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Sex Workers in the Shadows



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MARCH 30, 2012
ISSUE #175

If a string of wealthy businessmen or politicians were to disappear, chances are the New York Police Department would take it seriously. But when 911 calls are made regarding sex workers, little is done. At least that was what Melissa Barthelemy's parents experienced when they reported her missing in 2009. After calling her Bronx apartment for three days and receiving no answer, her parents contacted the NYPD. According to the Daily News, the sergeant who answered the phone hung up.

In December 2010, while searching for Shannon Gilbert, police found Barthelemy's body, along with the bodies of Maureen Brainard-Barnes, Megan Waterman and Amber Lynn Costello, near Ocean Parkway at Gilgo Beach on Long Island. Five other unidentified bodies were eventually found on Long Island: three adult women, one toddler and a man wearing women's clothing. The remains of Jessica Taylor were found in March 2011. Gilbert's body was later found on Long Island in December 2011. On Feb. 17, a decomposed body was found in Manorville on Long Island. Police say it had been there for five years. On March 21, another body was found, bringing the count to twelve. Of the twelve bodies that have been recovered, only five have been identified.

The identified victims were all sex workers.

Their disappearances had drawn little attention until someone mentioned "serial killer," a term now glamorized by shows like Dexter and Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.

The stigma associated with sex work and its illegal status make it very dangerous for the workers themselves. According to 2010 FBI data, women accounted for a shocking 70 percent of the 1,398 known victims of serial killers since 1985. Comparatively, only 22 percent of homicide victims were women. Sex workers are 40 times more likely to die from something other than natural

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ISSUE 175
Mar 21 - Apr 17, 2012

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causes. According to the American Journal of Epidemiology, an average of 124 sex workers were killed annually between the years 1981 and 1990.

It wasn't always like this. In "Prostitutes as Victims of Serial Killers," published in Sage Journal's Homicide Studies, Kenna Quinet found that "the proportion of solved cases involving female prostitute victims increased across the study period from 16 percent during 1970 to 1979 to a high of 69 percent during 2000 to 2009." Killers believe they can get away with it. Gary Leon Ridgway, who came to be known as the Green River killer, confessed in 2003 to killing 48 sex workers in the Pacific Northwest. "I thought I could kill as many as I wanted to without getting caught," he said in court.

Often police, rather than vigorously pursuing justice in cases of crimes against sex workers, commit violence themselves. In the 2003 publication, "Revolving Door," the New York City's Sex Workers Project interviewed street-based sex workers regarding both interactions with the police and their willingness to go to the police after experiencing a violent crime. Because assault was often perpetrated by police themselves, sex workers tended to not report crimes. "Thirty percent of sex workers interviewed told researchers that they had been threatened with violence by police officers, while 27 percent actually experienced violence at the hands of police. ... Prostitutes often encounter the popular belief that it is not possible for a prostitute to be raped." When contacting police after being assaulted, some sex workers were told that "their complaints would not be accepted, that this is what they should expect and that they deserve all that they get."

Further complicating safety for sex workers is the fact that carrying condoms can be used as evidence in a trial against them. In the same study by the Sex Workers Project, 16 out of 35 sex workers did not carry condoms for fear of police retaliation. Though New York City runs a condom distribution program, New York courts allow condoms as evidence of prostitution, putting sex workers in a safety Catch-22. What would you choose, a sexually transmitted disease or jail?

Sex workers must be able to operate without stigma and fear of violence, especially violence from the police. They must be able to carry condoms without fear of reprisal. And when the media glamorizes the killers and not the victims, we must remember the nameless. We remember Maureen, Melissa, Megan, Amber and Shannon.

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