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A Look Into New York City's Homeless Shelters

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A black cat runs past Jasmin Valesquez's leg and behind the locked gates of Help Women's Center in Brooklyn. Valesquez, 32, goes in front of the gates and pulls out a green lighter. Security guards scowl at her as Valesquez continues to light her cigarette. Ashes fall on her puffer jacket.

"Don't get addicted. You're far too pretty for that," Valesquez said to me. She starts to roam in front of the shelter and gets flustered as the security guards glare at her.

On another side of the city, Rayna Po, 30, shivers in front of Palladia Inc., a Manhattan shelter on 126th Street. Po slowly pulls out her lighter. Staff members stare at her.

The number of single women in shelters has increased in Manhattan and Brooklyn. In 1983, there were 534 women in homeless shelters. It jumped to 1,903 in 2003, and 2023 ended with 5,560 women.

The number of residents has been increasing yearly, according to the Coalition For The Homeless. As single women utilize the shelter system, women are unsatisfied with the conditions. They also do not feel protected outside of them where sex work is apparent.

Precious Mcharris, 54, sits on her red scooter outside Pam's Place in Long Island City. Mcharris smokes her cigarette while humming to the song Stomp! by the American Funk and R&B

band Brother Johnson. Mcharris likes to say, "There are ladies here that go on 21st Street at night for sex. You just have to observe."

Mcharris is a dancer; she said she never thought she would be stalked and kidnapped by her ex-boyfriend, who she ran away with. She left New York to be with him in Atlanta; it was perfect until it was not, and he started to abuse her and eventually hold her hostage. She escaped his abuse by breaking the glass doors of their tiny apartment when he was not home.

After escaping the cycle of abuse in 2015, she found her way back to New York City. When she entered the shelter system, she did not expect to see sexuality turned into a commodity, since that form of abuse could re-traumatize her. She said there are nights she cannot do anything but take medicine to sleep.

Mcharris said, "The same women from 2015 you can find in 2024 being involved in prostitution; around shelters, you can see women go on hoe strolls."

Hoe strolls are walks sex workers do to find potential buyers for sexual acts. Mcharris's experience resonates with Pia Wallenborn, age 75, another resident of Pam's Place. According to Wallenborn and Mcharris, just a few blocks down on 21st Street, you can see women partake in commercial sex. "Some

do it for something as simple as a smoke or beer," said Wallenborn.

In 2022, Dominique Hayes, a shelter resident of Pam's Place, filed a [lawsuit](#) in New York City's Bronx County Supreme Court. Her claim was against Acacia Network Housing Inc., which manages Pam's Place. Hayes' claims were against a shelter staff member identified as Murray (unknown last name). He would use his power, according to Hayes, to abuse shelter residents, sexualize the living environment with sexual comments, sexual propositions, and even solicitations for sex, to physically and sexually touch them, and, in some cases, physically and sexually assault them, all in the scope of his employment.

Hayes' lawsuit is still active, and according to Mcharris, issues similar to Hayes' lawsuit continue in 2024. According to Monique Ferguson-Riley, 40, sex work allegedly may take place within shelters and outside shelters. Riley said in her experience pimps or staff within some shelters manipulate women in vulnerable positions to have an intimate relationship with them or use women for money.

Riley is the founder and CEO of Freedom Youth Family Justice Center. This non-profit works to fight human trafficking and domestic violence. Half of the women this non-profit serves come from the shelter system, Riley said.

She created this non-profit after being in the shelter system nine times throughout her life. The first time she ever experienced the shelter system was when she was five years old with her mom, and the second time was when she was 12. Riley's mom was a sex worker in Jamaica before immigrating to America. She tried to protect Riley from that life.

However, when she was 12, Riley's friend groomed her for sex work through the flashy lifestyle of the job. Riley did not know her friend was recruiting women for a sex ring. The day Riley chose to leave with her friend, she did not think she would be trafficked, stuck in the cycle of sex work and shelters.

Jasmin Valesquez can identify with being stuck in the shelter system. One of her earliest experiences was sleeping outside in the cold and then forcing herself to go to the Henry Street Settlement Shelter, where she was placed next to a resident in his 60s. She was 20. According to Velazquez, she filed a complaint against her neighbor, who not only had poor hygiene but was also a pervert. After filing the complaint, Velasquez states the shelter made excuses, claiming the man "was just friendly."

Outside this shelter, Valesquez has faced catcalling, and when she goes out to smoke, she often witnesses pimps coming into the facility for their "girls."

This experience is not limited to Velesquez in Brooklyn or the woman of Pam's Place in Queens. Po in Manhattan has been a victim of domestic abuse, which forced her into the shelter system. After facing limited economic opportunities and unable to speak English, Po found herself roped into the world of pimps and sexual exploitation multiple times.

Rayna Po states that pimps groom, lure, and manipulate women in shelters, with a promise of economic stability.

Po said, "Pimps have housing, and pimps need people to rent their houses, people to be in their houses. And some girls want to get out of the shelter. So the business works perfectly. These are mental men mentally. You know they like girls going through hardship."

The way it works is pimps take girls from the shelters out to dinner, pay for their nails, spas, shopping, lashes, and hair. Po states, "And when you don't have family and nowhere to go and a pimp gives you everything, you go."

Po said that the economic stability is not worth her mental health, because when she escapes and goes back to the shelter,

she is left with curfews and cannot work night shifts, and is forced back to seek economic stability from pimps.

A prostitute is defined as one who exchanges sexual favors for money, drugs, and other commodities. A pimp controls the actions and lives off the proceeds of one or more prostitutes. In the United States, pimp-controlled prostitution is the most common form of prostitution. It is a \$14 billion business, with about 1 million prostitutes in the United States, according to a research study published in the [National Library Of Medicine](#).

This industry generates billions of dollars, but pimps take most of the profit, according to [Arizona State University](#). This business involves marketing girls online and selling them, where pimps and the girls make money and share profits.

In New York City alone, research shows that women get lured into the industry of pimp-controlled prostitution for three main reasons. There is the financial hardship of the individuals who work in the industry. The second reason is some are simply in it because they are attracted to the attention they get from pimps. The third reason is the system interactions of the individuals. These women have had difficult experiences with foster care, child welfare, courts, social services, and government assistance.

Even women who are not involved in sex work can find the shelters difficult. Po, Wallenboorn, Valesquez and Mcharris have been in the shelter system for over five years. Even when they leave, they find themselves returning, because "there should be more programming for teaching people how to go along in society," said Amber Hand, 36, a resident of Pam's Place. "I feel like people are in the system for one to five years; they do not learn how to live. You put them back on the streets, and you do not teach them how to be a human being in society."

Monique Riley's first job out of the shelter system was at McDonald's. She did not know how to count money, use a point-of-sale system, and was not used to making only \$300, since sex work made her more. Riley, who now helps women through her non-profit, said it is not only essential to educate and provide resources to women in the shelter system, but it is also important to meet them where they are at. "It is about harm reduction," she said. "It is about giving people the proper tools to navigate the system so they do not get stuck. We need to operate from a human standpoint. We have all been at a low point."

Women in these shelters often come to escape domestic violence. but re-experience trauma and sexual exploitation due to sex work and the conditions of the shelter system.

These conditions include limited access to cold water and hygiene products, unhealthy food, internal theft and robberies, and violence.

When Valesquez's boyfriend of nine years made fun of her for her "slave nose and accent," she said, he brought out her aggressive side. When she hit him, she knew she had to leave. However, she said, she did not know she would have to warm herself up with cigarettes due to a lack of hot water.

Some of the women of Pam's Place also do this. The hot water shuts off around 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. To combat this, they warm up with cigarettes outside the shelter, while another shelter resident tries to buy \$3 cigarettes from each of the women.

At Palladia Inc., three shelter residents discuss how the morning is the worst time to shower because everyone uses hot water. Po said she warms up by lighting a cigarette outside and waiting until late at night to use the shower.

When Po falls asleep after her night shower, she said she sometimes wakes up and groans, daunted by the idea of traveling about 500 feet outside her building to the main office next door for toilet paper. In a panic, she also has to Instacart herself feminine hygiene products.

Po goes up the stairs of the main office, presses the buzzer, and waits for security to open the door. She then has to go through metal detectors and let the security guard know she needs toilet paper at night.

Past the metal detectors, security guards ask her what she is there for. She expresses her needs, and they call for someone to bring her toilet paper. She then grabs it and heads outside, down the stairs of the main office building, and up the 10 flights of stairs to her building.

Feminine hygiene products, hot water, and drinking water are limited, Po said. Residents have access to only one water fountain. According to Po, in the main building, residents are left to drink tap water or use food stamps to buy their water and food. This is also because the food is unhealthy and inedible, Po said.

At Pam's Place, residents say they are not given soap or towels, and only a tiny amount of laundry detergent in Ziplock bags. Residents also say the meals are often frozen and uncooked.

According to the [Coalition For The Homeless](#), shelters were created in the 1970s to help homeless men. During this time, the homeless population faced terrible conditions on the street. To help people experiencing homelessness, lawyer and philanthropist

Robert Hayes brought a class action lawsuit against the city in Callahan V. Carey. Haye argued that New York's Constitution claims it supports those in need. However, the homeless population was not being helped. Hayes led this lawsuit against the city on behalf of all homeless men, with the lead plaintiff representing the case, Robert Callahan, a homeless individual who had alcoholism.

On December 5, 1979, a New York state court ordered the city and state to provide shelter for homeless men, citing Article XVII of the New York State Constitution.

In August 1981, the city and state agreed to the Callahan Consent Decree, which established shelters for homeless men who had physical, mental, and social needs. Shelters were also required to meet health and safety standards, with the Coalition for the Homeless in charge of the locations.

Conditions have not always been ideal, since the creation of shelters. Recently, the city has been challenged for not assigning people stable housing placements.

The shelter system also includes single women who are legal residents of New York. They go through an assessment in the Bronx. Once there, they are evaluated and placed in a permanent shelter at several locations in New York City. This process can take up to 60 days, sometimes less. However, residents can only

stay at the shelters for 60 days and can re-apply for a longer stay.

When the Callahan consent decree was signed in 1980, Mayor Ed Koch promised to give the same standards to both men and women. Several months after the Callahan decree was finalized, it became clear that shelters for homeless single women were not meeting the standards set by the decree.

As far back as the 1980s, women complained about shelter conditions. In recent years, the women of Pam's Place, Palladia Inc., and Hope Women's Shelter have been concerned about shelter conditions.

Toilet paper is not the only limited item at shelters; access to job opportunities is often dependent on caseworkers and the quality of staff. According to Po, there is only one worker who cares about the growth of the women in the shelter. "Her office is always busy, and it is hard to make an appointment, but she is the only one that will help you get a job," Po said.

Lack of support for jobs is not the only problem. Po said she has been robbed in the system. Valesquez said she has woken up to trash under her pillow after being robbed. Wallenborn said she got her wallet, phone, and glasses stolen. Hand said her vape pen was robbed.

Jesenia Alvarez, 35, was standing outside earlier this month when a group of girls beat her up. Wallenborn said she was smacked on the side of the head with a phone at the cafeteria after she told someone to lower the volume on her phone. When these situations happen, they say, shelter security does nothing.

Shelter residents are concerned about the conditions of these places and sex work outside and within the shelters. Former New York Police Officer Twariq Baraskar, 27, was transferred over in 2022 to work at the Port Authority. Baraskar said he has seen sex work outside shelters as a police officer. Baraskar said this has been an ongoing issue, and said police are told to be more vigilant to domestic violence issues, sex trafficking, and prostitution.

When Baraskar patrolled the streets of Queens, he encouraged homeless individuals to go to shelters for safety. He said they would rather be in the cold and on the street than be in a shelter. Barkasar said, "That is how bad it is. They rather die on the streets."

The women Monique Riley works with at her non-profit are concerned for their safety. She said it took her a long time to get out of the system, which was very difficult. She said she would run into her room, kneel, and pray to God in tears that

she would make it out of the shelter system. In 2015, she said she left and never looked back.

-- End --

Sources

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Twariq Baraskar: 6468753684

Resources

1. National Library of Medicine:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6424363/>

2. Court Records:

<https://iapps.courts.state.ny.us/webcivil/FCASCaseInfo?parm=CaseInfo&index=ToL4vqonhSadOVOCEjOa7w%3D%3D&county=WJMms8oBYkkCWTsvMXCfQA%3D%3D&motion=M&docs=&adate=07/19/2023&civilCaseId=bPAGHGvH7SLzL0lkyt9kXw%3D%3D>

3. Arizona State University:

<https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/street-prostitution-2nd-edition>

4. Coalition For The Homeless:

<https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/our-programs/advocacy/legal-victories/the-callahan-legacy-callahan-v-carey-and-the-legal-right-to-shelter/>

Postscript

I discovered this topic by speaking with my mom, who is involved in the Islamic Center of North America (ICNA). My mom made me aware that a lot of Muslim women come into ICNA from the shelter system. It got me thinking about how Muslim women in the shelter system are not only isolated from American society but their own cultures. I did some research on this and discovered how Muslim women were struggling in the shelter system and could not practice their faiths. This is a very niche topic, and it was hard to track down these women. I went to ICNA events and Muslim women's faith-based shelters to find this group of women. It was very hard; this topic has not been reported, not much research is done on it, and Muslim women are often scared to come out about their stories. The women I spoke to too often had only experience at faith-based shelters.

Struggling to find these women, I did the work to report at shelters in the hopes of running across a Muslim woman. I never did, but I ran across other women who shared their stories and hardships with me about the conditions of the shelter system. I

figured out this was my story. After reporting consistently, I ran across so many poor conditions I didn't even know what angle to take, and I do not think this thesis does the story justice. There are so many conditions to report on, from poor food quality, struggle for women in wheelchairs to get around shelters, the sex work industry, lack of bathroom products, and even the robberies within the shelter. I plan to continue to report on this after my project to gain more evidence on the sex work industry within and outside the shelter. A Lot of it will require FOILs and contacting the DHS.

A Lot of the research I did was through the library, reading up on this topic, reading scholarly work, and gathering data. I combined my reporting and research to write this thesis, but I still feel I am not done and that there's more work to do.