



The Silent Cry of “Me Too”

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As 2018 removed the barrier placed on women’s voices, society has resounded with the cry of “Me Too.” For one of the first times in known history, woman after woman has joined together in solidarity, calling out those who have violated their rights in the worst way possible. And this time, society listened, convicting prominent sexual offenders and delivering them their due punishment, simultaneously espousing the concept of respect for women and making a greater effort to protect women’s rights. However, amidst this deafening roar of wronged women seeking justice, the cries of the homeless who are undergoing the same kind of abuse fall on deaf ears.

Sexual abuse is a topic that the majority of homeless women are intimately acquainted with. According to a 2005 study of a sample of the Florida homeless population, approximately 78.3% of homeless women admitted to having been subjected to rape, physical assault, and/or stalking at some point in their lives. These experiences of violation are not confined to homeless women, however; homeless men and transgender people also experience abuse at a higher rate than those who have proper housing. A study conducted by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) in 2003 found rates of victimization among the homeless to be as much as forty times higher than those among the general population.

So what accounts for this disparity? UCSF researchers found a strong association between mental illness and sexual victimization, as well as between prostitution and victimization.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that 20 to 25% of the United States’ homeless population suffers from severe mental illness, mainly schizophrenia and depression, according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information. Here lies the link between these prominent mental disorders and sexual abuse of the homeless: both schizophrenia and depression are related to poor judgement and hasty decision making, according to Science Direct and Medical News Today. In other words, people who suffer from schizophrenia and/or depression are more likely to put themselves into dangerous situations, which in the case of the homeless is simply being in a secluded area. According to Margot Kushel, MD, “Homeless people with mental illness may not be able to assess risks as well as

others and thus may be particularly vulnerable to assault.” This connection between mental illness and sexual abuse are not simply one-way; it is a cycle of destruction. A 1997 study of mentally ill homeless individuals found that 97% of subjects had experienced victimization before in their lives. Essentially, sexual victimization contributes to mental illness, and mental illness in turn increases the likelihood of being a victim of sexual assault.

In addition to mental illness, prostitution and sex work also mark the homeless as targets for sexual abuse. Such people tend to work in the sex industry for a single reason: survival. Known as “survival sex,” this involves people performing sexual acts in return for a commodity they need in order to survive, such as food, shelter, etc. The Human Trafficking Hotline found in a study of the New York’s Covenant House homeless shelter that almost half of those who engaged in survival sex cited not having a place to stay as being the primary reason for engaging in commercial sex activity. More depressingly, results from this same study found that reports of homeless youth willingly performing sexual acts in exchange for a commodity were twice as common as youth reporting coercive sex trafficking. Evidently, desperation plays a prominent role in pushing the homeless to take desperate measures. The homeless who participate in the commercial sex industry are thus easily singled out as targets for sexual assault, as their despair is evident to sexual predators searching for an easy victim.

All in all, sexual assault among the homeless is an extremely relevant issue, and it is necessary to spread awareness regarding this issue in order to help those who are victims of this horrific experience. As we have embraced the plight of women in mainstream media affected by sexual harassment, so too must we extend a helping hand to the homeless men, women, and children who are targeted for sexual abuse simply because they do not have anywhere else to go and are thus easy targets for sexual predators. No longer can we turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the homeless crying “Me Too.”

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