University of Basel

ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Audio Transcript English

Women's Shelters

SERENA O. DANKWA: Susan Peter, for a long time, you worked at the women's shelter in Zurich, from the 1980s until 1992. After that, you were part of the leadership team of the Zurich Women's Shelter Foundation and served on the board of the DAO, the umbrella organisation of women's shelters in Switzerland and Liechtenstein. During this time, you worked extensively on security issues in the context of safe houses and women's shelters. What does "security" mean in the context of a women's shelter?

SUSAN PETER: Well, women's shelters are generally anonymous, meaning the location is not publicly known. There is a high level of security, in the sense that no one can just walk in. The security measures vary depending on the building or the location, but in Zurich, for example, there was a pretty high fence that prevented people from just walking into the garden. Entry was also controlled with a code; it's a level that means only those who are allowed can enter.

Another aspect is, of course, when a woman arrives, the immediate question: what does she need? Where does she feel safe, and where does she feel unsafe in the surrounding area of the shelter? Typically, this means that the women do not leave the premises right away but stay there to get emotionally settled. It also gives them a chance to breathe and recover a bit from the often very violent situation they've come from, to be able to sleep better, and then, of course, on a case management level, to express their needs. And by needs, I mean the woman's perspective; she is the expert on what her partner – usually a man, in rare cases a woman – knows and how that person is likely to behave. Then there are many different security aspects, ranging from the analogue, human, and physical level, right up to the digital aspect, like turning off phones, etc.

SERENA O. DANKWA: How has this security system changed? The first women's shelters here were established in the late 1970s. How would you compare the situation then and now?

SUSAN PETER: In the past, the security system was quite weak, since it was possible to just walk onto the women's shelter premises. There was a fence, but it was only about one meter high, compared to the two or three meters we have today. It was much more permeable. Also, the security of the house itself was much less robust. Back then, we would just close the shutters to secure the windows from being seen into or broken into. Today, we have triple-glazed windows.

What has remained the same, and I think this is really striking and important, is the emphasis on support when women first arrive. This includes drawing their attention to things like: how can they begin to take better care of themselves, both on a psychosocial level and by taking their own perceptions seriously? That aspect of the work has become much more professional. Back then, when we spoke with the women, we'd say things like: "If you see him, run", but today, counselling is much more advanced, with trauma-specific aspects discussed in far more detail. Women also try to articulate how they feel – for example, they talk about the sense of paralysis that can set in during violent situations, and in that sense, a process of empowerment takes place – something that was only just beginning back then but has now, I believe, become highly professional, supported by a much broader knowledge base. This growing trust – that women are getting to know themselves better and are recognising more options for action beyond that initial paralysis – has become a central part of counselling and support, alongside many other forms of assistance.

SERENA O. DANKWA: If you look at the headlines in Switzerland or even on a federal level, one could get the impression that domestic violence or violence against women is primarily a migrant problem, meaning a crime committed by migrant men. And if you look at the women's shelters, you mostly see women with a migration background. How do you explain that?

SUSAN PETER: The persistence of this idea has everything to do with how helpless situations are often delegated, as in: "It's not us, it's the others." And this is a narrative we also know from certain political parties. It's essentially the same mechanism – this defensive response – because it feels so helpless to admit that this is happening right in our midst, in our everyday lives, right in front of us. And this situation, this defensive mechanism, can easily be explained in the context of domestic violence, as the numbers in women's shelters specifically underline the connection to the women's backgrounds.

But this, in turn, has to do with something entirely different – namely, that the services we offer are not equally accessible to all women. Some women say: "I can't afford to leave the house, to go out in public, because my husband is a professor, or a doctor, or a CEO, or some other prominent person. I can't afford to resolve this publicly, so I'll solve it through a lawyer, or escape to a hotel or holiday home and do everything as quietly and privately as possible."

And then there are women who cannot even afford to resolve things privately, because their support network isn't stable enough, or because there is domestic violence or an attitude in their network that is still very strongly patriarchal, such as: "Well, you have to put up with it, you chose him yourself", or "It'll get better", or "You brought this on yourself". In these situations, stigmatising prejudices kick in very quickly.

Or there are women who don’t speak the language and are genuinely reliant on support to understand, even on an intercultural level, what rights they have here. And that opens up a space where they are offered more choices.

What these groups of women who experience domestic violence have in common is this inner emotional process of breaking out of the cycle. Today, the path out is much more diversified in terms of available services. Not every woman needs to go to a women’s shelter. Some women go to an outpatient counselling service and receive enough support there. So, besides the differences in who can afford to access services and for which reasons, it also comes down to the question of what kind of support a woman needs.

And I have to say, the picture is becoming more nuanced. I remember clearly when Corinne Rey-Bellet, the former ski racer, was shot by her partner with a service weapon; he was an officer, among other things, a so-called "upstanding citizen". This caused a huge uproar in Switzerland. We couldn’t afford a publicity campaign, but that incident was, in quotation marks, actually a... of course, given the tragedy and all that it entailed, it was terrible, but ultimately it had a positive impact because the issue was finally discussed properly: "Ah, yes, it’s not just migrant women or foreign women or poor women."

SERENA O. DANKWA: You emphasise or use the term "Frauenhaus" (women's shelter) rather than "Schutzhaus" (safe house or shelter for protection) – why?

SUSAN PETER: The "Frauenhaus" is a concept that emerged in the late 1970s, and it came from feminist, socio-political critical discourses. As I mentioned, back then, a woman was still not allowed to leave her husband and, in doing so, would have been seen as guilty. This was right after women received the right to vote in Switzerland, so that’s not really surprising. The development has continued to this day, where we realise that even these legal adjustments, let's say, are still not as advanced as they should be – medicine, etc., all of these topics.

SERENA O. DANKWA: And in the late 1970s, if I understood you correctly, violence within marriage wasn’t even considered a criminal offence, for example.

SUSAN PETER: Well, it wasn't recognised or addressed legally at the time. Exactly. There was the term "zerrüttete Ehe" (broken marriage), which could then be interpreted to some extent. That’s how the first female lawyers argued their cases before the marriage protection judge. There weren’t any female judges back then. So, as legal developments progressed, it became possible to adapt concepts like the so-called "Frauenhaus" (women's shelter) accordingly.

But this approach, which still holds today, the "help for self-help" idea, a term that might sound a bit dated but is still in use, or the very specific and determined stance: actively supporting the woman, or standing with the children – because their interests and needs can differ – remains important. Showing this partiality, representing the interests of the women who, in that moment, are victims, and taking that stance into society – to the authorities, institutions, and the education system – that was a politically significant decision. And in my view, women's shelters should still be called "Frauenhäuser", even though the developments have been positive, because we are still far from where we need to be as a society – namely, with much, much less violence, and far fewer femicides.

And the fact that there are now services called "Schutzhäuser" (safe houses), I think, is a valuable and welcome addition. I mean, again, one term should not replace the other, they should exist side by side. Because shelters for other people, let's say, people of other genders, make sense as well.

SERENA O. DANKWA: These days, there are further measures in place, beyond the physical shelters and building-related security – for example, electronic ankle bracelets. What kind of measure is that, and what are the arguments for or against it? First of all, what exactly is an ankle bracelet? How should we picture it, and how is it meant to protect the person?

SUSAN PETER: The electronic ankle bracelet is a GPS-mandated or GPS-controlled device that is attached to the ankle and cannot be removed by the perpetrator on their own. The perpetrator is required to stay within a defined area. This ankle bracelet is also used for house arrest in other criminal cases. It's relatively new, or newer, that it's being used in the context of domestic violence. For example, a driver who has committed a crime related to traffic could be placed under house arrest with an ankle bracelet instead of being incarcerated, which can be a relief and, in my opinion, is quite sensible in this context.

With domestic violence, I personally find the issue to be that, in order for it to provide effective support – meaning to truly ease the burden on the system of protection – or, to put it differently, for the woman to actually feel safer, she needs a counterpart. Essentially, an analogous bracelet, because only then can these two elements – one on the perpetrator, one on the victim – be fixed and communicate with each other via satellites, much like the GPS in our cars. The signals are then transmitted via satellites. Through monitoring, it can be checked. It starts to beep when the two elements come too close to each other.

The man is supposed to respect the perimeter restriction and should not come any closer. But it also means that if the woman moves somewhere and unintentionally gets too close, without realising it, the device will beep. And that's already a factor that's tricky. Another tricky aspect is the psycho-emotional level. The woman is, in essence, permanently connected to the perpetrator through electronics, which is not necessarily conducive to detaching herself from a violent relationship.

Safety is not actually increased by this GPS ankle bracelet system, because at the moment that the alarm is triggered, in Switzerland, specifically in the canton of Zurich, the alarm first goes to a company that is also responsible for "Securitas" and other surveillance tasks. Then, on the monitor at this company, the alarm goes off. The employee tries to reach the person and says, "Hello, hello, you need to leave the area." Once the man is outside, the employee can be at ease. However, if the employee cannot reach the perpetrator or the person, or if the person is in a tunnel, or if they are outside of Switzerland – this is an issue in Basel, for example, because of the three-country border – then the whole satellite system gets mixed up. That means it's not really fast enough to trigger police action. If the monitoring company's alarm system cannot reach the person, they call the police, and the police will then respond. This means that at least 10 minutes will have passed by the time the police intervene. And this does not actually increase the chances of preventing something like a femicide.

In my opinion, it would make more sense if this were directly connected to the police, so that the police can intervene immediately when the man violates the perimeter restriction or crosses a boundary, and then take immediate action, without going through this intermediary step. It's a matter of resources, of course; we know that the police say they don't have enough resources, so it's relatively tricky to solve this in a satisfactory way. But women aren't more protected through this ankle bracelet system, and that's what the police always communicate. Safety doesn't actually increase, because the police of course want to distance themselves when something happens.

In other words, I don't think this approach is in the right place. I genuinely believe that much more funding should go towards ensuring the police – in cases of domestic violence, for example – receive proper supervision, because they're under a great deal of pressure, too. Take the situation where they've been called to the same family for the fifth time, and the woman is still so frightened that she doesn't want to file a report, for instance. There also needs to be far more work done on prevention. In my opinion, the investment is currently going into the wrong areas.

But as I said, there are different groups involved. I don't think we can prevent it. What's needed in Switzerland are thorough evaluations to see how this approach is actually being received.

SERENA O. DANKWA: Thank you very much.