it: 'it's about doing the right things in order to live freely'.

The women's shelters also talk about security: 'the shelter has a surveillance camera and direct alarm to a security company and the police'. (WS-W-36) Women's shelter WS-I-34 said:

We constantly think security in everything we do. Like entering the premises from different directions, some of the staff avoid media exposure, technical security solutions in our open space where we meet those who seek support [...] so security is really, really important.

However, security is articulated by most of the women's shelters as self-evident or secondary, as a WS-I-29 explained when speaking about the formal, three-level security classification: 'It's not something we accentuate because, well, to us, it goes without saying'. Another (WS-I-28) argued that: 'all that about external security is a given to us, it's the internal security you need to work with'. In a similar manner, WS-I-35 argued:

It's really not the lock on the door that's crucial for those who leave a violent relationship, it's the support. The practical help in understanding what has happened, and what happens now, what do I need to do, how can I move on, in a new life, free from violence.

In the above, safety is not articulated in terms of security, and in fact one respondent (WS-I-29) emphasized the possible drawbacks of such an approach:

We should not make an already vulnerable woman feel unsafe by focusing on the external shell protection and that kind of safety, because then we'll confirm that anxiety.

The quote above seems to connect to the idea of a risk of increasing women's feelings of unsafety, and partly also to the desire that 'living here should amount to an increased freedom, not the opposite' (WS-I-30). Where safety at the private shelters seems to connect to security and shell protection, women's shelters tend to articulate a notion of 'internal safety' (WS-I-31), which has to do with listening to the women, being there for them, and supporting them as they seek protection. As WS-I-30 explained:

What's fundamental for feminist women's shelters is to listen to what they say, take it seriously and not question it, because it's really common for them to be met by that. Trusting what they're saying can create safety.

In sum, the question of safety is articulated in different ways by the two kinds of shelters: there is an ongoing struggle over how safety ought to be understood. To the women's shelters, safety is about a homey environment and women's inner sense of safety, whereas the private shelters fill the discourse of safety with alarms, camera surveillance, reinforced windows, perpetrator profiles, risk assessments, security guidelines, and bodyguards (see also Socialstyrelsen 2020), what we call a *securitization of the safety discourse*. Kim (2013) coined the term 'fetishization of safety' when arguing that the increased criminalization of domestic violence in the USA has perverted legitimate safety concerns and made safety the undebatable priority for anti-violence social movements and that this directs attention away from other remedies. This resonates with the private shelters' ideals in our study but not as much with women's shelters.

Concluding discussion

From our analysis of discourses on separatism, violence, and safety, important differences have emerged between how women's shelters and private shelters articulate their role, ideals, and work.

In line with previous research, our analysis illustrates that separatism is still an important ideal for many of the women's shelters, with a focus on separatism for those women who have been subjected to violence, in the sense that they can get a break from men. Some women's shelters have also started to provide shelter for men subjected to violence. The private shelters rarely articulate any reluctance to provide shelter for men or to have men working for them, rather the opposite. Providing shelter for men is framed as an act of inclusion, 'welcoming all', and having male staff is either framed as a practical necessity or argued to be an asset, to show women subjected to violence that there also exist 'good' men in the world.

The women's shelters articulate a strong belief that knowledge about men's violence is important for counteracting the normalization of violence, to remove the blame from women subjected to such violence and to empower them. Occasional private shelters mention that such knowledge is important, but in general put more emphasis on therapeutic knowledge and interventions, which could be understood as adhering to a pathologizing discourse of VAW (McDonald 2005). Thus, the discourse of violence is filled with contradictory understandings of the problem, which opens for different approaches and different solutions towards those subjected to violence and to address the violence itself.

Safety is a central aspect for both women's shelters and private shelters; however, the issues that they connect to safety differ. Women's shelters connect the understanding of safety to a sense of home, internal safety, a general sense of calm, and their knowledge about violence, while arguing that security is self-evident. Meanwhile, for the private shelters, safety is to a large extent tied to notions of security: shell protection, perpetrator profiles, and risk assessments, which can be understood in relation to Kim's (2013) reasoning about the fetishization of safety found in US anti-violence movements.

In the context of marketization, where shelters for those subjected to violence are increasingly open to competitive tendering (procurement), the developments described above are worrying for several reasons. Firstly, when local non-profit women's shelters must compete with corporations to acquire funding for their shelters from municipal social services, they may be increasingly required to show 'value for money' (Wathen et al. 2015) and become more like an ordinary service provider (Helmerson and Diss 2017).

Secondly, the private shelters, with their emphasis on security measures, are reshaping the discourse on shelters and safety and, if a security discourse comes to dominate the shelter domain, private companies can present extensive technical security solutions due to their economic strength, and many women's shelters will have problems competing with them. In addition, such a focus will block other remedies (Kim 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, the importance of separatism, as well as experience-based and feminist knowledge of violence, will be difficult to present as objective criteria when municipalities use competitive tendering for shelter placement. While there are differences between the various women's shelters' adherence to a feminist and separatist political agenda (Enander, Holmberg, and Lindgren 2013), the growth of private shelters risks framing violence against women as an issue that can best be solved by masculine-coded security measures such as shell protection, bodyguards, and perpetrator profiling.

Thirdly, we have the issue of formal permits for providing shelter. As feminist activists saw a need to provide sanctuary space, shelters developed organically and, at least partly because of that, at the time of this writing, there is no legal definition or external control of what shelters are or should be in Sweden. Simply put, no need for such regulation was identified. However, the Swedish government plans to subject shelters to authorization in the near future (Swedish Government 2022). Governmental agencies argue that such a system will ensure the quality of shelters, improve the process of competitive tendering (procurement), and regulate the now rapidly increasing market for shelters (SKR 2022). The outcome of such a system will rely heavily on what kind of measures of quality are used. If security is emphasized, at the expense of feminist ideals and knowledge about violence, this will have serious effects both for those seeking shelter and the women's shelter movement. As we have seen before, methods of increased control are prompted

alongside the neoliberalization of the welfare system, because the motivations of for-profit actors are called into question.

Fourthly, if security becomes a dominant discourse, this might shift the focus from shelters being an empowering context to the ‘warehousing’ of women exposed to violence. In their research on the privatization of the prison and probation system, Fitzgibbon and Lea (2020) argue that privatization, paired with a culture of individual responsibility, shifts the focus from rehabilitation to detention, in a profit ‘race to the bottom’. In the context of shelters for those subjected to violence, the emphasis on security measures, and the de-emphasizing of empowerment and increasing the women’s living space, may turn shelters into warehousing, where women are expected to work on themselves by means of individual therapy to become independent subjects who can take care of themselves (see also Lauri 2019; Lauri and Lauri 2023).

Lastly, if funding from municipalities’ social services continues to be directed towards shelters with profit as their primary goal, rather than to women’s shelters, this might hollow out a long tradition of the dual responsibility of women’s shelters: providing refuge and contributing to social change, meaning that marketization will have undermined the woman’s shelters’ political voice.

Note

1. Because of the scope of our study, and because they constitute only nine per cent of the national capacity (Socialstyrelsen 2020), we have chosen not to include municipal shelters.

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