

Women's Shelter, a prison in reverse: when the protection of victims imprisons them

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THEMATIC ARTICLE

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Abstract *This article aimed to know a Shelter for women in situations of intimate partner violence at imminent risk of death located in the state of Rio de Janeiro from the perception of its professionals. To this end, this qualitative research adopted semi-structured interviews with seven professionals directly involved with the care and assistance to the Shelter's user population. The findings were interpreted through Bardin's thematic content analysis. Moreover, the profile of the women and children sheltered in 2021 was drawn based on the data provided by the institution. In conceptual terms, this work focused on intersectional feminist theoretical references. Among the results, we argue that the shelter is permeated by contradictions, from its normative idealizations to institutional practices: on the one hand, the shelter represents the possibility of salvation, that is, of interrupting the escalation of violence and, therefore, preventing femicide. However, on the other hand, it appears as an upside-down prison, which "incarcerates" the victims. We highlight the importance of thinking about new ways to ensure protection for women who need this shelter.*

Key words *Violence against women, Intimate partner violence, Women's shelter*

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Introduction

Shelters are generally confidential spaces where women at imminent risk of death – along with their underage children, if necessary – can turn to in order to obtain protection for their lives and their rights. This article aims to understand a Shelter – located in the state of Rio de Janeiro – for women in situations of intimate partner violence (IPV) whose lives are under threat of near death, from the perception of its professionals. However, although the category Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) was chosen because it better represents the expression of violence reflected here, we should underscore the possibility – albeit not recurrent – of the Shelter taking in women in situations of violence committed by people other than their intimate partners, such as the case reported by one respondent, in which an older woman was taken into the institution due to violence committed by her son-in-law. However, this woman entered the institution accompanied by her daughter, who is the perpetrator's intimate partner.

In Brazil, primarily since the 1980s, public authorities have attempted to tackle domestic and intrafamily violence against women through several initiatives. However, the statistics on this type of violence are still alarming in the second decade of the 21st century. The Rio de Janeiro Public Security Institute (ISP) publishes the Women's Dossier yearly, with information on violence against women based on the records of occurrences from the Rio de Janeiro State Civil Police Department. The latest Women's Dossier¹ – published in 2022 with data for 2021 – shows that 299 women were victims of domestic violence every 24 hours. Regarding the pinnacle of this violence – femicide – 85 women lost their lives because they were women, and 264 suffered attempted murder. Fourteen of these 85 murdered women already had a protective order granted by the courts; 81.2% of the perpetrators were the victims' partners or former partners; 60% of the women were Black; 69.4% of the femicides occurred inside a home; in 21 cases, children witnessed their mothers being killed; 63.5% of the victims were mothers, and 68.5% of the children were children or adolescents. Femicide is usually preceded by other expressions of domestic/intrafamily violence, which Saffioti and Almeida² call an escalation of violence, i.e., progressively more intense violent acts. Faced with the immediate possibility of death, shelters are fundamental in interrupting this escalation and

vital to guaranteeing legal, social, and psychological assistance to the victims.

Despite this topic's centrality and relevance, studies on the subject are incipient. In a bibliographic search covering the 2012-2021 period performed in March 2023 on the SciELO, Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), and the Virtual Health Library (BVS) platforms, using the Portuguese keywords “*violência contra as mulheres*” and “*casas-abrigo*”, with the Boolean operator “AND” and Portuguese as the language, only sixteen studies were found – some of them only tangentially addressing the issue of confidential sheltering. No results were found on shelters in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The scarcity of scientific production on the subject is not merely a Brazilian issue; it is also an international one³. The gap is even more significant regarding research on institutional practices.

The first officially registered shelter dates back to 1971 in Great Britain. In Brazil, the first shelter was opened in the state of São Paulo in 1986 and the following year in Rio de Janeiro. On Brazilian soil, feminist ideals were behind the construction of these institutions, unlike Portugal, for example, where the formation of shelters stemmed from initiatives by the Catholic Church, which adopted humanist approaches⁴.

Some regulatory frameworks must be considered and observed to set up and maintain shelters. It is important to note that this type of shelter is listed as a highly complex special social protection service in the Typification of Social Assistance Services of the Social Assistance Policy⁵, whose primary responsibility for provision lies with the state. This government document stipulates that the location of shelters must be kept confidential, but before that, the 2005 Terms of Reference for the Establishment of Shelters⁶ already stipulated that confidentiality was essential. In 2011, the National Guidelines for the Sheltering of Women at Risk of Violence⁷ debated confidentiality as a prerequisite, although one of its general guidelines is confidentiality, which indicates a contradiction. Thus, we see that the requirement for secrecy is found in all the regulatory frameworks on which the country's shelters must be guided, which inevitably affects the institutional practices delivered to the user population.

This article presents a perspective of some of the findings of a dissertation developed as part of the Graduate Program in Collective Health at the National School of Public Health. It outlines the profile of the women and their children cared

for at the Shelter in question in 2021. Next, we analyzed the perceptions of the professionals interviewed about the Shelter's functioning and the situation of the women sheltered. This process identifies institutional strengths, contradictions, and challenges in the light of an intersectional feminist theoretical framework in dialogue with national and international production on the subject.

Methodological considerations

Given the confidential nature of shelters and the difficulty of contacting them directly, a Specialized Women's Care Centre (CEAM) mediated the approach to the field of research. In other words, a CEAM professional forwarded the request and the research proposal to the state shelter director, who accepted and signed the consent form with a few caveats. The initial proposal was to conduct interviews with the women in the shelter. However, the proposal was readjusted, as instructed by the shelter director, in order to keep their identities confidential. With this in mind, the respondents' names are fictitious. The interviews were held with seven professionals from the institution.

The Shelter surveyed is located in the state of Rio de Janeiro, the address of which cannot be disclosed. It was inaugurated in 2007 and has been managed by an NGO contracted by the state government since then. In an interview, the institution's director said the shelter in question is the only one under the responsibility of the Rio de Janeiro state government and receives women from all regions of the state.

The research was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach^{8,9}. The information collected in the interviews was studied using the thematic content analysis technique¹⁰. We opted for semi-structured interviews with seven of the Shelter's professionals, only one of whom was male: the director, the social worker, the psychologist, the pedagogue, and three social educators. The latter are mid-level professionals. The interviews were held over two days at the very institution. Regarding the quantitative data, i.e., the information database on the profile of the people cared for at the Shelter in 2021 provided by the institution's management, we calculated the frequency distributions of the observable variables, such as race/ethnicity, age group, and schooling. The research was assessed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Sergio Arouca National School

of Public Health (CEP/ENSP) under CAAE N° 58090922.3.0000.5240.

Results and discussion

Profile of sheltered women and children

The data provided by the institution for 2021 shows that 106 women used the shelter service. Of these, 75 were Black – equivalent to more than 70% of the total, with 25 identified as Black and 50 as brown. Concerning the age group of the sheltered women, most were young women. The three largest groups – 18-24, 25-35, and 36-45 – accounted for over 90% of the total. As for the residents' schooling, 36 had only incomplete primary education, and 16 had completed it; 20 had entered high school without finishing it, 25 had completed it, and only two had completed higher education.

Moreover, three had no schooling and could not read or write. In the data provided, there needs to be more information on the economic and financial conditions, i.e., the income and employability of the sheltered women. However, we can infer, as observed in the field research, in the content of the other data available, such as race/schooling, which have an interface with income, and even in informal conversations with staff at the Shelter, that the institution generally receives highly vulnerable social segments. For example, in a conversation with the director, we identified that many women in the shelter are users of the Social Assistance Policy's cash transfer programs, and there are several socioeconomic conditionalities for accessing these funds, which means that only the impoverished and extremely impoverished are eligible.

Concerning the children and adolescents, 96 were at some point at the Shelter, and 62.5% were brown/Black. More than half of them had an age-grade distortion, i.e., they were out of the recommended school age. The most frequent age group was 0-6, followed by 7-12 and 13-16 years.

The profile of the people sheltered points to the existence of a specific group of women, children, and adolescents who – faced with the imminent risk of death – are led to seek the service. Although the Shelter is available to anyone who needs it – just like any other service under the Social Assistance Policy – in practice, the target population is very well defined.

In the scientific productions on Shelters^{4,11,12} and the interviews, we found that fragile social

policies greatly concern women in shelters and professionals in the institutions who collectively plan safe exits from the Shelters. The absence, scarcity, or fragility of policies for access to housing, employment, education, and even food – in other words, the lack of access to rights experienced by these social segments even before they enter the shelter – are obstacles to structuring a safe life outside the Shelter and violent relationships.

The Shelter

The institution surveyed is run by an NGO by delegation from the state government, so its employees are not civil servants, but are recruited under the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT) scheme. Four of the seven professionals interviewed had Higher Education qualifications, i.e., a full degree, and three had Secondary Education qualifications. The latter are social educators and professionals who work on call at the shelter and, therefore, are continuously in touch with the sheltered women on a 24/7 basis – they receive them, whatever time they arrive. Higher education professionals make up the technical team – a pedagogue, social worker, and psychologist – and the director. We should underscore that there is only one social worker, one psychologist, and one pedagogue at the shelter, all of whom were interviewed. Besides the staff interviewed are kitchen staff, cleaners, drivers, security guards, and porters, including women and men.

Away from the city center, the Shelter is located on a residential street, but its walls are different from the others, as they are imposing and wide, like those of a factory. During the two days of the interviews, we observed that the institution was undergoing construction work, with siding and building materials being placed in almost every space, and that there were several structural cracks, stains on the floor, and mold in the rooms, which points to a lack of maintenance over the years.

The institution's daily routine

Before discussing the Shelter's daily routine, we should bear in mind that the professionals' narratives – which often interpret and elucidate the perceptions of the sheltered women – have a minimal starting point, i.e., the respondents elaborate and discuss as professionals of the institution, which may be, to a lesser or greater extent, different from the conceptions of the people in the shelter.

Regarding placement in the Shelter, women who need this type of refuge must first be received by the Judicial Center for the Reception of Women Victims of Domestic Violence (CEJUVIDA) or by the Specialized Women's Care Centers (CEAMs). Although several institutions are part of the network of care for women in situations of violence, such as health units, Guardianship Councils, and Police Stations, only CEJUVIDA and CEAMs can refer users to the Shelter, and they are the only bodies that know its exact location. Thus, other institutions should refer women, especially to the CEAMs. Women are referred to the Shelter when all possibilities have been exhausted. As a result, not all women at imminent risk of death are necessarily referred to the Shelter, but only those who have no other protection. During the journey to the Shelter, which professionals always mediate, women are asked to turn off their cell phones and remove their SIM cards, in order to avoid being located by the perpetrators. When they arrive at the Shelter, cell phones, chips, valuables, and money are collected by the social workers and stored by the institution's coordinators. The interviews indicated that the institution must keep them safe, as there are no safes in the collective rooms. Cell phones must be seized because their use is strictly forbidden while in the shelter program.

The Shelter's routines and spaces are mainly collective. The rooms house two families who share a bathroom. Meal times are standardized, so if the residents want to eat, they have to plan to respect those times. The cafeteria, patio, TV room, laundry room, and beauty salon are all communal spaces with continuous interaction.

The maximum recommended length of stay for women in the Shelter is six months. Communication with the support network outside the institution, such as family, friends, and protection agencies, is encouraged to arrange a safe exit. However, all communication is performed by institutional telephone and computer – equipped with programs that prevent tracking – with the necessary presence and mediation of the technical team.

Exits are only allowed if accompanied by professionals, who even mediate the health appointments by entering the offices. After the appointments, these mediators record the medical instructions in a minute book containing information such as the time and dosage of the medication so that the other professionals are aware of the health needs of the shelter's women, children, and adolescents.

In the first years of the Shelter's operation, the women were allowed to work while they were sheltered. However, according to an interview, many began to get involved with people – including their perpetrators – to whom they revealed the Shelter's address. Therefore, due to the need to ensure the protection of both the sheltered women and the staff, women were forbidden to work while they were in the shelter program. This prohibition appeared in the interviews in a problematic way, as the professionals recognize that financial independence is one of the fundamental traits that allow women to break away from violent relationships.

In the perceptions of the people interviewed for this study, the women assisted at the Shelter in Rio de Janeiro often show dissatisfaction with the institutional routine, as they feel trapped and tutored. Moreover, the feeling of imprisonment is compounded by an interpretation of injustice because if they have been victims of domestic violence, why are they “imprisoned” and the perpetrators generally free? The respondents' reports purport common mentions of the words and attitudes of women in shelters that point to questioning and even rebellion at the Shelter's face, which appears to them as a prison, as the following excerpts from the statements of two professionals exemplify.

Confinement is not easy; it generates anxiety and revolt because they cannot understand that it is protective confinement and not prison. “Oh, why do I have to be stuck here, and he is free?” (Tereza).

Confinement is very interpretative, isn't it? As professionals, we can understand that it is a moment of fragility that she is going through. However, now and then, they see it as another punishment. Then, we need to do much sensitization work for them to understand that it is not a prison. The fact that you cannot leave, and you are confined is a matter of protecting your physical integrity, which is the purpose of this institution, a Shelter for women victims of domestic violence at imminent risk of death (Nayane).

The institution's extreme surveillance and administration of the women in its shelters makes them feel imprisoned because they do not have the autonomy and freedom they used to enjoy when it comes to fundamental life issues, such as choosing when to wake up, eat, and sleep and planning their day, considering the possibility of moving around the streets.

The intensely communal routine managed by the institution can lead residents to feel that they are being tutored in a way that is alien to

adult life since activities that were once highly autonomous in the institution take on the nature of heteronomy and surveillance by third parties. We see what Goffman¹³ calls mutilations/mortifications of the self and contaminating exposure, which are depersonification – through intense standardization – and lack of privacy – due to the significant collective interaction. These characteristics are common and typical of what he called total institutions¹³, which are spaces for life's comprehensive experience, where the affected population performs all their life's activities in the same place, such as waking up, eating, working, having fun, and sleeping. One of the most essential features of these institutions is seclusion. It could, therefore, be argued that shelters are a total institution, as they encompass and manage the whole of the residents' lives.

In 2013, the report of the Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPMI)¹⁴, which investigated the operating conditions of the support network for victims, showed that the Shelters, despite being the central shelter policy for women in situations of violence, are still little sought after, and one of the reasons for this low adherence is institutional rules and models, which restrict the freedom and autonomy of the user population.

In the same vein, a study investigating the relationship between the effects of sheltering and requests to leave a shelter in São Paulo¹¹ indicates that deprivation of liberty is one of the main reasons why sheltered women choose to leave the institution. Findings from a study on shelters in Pernambuco⁴ indicate that the state implements a protection policy that violates freedom while attempting to guarantee a fundamental right for women (life). In other words, it ensures one right by violating another, so that shelters supposedly seem to be unavoidable. International research¹⁵, based on interviews with seven women temporarily residing in a shelter in Cambodia, indicates that the respondents also experienced tension between safety from domestic violence and their freedom and, thus, had to choose between these two alternatives, which is seen as punitive safety.

On the other hand, studies of shelters in Chile¹⁶ and the United States¹⁷ show that women living in secret shelters preserve their outside work activities and even look for work while living in the institutions. The possibility of enjoying leisure activities outside the shelters has also been noted in these places.

Besides considering the Shelter as a total institution – which in itself could explain the feel-

ing of seclusion and imprisonment perceived by the residents – it is argued that the secret shelter is aimed at women and, thus, a look into the gender relationships that underlie the conception and execution of this program becomes necessary, including, therefore, the relationship between gender and the state: it is necessary to consider how gender permeates the state apparatus and is found in the idealization and implementation of public policies¹⁸.

We understand that patriarchy is structural and structuring in Brazilian social formation. As such, its production/reproduction does not depend on the presence of men, as this system of subordination of women and the feminine works like a cog in the wheel, delegated by the so-called patriarch¹⁹, and can be activated by any figure, be they people – including women – or institutions. Institutional (and, thus, structural) male chauvinism often tends to be more discreet or veiled, which makes it more challenging to identify and confront since it is cloaked in official discourses and objectives – in the case of shelters, the need to ensure women's safety and protection. This is the concept of state chivalry¹⁸, which is the face of masculinity that is more docile, kind, and protective – as opposed to the aggressive and domineering image – but which is still sexist and patriarchal because protection demands devotion, obedience, and gratitude from its subordinates – who are almost always women and children. This concept seems pertinent when reflecting on the shelters because the residents feel immersed in the contradiction that they are being “helped and protected” but must give up their autonomy in return.

If outside the shelter, women do not enjoy freedom because their abusers are free and can easily harm their lives – in other words, they are subjected to the more “traditional”, aggressive, and exterminating face of gender violence – inside the institution, they do not enjoy autonomy to decide on the details of their lives, because they are subjugated to the more protective, but no less dominating face of patriarchy. In both cases, their freedom is taken away.

Just as it is necessary to consider that gender and the State feed off each other and how this relationship is expressed through the public policies made available to the population, it is equally important to consider the issue of race/ethnicity/class imbricated in these relationships. In practice, the Shelter studied meets the needs of segments of women, children, and adolescents who face countless vulnerabilities and social inequal-

ities rooted structurally in the social construct: Black, poor, with minimal schooling, and severely affected by domestic violence.

Western colonial logic imposed a hierarchy between the human and the non-human – in which the white, civilized, and European population reflected humanity par excellence. At the same time, the rest were relegated to the status of non-human²⁰. Thus, the place reserved for those who were not considered human was non-place, silencing, an idea that is still present today since racism, classism, and sexism are not exclusive to Colonization, but on the contrary, are often updated, acquiring new guises and expressions.

Considering that racism is a historical process that identifies certain groups and creates the necessary conditions to systematically discriminate against them²¹, analyzing a confidential shelter service for women who are at imminent risk of death as a result of domestic violence in Brazil requires adopting an intersectional perspective in order to understand the complex social interactions that culminate in violent and subalternizing gender, race and class relationships, both in interpersonal and institutional relationships.

Summary of the Shelter's main contradictions

Faced with the failure to guarantee the safety of women who suffer domestic violence, the State has been called upon to provide a place that addresses this protection gap. However, the institutional address should be kept strictly confidential to preserve protection and safety. This is where one of the central contradictions arises: if, on the one hand, the right to life is guaranteed, on the other, the rights to freedom, to come and go, and autonomy are violated. The State's lacks political will to provide services that protect and foster autonomy simultaneously – which would require investment and public funding. In the study, there was a shortage of human and material resources, such as the lack of safes in the collective rooms, which creates insecurity about leaving valuable objects with their owners, so they have to ask the management for permission to access them. Regarding the technical team – which, during the interviews, showed concerns about possible alternatives in the work process – we can infer that it is insufficient to meet the demands since there is only one psychologist, one social worker, and one pedagogue to attend to all the sheltered women and their children. The concrete need for secrecy is compounded by the

lack of public investment in the shelter program, which escalates the rules' inflexibility, further restricting the residents' autonomy.

Concerning the women in shelters, their perceptions of sheltering, and all the consequences it imposes on them, what can be highlighted are the singularities of the residents, which is evident in the interviews. In other words, the meanings of sheltering take on very different contours depending on each woman's life experiences and their stages. They often alternate in the same woman's conception. Thus, secret sheltering sometimes appears as protection, refuge, and "salvation" and sometimes as imprisonment, restriction, and injustice.

Despite the difficulties mentioned, the Shelter indeed meets the concrete survival needs of segments of women who suffer from domestic violence. From its inauguration in 2007 until May 2022, 1,153 women have safeguarded their lives by turning to the Shelter, along with 1,609 children. Undoubtedly, the institution plays an exceptional and irreplaceable role in stopping the escalation of violence.

However, the social need for spaces like this should not be naturalized. There is a need to question why countless women have to break with their daily lives; "choosing" to submit to a collective environment of extreme surveillance and control over their lives, which imposes on them the suspension of freedoms and autonomy.

Final considerations

Based on the data collected in interviews with seven professionals from a shelter in the state of Rio de Janeiro and a survey of the profile of the women and children served using information from the institution's database, we found that although the Shelter is available to any woman in need, in practice, the population served is main-

ly made up of Black women, children, and adolescents, from the most impoverished segments and with deficient schooling levels, pointing to sexism and structural racism in our society. This observation leads to another: besides having their right to life violated by the imminence of intimate partner violence, women in shelters lose their right to freedom when they arrive at the Shelter. However, long before they enter the institution, these parts of the population already have their most basic social rights violated, such as health, education, housing, income, and security – specified in Article 6 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution²².

We underscored the essentially contradictory – perhaps paradoxical – nature of the Shelter: it is sometimes a place that protects, receives, and "saves"; some other times, it is a place that materializes "imprisonment", "punishment", and injustice towards sheltered women. Inflexible rules are a determinant that needs to be rethought because women feel penalized by the internal regulations as if they were imprisoned, which is often an unsustainable burden.

The public authorities and political agents – not just formal and partisan ones, but also social movements – should build alternatives to the current dominant model of extreme surveillance and control over the lives of those sheltered. Again, We should stress that we share the idea of the need for Shelters, as they are undeniable protection instruments. However, it is argued that the mere fact of having to resort to a secret shelter is already something of a burden for women, considering all the reorganization and fear imposed on their lives. It is therefore urgent to think of ways to guarantee them more autonomy when they are sheltered – it is known that many have had their entire life experience based on the leadership of others – as subjects of their history. Otherwise, there is a risk that the shelters will re-victimize them.

Collaborations

CD Queiroz contributed to the conception, data analysis and interpretation, and manuscript drafting. LW Pinto and VLM Silva contributed to the conception, data analysis and interpretation, and the article's review. All the authors approved the final version to be published.

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