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Vänligen

Veronica Ekström

“What is needed to achieve quality in a shelter is staff” – shelter managers’ constructions of quality in shelters for female victims of interpersonal violence

From being almost entirely dominated by the Women's Shelter movement, half of all shelters for abused women in Sweden are today run by private companies. The social services’ procurement of these shelters has resulted in increased demands for quality and monitoring. This article examines perceptions of quality regarding shelters among representatives of 15 different shelters. The analysis shows that these perceptions include safety and protection, support and other interventions in addition to protection, living environment, and appropriate staff. Appropriate staff is discussed in terms of both trained and available staff. The results indicate differences in how shelters perceive employees vs. volunteers in relation to quality. The analysis also shows that for shelters to be able to provide important counselling and empowering practices, time is crucial. Stricter social services limit shelters’ possibilities to offer quality services to women and children in shelters.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, shelter, quality, social services.

# Introduction

Shelter is an important service for many victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). In Sweden, approximately 6,500 adults and 6,200 children per year spent at least one night in a shelter in 2019 (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020). In most cases, a woman needs a formal decision from the social services to stay at a shelter, and therefore, most women subjected to IPV and in need of shelter become clients of the municipal social services. In parallel with an increased focus on IPV and increased responsibility for social services (Ekström 2016), the Swedish welfare system has in recent decades undergone major changes, with increased privatisation and marketisation (Blomqvist 2004; Dahlstedt & Fejes 2018; Hartman 2011; Härnbro, Herz & Dahlstedt 2021; Svallfors & Tyllström 2019). These changes now also seem to apply to shelters for victims of IPV. After decades of being an area dominated by the non-profit women's shelters movement, it has in a relatively short time developed into a so-called quasi-market (Le Grand 1991), where almost as many for-profit companies as non-profit actors, together with a few municipally shelters, today compete over social services funding (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2020; Lauri, Lauri, & Linander 2023).

A central aspect of the more general privatisation and marketisation of Swedish welfare concerns the introduction of public procurement where quality, and in particular the relationship between the quality of the welfare produced and the price of it, plays a decisive role. As expressed in the law on public procurement: a central part of the evaluation of tenders is about finding *"/…/ the best ratio between price and quality"* (SFS 2016:1145). While the meaning of price in these contexts seems to be relatively unproblematic, one can ask what quality is. The question is difficult to answer because what constitutes quality is both relative and contextual (Elassy 2015; Harvey & Green 1993). Concerning shelters, this is central because dominant perceptions of what quality is, affect everything from for example how social services choose between different procurement options and evaluate individual services, to how entire fields of services can develop over time (Hjärpe 2017). The purpose of this article is to contribute to knowledge on how quality in shelters is constructed by one of the central actors, namely the shelter manager. The following research question will be addressed:

* How do shelter managers construct quality in shelters for victims of intimate partner violence?

# Previous research on quality in shelters

Research on IPV has become an extensive and multidisciplinary field that accommodates many perspectives. While it seems unusual to explicitly study quality in this field, there are, however, several studies that include both aspects and phenomena that can be understood as a type of proxy for what quality can be in shelters. Quality in shelters can, for example, be about meeting the basic needs for support and protection that women exposed to violence have, and an important aspect of these basic needs is about offering an opportunity to feel safe (Robinson et al. 2019; Sullivan et al. 2008; Sullivan & Virden 2017a, 2017b). Other studies highlight physical design as an important aspect (Asmoredjo et al. 2017; Banga & Gill 2008; Wendt & Baker 2013). For example, Asmoredjo et al. (2017) highlight abused women's need for privacy. According to Banga and Gill (2008), an unsuitable living environment in a shelter can lead to the abused woman choosing to return to her violent partner.

The importance of the relationship between the client and the social worker, and emotional support has been highlighted in previous research (Asmoredjo et al. 2017; Bergstrom-Lynch 2018; Glenn & Goodman 2015; Melbin et al. 2003; Robinson et al. 2019; Sullivan & Virden 2017a, 2017b; Wendt & Baker 2013). For example, Sullivan and Virden (2017a) showed that a vast majority of clients need emotional support, help to deal with stress, and relevant support and advice on how to change and improve their lives. Good quality can be described in terms of women who live in shelters placing great importance on being believed, and non-judgemental staff (Bergstrom-Lynch 2018; Melbin et al. 2003). Banga and Gill (2008) conclude that it is important to pay attention to aspects such as language and ethnic discrimination in shelters.

Since women often come to a shelter with their children, it is important that there are spaces that are adapted for children, that both appropriate interventions (e.g. counselling), activities, and parental support are offered, and that women can be relieved of childcare to participate in important meetings, activities, or recovery (Chanmugam 2011; Øverlien 2011; Sullivan & Virden 2017a, 2017b; Wendt & Baker 2013). Relations with other children are particularly highlighted in studies where the children's experiences have been studied (Chanmugam 2011; Øverlien 2011).

Conditions that support women with getting on in life are other aspects that can be understood as a form of quality in shelters. These prerequisites can be about two overarching aspects, one of which can be called empowering practices (McGirr & Sullivan 2017; Sullivan et al. 2008; Sullivan & Virden 2017a; Vaughn & Stamp 2003) and the other access to material and societal resources. Empowering practices in social interventions aim to promote individuals' interpersonal and social power by expanding their knowledge, abilities, perceptions, and access to resources in society (McGirr & Sullivan 2017). Vaughn and Stamp (2003) discuss the dilemma between, on the one hand, empowerment and, on the other hand, rules, and control. They partly point to the power structure between the staff and the clients and partly to various forms of compulsory household chores or rules that the residents of shelters are expected to perform and follow. The critical discussion around mandatory chores, activities, and rules recurs in several studies. For example, Glenn and Goodman (2015) show how rules and consequences in shelters can resemble the relationship between perpetrators and victims of violence. While stereotypes linked to the white, heterosexual middle class seem to be able to negatively affect women during their stay in shelters (Gengler 2011; VanNatta 2010), bans on pets can be a barrier to abused women entering shelters at all (Strand & Faver 2008). Furthermore, both Burnett et al. (2016) and Bergstrom-Lynch (2018) show how time restrictions regarding placements in shelters can make it difficult for women. Rules such as, for example, being allowed to stay for a maximum of six or eight weeks in a shelter often become unsustainable for women with complex needs because they do not have time to arrange new accommodation and other practical things before they have to move.

Access to material and societal resources concerns not least access to long-term and economically reasonable housing solutions (Hetling et al. 2018). Burnett et al. (2016) discuss how the rules of authorities and organisations whereby women must prove that they have been exposed to violence to receive certain benefits (financial support or housing) cause major problems for both the women exposed to violence and for staff at the shelter. It is thus not only about *what* women exposed to violence are offered (protection, childcare, legal advice, etc.) but also *how* they are offered this (McGirr & Sullivan 2017)

The only previous Swedish research on quality in shelters comprises two sub-studies of the same research project as the one in focus for this article. The first by Ekström and Hvenmark (2023) focuses on constructions of quality in shelters among local politicians and managers in social services. The results showed that shelter staff following the social services' assignments was considered as a sign of quality, along with competent staff. The latter emphasised that those working (voluntarily or paid) in shelters should have knowledge about IPV. Additionally, although not as frequently, interior design and the suitability of the premises were also emphasised, along with the importance of offering various support services or complementary activities. The interviewees also discussed what can be understood as outcome quality, especially through the recurring perception that shelters should primarily help victims of IPV to live independent lives. Another closely linked aspect of quality that some interviewees highlighted was that the intervention should be short and cost-effective. Thus, outcome quality is more related to limiting the duration of support interventions, which can be achieved by maintaining distance and not offering overly extensive support (ibid.).

The other study focuses on the experiences of women with experiences of living in shelters (Forthmeiier & Ekström 2024). Women described feelings of confinement and control due to the structure and regulations of the shelter as well as extensive loneliness. At the same time, opinions on the quality of shelters were relatively unanimous; the shelter should be a safe place for recovery, provide a respite from violence, and a home-like environment. Shelters should offer both counselling and practical support aiming to help women process previous difficult experiences and help them create a new life free from violence. Some shelters were described as perceiving children only as an appendage to the mother, where no specific adjustments or services were provided for the children, while others took a more holistic family-oriented approach where children's needs were perceived as equal to those of the mothers. Shelters adjusted for children’s needs were perceived as having better quality.

# Perspectives on quality

The concept of quality related to treatment or welfare services has no clear and uniform definition despite extensive contemporary research. The typical explanation for the lack of a clear and uniform definition of quality concerns both the relative nature and contextual condition of the concept (Elassy 2015; Harvey & Green 1993). Quality is ultimately dependent on where, when, and who gives it meaning, which also makes quality an often-disputed subject (Blom & Morén 2012). Since quality can mean different things to different people or groups of people, and also the same person can give quality different meanings at different times and in different contexts, it is more relevant to talk about several different qualities of a specific object or context. In other words, quality must primarily be understood as a social construction, which from an ontological and epistemological perspective means that its meaning is created and recreated through the norms, values, conventions, interpretations, and practices actors in a certain context share, question, or perhaps negotiate. To understand the construction of quality in a certain context, we should thus consider the different perceptions of quality that actors in a given context express (Carlstedt & Jacobsson 2017; see also e.g. Strannegård 2013.

The construction of quality is ultimately about power – and then specifically the possibility and ability to define quality (Megivern et al. 2007). To understand the construction of quality in different contexts, we should thus not only consider the perceptions of different actors but also that these actors tend to both represent different interests and at the same time be asymmetrically related via the social structures of the specific context (cf. Bovaird 2007; Greenwood & Mir 2019). This can be assumed to affect their ability and opportunity to put forward their interpretations and definitions of what quality is, can, or should be, and be heard. The fact that actors are asymmetrically related and that their 'voices' are thus often assigned different meanings depends, among other things, on hierarchical position and varying access to resources (cf. Clegg et al. 2006; Lukes 2005).

Donabedian (1988) has developed a framework for evaluating quality, which is frequently applied in both Swedish and foreign quality-related research (Botma & Labuschagne 2018; Kajonius & Kazemi 2016). The framework distinguishes between quality in three different parts – structure, process, and outcome – where structure relates to what you *have* (for example, staff density or level of education of the staff), process to what you *do* (what the intervention contains in concrete terms or how the care is carried out) and outcome to what you *get* (that is, what a certain effort leads to). Donabedian himself (1988) believes that the different parts of the framework, which also function as quality measures, are intuitively connected via the assumption that a combination of both a high structural and process quality is likely to lead to a high outcome quality. Referring to the widespread use, critics, among others Szebehely (2011), argue that this framework is problematic as it can give rise to both undesirable standardisations of quality and a one-sided focus on quality aspects that are easy to measure. However, in this study, the framework will not be used for evaluating quality in a specific shelter, but for a deeper understanding of the different constructions of quality identified in the analysis.

Based on the above perspective on quality, it is thus important to keep track of who is constructing quality, as well as when and how. Concerning shelters, this means more specifically that dominant perceptions of the meaning of quality can not only influence the design of overall quality indicators or how social services choose between different procurement options and evaluate individual activities, but also how the entire area of activity develops over time.

# Method

The study presented in this article is part of a larger project on quality and procurement linked to shelters. A qualitative interview design has been chosen to capture the complexity of these people's constructions of quality in shelters. Shelters were recruited via the two national associations for the Women’s Shelter movement, the national association for private shelters, and by approaching one municipal shelter and one NGO shelter (see Table 1). The goal was to reach a variety of organisations, sizes, and geographic locations. The smallest shelter in the study has room for only one family and the largest has room for 80 families. The shelters are located in different parts of the country, both in large cities and more rural places.

Table 1. Participating shelters.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Organisation | Number of shelters | ID in manuscript |
| Women’s Shelter movement | 9 | Women’s Shelter A-I |
| Private companies | 4 | Private Shelter A-D |
| Municipality | 1 | Municipal Shelter A |
| Non-governmental organisation | 1 | NGO Shelter A |

All interviews were conducted based on semi-structured interview guides where common themes touched on the understanding of quality both in municipal operations more generally and in shelters more specifically. Due to the pandemic situation that prevailed in 2020 and 2021, all interviews were conducted digitally via the platforms Teams and Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The first step in the analysis was that all transcribed interviews were read before they were coded in NVivo, a procedure inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding scheme was developed during the coding process. After the preliminary coding of all interviews, codes were redefined and merged into larger codes. After going through all the coding, preliminary themes were developed. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis has entailed moving back and forth between the original transcripts, codes, and themes and making adjustments. The analysis resulted in four major themes that together form the shelter managers’ constructions of quality in shelters.

As the empirical material does not contain any sensitive personal data or other information that could harm the interviewees, it is also not subject to ethical review requirements. At the same time, the study is part of a larger project that has been ethically tested and approved in its entirety (Dnr 2020-05934). Before each interview, the interviewee was informed about the purpose of the study and how the content of the interview was intended to be used. The interviewee was also informed that participation was voluntary and that it could also be cancelled at any time. Furthermore, both participating shelters and interviewees have been de-identified to ensure anonymity and to allow the interviewees to feel free to speak openly.

# Results

In the thematic analysis, four themes were identified which collectively show how quality is constructed by the shelter managers. Of course, all shelters work, to some extent, with security and protection and offer some form of support activities. The analysis focuses on how the interviewees talk about quality - that is, how quality is constructed. This is how the presentation that follows should be understood. The presentation is structured after the four identified themes: *Safety and protection*, *Support and interventions in addition to protection*, *Living environment,* and finally *Appropriate staff*.

## Safety and protection

In six of the interviews, safety and protection were highlighted as important aspects of quality in shelters. An example of how this was expressed is in the interview with Women's Shelter E:

Quality is also safety. That you should be safe and protected when you live with us. We have a collaboration with a security company. (…) Security is also that we continuously have good cooperation with [the municipal housing company] so we can change apartments from time to time.

Since shelter staff in Women Shelter E only spend a few hours a day with the residents, women need to be able to protect themselves. The manager said that they have security alarms and safety information, but some women need more protection than their shelter can offer. One example the manager mentioned was where the perpetrator has connections to organised crime. The shelter does not accept women they do not believe they can protect, but the social service does not always share all their information. Similarly, the manager from Women's Shelter F emphasised women’s capacity for "inner protection" and the necessity of working flexibly to help women learn to protect themselves. Working in close collaboration with the residents was also presented as a quality aspect in the interview with the manager from NGO Shelter A. The manager explained that the staff must have such a high level of competence that they react if they hear anything that suggest impending danger. In this interview too, the manager emphasised that social services sometimes make placements that are not reasonable given the security risks and the needs of the women and children.

In two of the interviews with managers from private shelters, security was also highlighted as an important aspect of quality. At Private Shelter A, protection and safety were linked to their staff. They had chosen staff with experience of working as police officers, which the interviewee believed was necessary, for example to ensure safe transportation:

This wouldn't have worked if I didn't have the background that I have. I know what I'm talking about when we talk about security and protection, privacy, and things like that. Safe transportation. Just one such thing. (…) It’s very important to know what you’re doing.

The manager from Private Shelter B said that they work based on risk assessments that are central to everything they do. It is part of their ambition to work in an evidence-based manner.

## Support and other interventions in addition to protection

In all but two interviews (private shelters), the managers highlighted services that can be classified as support and other interventions in addition to protection as important aspects of quality. Counselling was mentioned by four of the Women’s Shelters. They emphasised that counselling is important, but also that it must be adapted to the specific woman’s needs and situation and must be on her terms. For example, the manager from Women's Shelter D described it like this:

It must be adapted. If a woman can't… we've noticed that she needs so much support, but she can't sit here and talk to me. No, but then I don't do that. I ask her "Shall we go out for coffee, shall we go for a walk, shall we take the children to a playland?" And when the children start playing, maybe she dares to talk to me a little bit. We open up to it that way. So that everything is adapted to her and she can get, as far as it’s possible, the support she needs.

The manager from Women's Shelter H argued that counselling is necessary. She argued that shelter cannot be about only providing an apartment. There must be some sort of counselling as a minimum of quality. This is in line with previous research where for example Sullivan and Virden (2017 a) have shown that a majority of shelter residents need emotional support, help to deal with stress, and advice on how to improve their lives.

Another recurrent theme in previous research on shelter is empowering practices and the need to expand women’s knowledge, abilities, perceptions, and access to resources in society (McGirr & Sullivan 2017; Sullivan et al. 2008; Sullivan & Virden 2017a; Vaughn & Stamp 2003). Some of the shelter managers talk about self-determination and empowerment as aspects of quality in shelter. Some of them say that it is important for shelter staff to get the woman to be involved in her process, or as the representative of Women's Shelter C described it:

I think quality is based on the individual and on increasing the individual's self-determination in the process. Everything we do is with the consent of the individual.

Working to increase the woman's self-determination is partly about what happens during the time a woman lives in a shelter, but also about increasing the woman's self-determination in the long run by, for example, being able to support herself financially. Helping the woman to get an education or get a job then becomes a concrete thing that the shelter can help with. The quote below illustrates how the manager of Women's Shelter F described this:

Many of the women who live with us have foreign origins and may not always have very good Swedish skills, or if you have been locked up and not even used a credit card yourself,,,haven’t had access to money. Then it's a lot about pedagogically showing how to do different things. We go to the bank together, we go to the Social Insurance Agency together, or sit together on the phone and do different things. (…) You should be as equipped as far possible during the time you’re with us to be able to stand on your own two feet afterward.

Similarly, the manager from Private Shelter A said that they work with practical things based on what the specific woman needs. Some women manage a lot on their own, but others need a lot of support and help. In a couple of the interviews, the managers highlighted that women may need support in the form of having someone who "stands on the woman's side". This can be described as a form of advocacy where you give the woman help and support so she can claim her rights. The manager from Women's Shelter G described it as follows:

Many times, social workers [in the social services] are very stressed and they don't have time to have many meetings with these women, and they don’t notice their trauma and sometimes they may find them difficult to meet. They get weird and ambivalent, and their behaviour becomes difficult to interpret. Then we can be like a bridge and explain this behaviour and talk about crisis and trauma.

The manager from Municipal Shelter A had a similar description. One way that a quality service is achieved is that everyone who comes to the shelter gets a contact person who "looks after that person's interests concerning the social services". Bergstrom-Lynch (2018) and Melbin et al. (2003) have come to similar conclusions. Women in shelters need to be trusted and met by non-judgemental staff.

There were also examples when the managers talked about the importance of *not* doing things for the woman as an aspect of quality. The manager from Private Shelter B said quality is about "mobilising the people's powers and not passivating them". One should “not do for the client, but in that case, do with”. At NGO Shelter A, much work has been done to sort out what the staff should help women with and what "help actually is". An example the manager mentioned was the decision to no longer help women with shopping. If, from a safety perspective, the woman can move around in the local community, she should do the shopping herself:

Somewhere, you have to be able to do what you can do yourself if you’re to become independent and move on. It's not nice to be too nice.

Another area where they had introduced restrictions was childcare. If the staff had time to spend with children, it should be quality time and not "so much babysitting". However, the manager stated that looking after children was something they would prefer to be able to be a little more flexible about because some of the women need "a little more alone time to be able to breathe". However, there was no budget for hiring more staff and they had to prioritise.

Discussions on children's situations recurred in some of the interviews. Paying attention to children was described as important by some and others mentioned the importance of providing possibilities for attending school during the time in shelter as a measure of quality. The manager from Women's Shelter G said that the relationship between the mother and the child was decisive for quality and also that staff pay attention to children:

Quality is also very much dependent on how their relationship turns out, because it won't be a good quality experience for them in the shelter if they can't talk to each other or must tiptoe around. Or if children are not allowed to ask questions or talk to anyone. Quality is precisely this; it’s children having someone who specifically meets them, welcomes them, and plays with them.

Related to the discussion about support and interventions during the time in a shelter, some of the managers talked about how important it was – from a quality perspective – that women were allowed to stay in the shelter long enough. Several described more restrictive policies from the social services resulting in shorter placements and that it was not uncommon for stays to be limited to two weeks. After two weeks, there was a new assessment and the woman got a new decision for two weeks. The quote below is one example from the manager at Women’s shelter B:

Decisions for two weeks as an example. I think like this: it’s totally insane. What happens in two weeks? Nothing!

The manager continued by saying that the social services need to focus on the individual and what the specific client needs. The manager at Municipal Shelter A said that spending time in their shelter should include the possibility of processing the crisis the woman and child have been through, psychoeducation about the mechanisms of violence, and rest in a safe environment to sort out their feelings and thoughts. Women should be able to make plans for a better life. But what happens when the time in a shelter is short is that all the practical issues tend to take over. From a quality perspective, time in shelter affects what shelter staff can provide.

## Living environment

Previous research has shown that physical living conditions are important for abused women (Asmoredjo et al. 2017; Wendt & Baker 2013; Banga & Gill 2008; Forthmeiier & Ekström 2023). Unsuitable living conditions can contribute to a decision to leave the shelter and in the worst cases return to the abuser (Banga & Gill 2008). In the present study, only five managers talked about the living environment when they discussed quality. According to the manager from Private Shelter B, the physical and psychological environment must be "dignified". He used his personal preferences for guidance:

We must decorate and furnish our premises as if I could... yes, enjoy is perhaps the wrong word. But think it's okay to be in if it's me who needs protection. That's how it should look with us.

The managers from Women's Shelter A and Women's Shelter D both highlighted that the living environment should contribute to women and children feeling safe. You should also feel "nice and comfortable", according to the manager from Women's Shelter A. The manager from Women's Shelter D believed that the physical environment should be "adapted, caring, and warm". It should not feel like a social service institution, said the manager from Women’s shelter E. It should rather be like "coming home", since a home-like environment has a healing function, according to the manager. This is in line with for example the results in Forthmeiier and Ekström (2023). Aspects such as the need for privacy (Asmoredjo et al. 2017) were not mentioned in the interviews.

## Appropriate staff

According to the manager from NGO Shelter A, what is needed to achieve quality in a shelter is staff. This is an opinion that seems to be shared by all who were interviewed. All managers spoke of the importance of the staff when they described how they viewed quality in shelters. However, there were differences in how the interviewees talked about staff and where they put the emphasis. The responses can be categorised into four sub-themes: employed staff, complementary volunteers, trained staff, and available staff.

### Employed staff

Women's shelters in Sweden have historically been based on non-profit commitment and volunteers. However, there are also shelters run by the Women's Shelter movement that have chosen not to have volunteers in their shelters. Women's Shelter C is one of these. They decided several years ago that volunteers should not be used in the shelter. They had found it difficult to ensure that the volunteers maintained quality. For example, there had been situations where volunteers had been asking women questions that perhaps they should not have asked. Women's Shelter D had made similar changes to ensure that women in the shelter would only meet "trained staff and the same staff". In some of the interviews with shelters not run by the Women's Shelter movement, having employed staff instead of volunteers was highlighted as an important quality aspect. For example, the manager from Municipal Shelter A said: "That it is not a voluntary activity, I think that is also a measure of quality".

Women's Shelter I had made policy changes so that in the future they would have employees also on evenings and weekends. This was described by the manager as increasing quality. The manager pointed to previous deficiencies in documentation when volunteers handled new residents. It had been difficult to maintain routines, and volunteers had not been able to carry out risk assessments. The policy change had been driven by the municipality's procurement, which included requirements for employed staff on all days of the week. The manager from Women's Shelter E said that they wanted to be able to make demands on the staff, and therefore had chosen to only use employed staff.

As described above, there seems to be a development towards a shorter time in shelters. The managers in this study were critical because this affects what they can offer and work on with both women and children in shelter. Some managers also discussed costs for shelter. Employing well-educated staff as trained social workers increases costs and there were some concerns among the managers about whether the social services are willing to pay for the quality they ask for and the quality the shelters want to offer.

### Complementary volunteers

In both Women’s Shelter I and E where policy changes had been implemented to increase the use of employed staff, volunteers still were used as a complement to the main staff. For example, at Women’s Shelter E, volunteers were occasionally used to help with babysitting, driving, or technical data support. According to the manager from Women’s Shelter I, volunteers had an important function and were considered to represent an aspect of quality. Volunteers offered the possibility of conversations and relief for abused women by spending time with children. The managers from Women's Shelter B and Women's Shelter F also highlighted volunteers as an important complement to employed staff. They had employed staff during office hours, and outside office hours volunteers assisted women and children. The manager from Women's Shelter F said that they had a relatively fixed group of eight to ten volunteers who also received regular supervision. At Women's Shelter G, they considered volunteers as extra support for women and children, according to the manager. All volunteers had received basic training and had promised to maintain confidentiality. In the past, the volunteers had played an even greater role, but this had changed as more paid staff had been hired.

The manager from Women's Shelter A emphasised that the commitment is different for people who have chosen to work or be involved in a shelter run by the Women’s Shelter movement. The manager stated that a person who works in municipal or private shelters becomes "just an employee" in contrast to women's movement shelters where the commitment is different.

The meeting here will be in a different way. You get meetings where people are listened to from other perspectives. Not just the perspective of professionals.

In the quote above, the manager highlighted the volunteers, but she also said that their employees had a special commitment that she believed was specific to the Women’s Shelter movement.

### Trained staff

An important aspect linked to staff in sheltered housing is the staff's competence and training. For example, the manager from Private Shelter D said that quality in shelters is demonstrated above all by having trained staff. Staff do not need to have several years of university training, but different skills can complement each other. However, knowledge about violence in intimate relationships was considered extremely important. The manager had chosen to employ trained social workers because they have a broader knowledge and understanding of people in crisis and with difficult and complex life situations.

At Private Shelter C, staff density and trained staff were described as important aspects of quality. Municipal Shelter A also highlighted trained personnel as a measure of quality. It was described as important for quality that those who work at the shelter had the same training. The manager from Private Shelter B said that all staff needed to have basic knowledge of interpersonal violence and that it was quite easy to acquire such knowledge: "There are online courses on violence and there are also courses from the County Administration and other things. There is a lot of good stuff on YouTube."

In most of the interviews, knowledge of interpersonal violence was linked to formal education, but there were also exceptions. Learning from YouTube as the manager from Private Shelter B above talked about is one example. In some of the shelters run by the Women’s Shelter movement, there were also examples of learning from the organisation and experience than rather than formal training. The manager from Women's Shelter H described a form of knowledge that comes from having worked with victims of violence for a very long time and she argued that they had developed a specialist competence from that. Part of this competence was described as having a sufficiently secure basis for meeting people, daring to ask, and admitting that you do not know everything. And as the manager put it: “It is the abused woman who is the expert”.

### Available staff

Some of the interviewees highlighted in particular that the staff must be available. The manager from Women's Shelter D said, for example, that it is important that the women meet the same staff so that they can create a secure relationship with them. It is particularly important in shelters where several families live together. When families move in and out, shelter staff should stay the same. Another aspect of accessibility mentioned was being able to relieve the woman by looking after her children for a while so that she could take a shower or go shopping. According to the manager, this increases quality. At Private Shelter A, they wanted residents to feel "seen, heard, and confirmed" and this meant that there must always be available staff, according to the manager. The manager from Private Shelter D had a similar view and emphasised that staff need to be active and try to reach out to women:

It is perhaps more connected to how I want the staff to be. That they reach out and make contact with clients. Some just call and ask "Is everything okay? No. Okay, see you tomorrow then." I think we can do better than that. (…) Quality, it’s to a large extent about the staff of course, and what attitude you have towards wanting to help, and that we have to be active.

# Discussion

All services offered by social services must be of good quality according to the Swedish Social Services Act. This can be seen as both self-evident and unproblematic, but as has been argued in this article, it is rather a matter of social constructions and ultimately a question of power (Ellasy 2015; Harvey & Green 1993, Carlstedt & Jacobsson 2017; Blom & Morén 2007). This study is based on the theoretical perception that quality is socially constructed by different actors. In this final section, the results will be discussed in relation to how social services managers and local politicians construct quality in shelters (Ekström & Hvenmark 2023) and how women with experience of living in shelters view quality (Forthmeiier & Ekström 2023).

The thematic analysis identified four major themes that together form how the different shelter managers construct quality in shelter: Safety and protection, Support and other interventions in addition to protection, Living environment, and Appropriate staff. Using Donebedian’s (1988) distinctions between structure, process, and outcome, this is mostly about structure quality, i.e., what you have. Security alarms, trained staff, counselling, activities and services for children, and suitable living environments are examples of this. However, part of the results can be analysed as process quality. Being flexible and adjusting support for the specific woman is one example. The managers’ concerns about shorter placements and stricter social services can be interpreted as barriers for quality aspects connected to process. Quality should not only be about having f access to counselling. You also need to focus on actual prerequisites. The managers emphasise aspects such as working towards self-determination and what can be interpreted as empowering practices. This can also be interpreted as outcome quality since the focus is on the woman’s possibilities after she has left the shelter.

There are important differences when comparing the results to how social services managers and local politicians (Ekström & Hvenmark 2023) as well as how women with experiences of living in shelter (Forthmeiier & Ekström 2023) construct quality. The latter study indicates that women emphasise structure – a home-like environment and access to support for themselves and their children. But they also talked about feelings of control, confinement, and loneliness as negative aspects of quality in shelter. This can be understood as process quality and is important for understanding quality in shelter. The analysis of social services constructions on the other hand –represented by managers and local politicians in Ekström & Hvenmark (2023) – identified adherence to the social services' assignments as a matter of quality. Recurring was the perception that shelters should primarily help victims of IPV to live independent lives. Another closely linked aspect of quality was that the intervention should be short and cost-effective. Thus, outcome quality from the perspective of social services was more related to limiting the duration of support interventions, which can be achieved by maintaining distance and not offering overly extensive support.

According to shelter managers, social services, and abused women, shelter staff are central to the quality of shelters (see Ekström & Hvenmark 2023 and Forthmeiier & Ekström 2023). Most shelters in Sweden have employed staff, but the Women’s movement shelters sometimes use volunteers. In this study, most shelter managers emphasised that staff should be employed, including managers from the Women’s Shelter movement. This can be understood as part of the ongoing professionalisation of shelters in Sweden and elsewhere (Brückner 2001; Dewey & St. Germain 2014; Warrington 2003; Wies 2008). However, for the women in the study by Forthmeiier and Ekström (2023), it did not seem to matter whether staff were employed or not. Rather, they emphasised the importance of having available and empathic staff that could offer support, consolation, and relief. The women also talked about knowledge about IPV as an aspect of quality in shelters. This is a theme in the analysis of shelter managers’ constructions of quality, as well as those of social services managers and local politicians. Even though all shelter managers agreed that knowledge is important, there seem to be differences in what they put into the concept of knowledge. Some employed formally trained social workers, but social workers do not necessarily have a deep knowledge specifically of IPV. The Women’s shelter movement has a long tradition of training staff and volunteers about IPV, which according to some of the managers contributes to quality. Others, like the manager from one of the private shelters who stated that learning about IPV through YouTube was sufficient, seemed to interpret knowledge of IPV as having more limited content and depth.

The results of this study together with the results from previous studies on quality in shelters have important implications for practice and policy. Firstly, it is important to consider abused women’s experiences. Feelings of control, confinement, and loneliness, as well as unsuitable living environments for women and children, can contribute to a decision to interrupt the placement, and in the worst cases return to the abuser (cf. Banga & Gill 2008). Secondly, staff play a decisive role in shelter quality. Staff should have knowledge about IPV, but equally important are characteristics such as availability, flexibility, and empathy. Finally, this study shows that support and services in addition to safety and protection are important aspects of quality. However, to be able to provide counselling and empowering practices in shelters, time is crucial. The development of stricter policies resulting in shorter placements limit how and to what extent shelters can offer quality support to both women and children in shelters.

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