

Turkey: Shelters not cemeteries

As in countries throughout the world, the human rights of thousands of women in Turkey are violated daily through violence in the family. As many as a half of all women in Turkey are estimated to be victims of physical violence within their families.

Women should not face this violence unsupported. Shelters provide essential protection and support for women who have been exposed to violence. They serve as temporary places of refuge for women fleeing violence. When state and society are unable to ensure women's safety at home, shelters give women a respite from violent behaviour and allow them the time to make decisions about their lives and access support whilst not living under the constant threat of violence.

Shelters are only part of the solution, but they are critical in situations where women's lives are at risk, or in which they are so paralyzed by fear that they are unable to act. In some situations, where a protection order is to be enforced, if women reside in shelters it means that security forces can remove weapons from the home without further risk to the woman. Shelters also put long-term solutions for women fleeing violence on the government agenda.

According to a recent European Union report there should be one shelter per 10,000 head of population. In Turkey, there are about 14 state "guesthouses" and 19 community-based services to support women living with violence at home in a country of over 70 million people. Two independently run shelters performing invaluable services to women escaping violence have closed in the last 10 years due to lack of funding.

"Everyone sends women who have experienced violence to us. Everyone. The government, the police, everyone. We don't have the facilities to meet the demand."
A worker at a Turkish non-governmental organization

Turkey has an obligation under international law to ensure that women are free from violence in their homes and communities. These obligations are not limited to legislating against and criminalizing violence, but also require the state to adopt a whole range of measures to protect women's rights.

Please write to the Turkish authorities using the letter below as a guide.

Dear Minister,

I urge you to take an important step to prevent violence against women by funding or enabling the funding of a sufficient number of appropriate shelters, in collaboration with NGOs experienced in working to protect women from violence. Please ensure that sufficient information and points of access for women to report violence exist, including hotlines covering all regions of Turkey staffed by sufficiently trained personnel, brochures and posters disseminated at hospitals, primary health care centres and courts, and websites.

I also urge you to take immediate steps to enforce laws that protect women, such as the Family Protection Law and the soon-to-be amended Penal Code, to ensure that violence in the family is treated as seriously as assaults in other contexts, and that rape and other violence against women is criminalized in all contexts.

Yours sincerely,
State Minister with responsibility for Human Rights

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Salutation: Dear Minister



'We want shelters, not graves!'

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Shelters from violence

As in countries throughout the world, the human rights of hundreds of thousands of women in Turkey are violated daily. At least a third and up to a half of all women in the country are estimated to be victims of physical violence within their families. They are beaten, raped, and in some cases even killed or forced to commit suicide. Young girls are bartered and forced into early marriage.

Amnesty International's report *Turkey: Women confronting family violence* features cases of individual women who have suffered violence at the hands of their family. It outlines a pattern of abuse and discrimination which can start from birth when families barter their newborn daughters and force young girls into early marriage. The report reveals a culture of violence that can place women in double jeopardy, both as victims of violence and because they are denied effective access to justice.

Güldünya Tören named her new baby Umut or "Hope". She knew that the two of them might not have long to live. After she became pregnant, she had refused to marry her cousin and was sent to her uncle's house in Istanbul. There, one of her brothers gave her a rope and told her to hang herself. She escaped and begged for police protection, but was assured that her uncle and brother promised not to kill her. In February 2004, weeks after the birth, her brothers reportedly shot and wounded her in the street. From her hospital bed, she pleaded for the police to save her. She was left to face her murderers alone. Late at night, her killers entered the unguarded hospital and shot her in the head. Her life support machine was later turned off.



Güldünya Tören and Umut
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At present, the role of women's rights activists in Turkey is crucial to ensure that at least a small proportion of women obtain the protection which was denied to Güldünya Tören.

Women's organizations argue that, with the exception of financial audits, such centres should be run independently of government. The Purple Roof Foundation, an independent women's organization that provides support to women's groups, a news bulletin, and telephone advocacy and consulting services, told Amnesty International of some of the difficulties that women's activists are facing in Turkey. "We have reports that government-run women's shelters are turning away women who do not have their identity cards with them," said a representative. "When you are running away from a violent home, do you think to take your identity card?" Government-run shelters have been criticized for their failures to accept women who fall into particular categories – for example, prostitutes, women with health problems and women who are pregnant.