

washingtonpost.com

Muslim Women Who Become Homeless Have Limited Options

Advertisement

By Jackie Spinner

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, December 29, 2007; B01

They sleep in mosques. Or on the streets. Or in Christian-oriented shelters that might hold prayer meetings or services at odds with their own religious beliefs. For Muslim women without a place to live, particularly those who have been battered or are immigrants, being homeless can test their faith at the time they need it most.

When Muslim women are sent to shelters that serve the general population, they are often exposed to lifestyles that challenge their faith, such as drinking, abusing drugs, eating pork and undressing or bathing in front of others, says Imam Faizul Khan of the Islamic Society of Washington in Silver Spring. They return from such shelters "with sad stories," he says.

The Virginia Muslim Political Action Committee estimates that several hundred Muslim women are homeless in the Washington region, based on U.S. Census Bureau data and local surveys. That is a small fraction of the homeless population and of the estimated 250,000 Muslims in the region, but local Islamic leaders say the problem has grown in recent years. Kahn said homelessness in the Muslim community was almost unheard of several years ago.

Some Islamic leaders have begun to raise money to establish more shelters that cater to the Islamic community. There are now just two serving the Washington-Baltimore area, according to local mosque leaders. The leaders said they were unaware of any in Northern Virginia.

A four-bedroom, one-bath shelter in downtown Baltimore, the al-Mumtahinah home, holds 12 women. When the brick rowhouse is full, shelter director Nadia Auxila McIntosh squeezes women into a sitting room or dining room. The Islamic Center of Maryland runs another shelter in Gaithersburg, with room for six to eight.

Social workers, clerics and lawyers who work with Muslim homeless women said most were driven from home by abusive husbands or are unable to work because of their immigration status, leaving them without money for housing. Some face both troubles.

"If a battered Muslim woman is also an immigrant, she may be that much closer to homelessness," said Mazna Hussain, an attorney with the nonprofit Tahirih Justice Center, a women's advocacy group in Falls Church. "If she doesn't have the right to work, she can't build up a safety net."

A woman who identified herself as Fatem, using the nickname her mother called her as a child in Mali, came to Tahirih for help after she fled an abusive husband in the area. She is now seeking an immigration status that would allow her to work without relying on her husband's income. She entered the country legally in 2002, but her husband refused to help her apply for permanent residency.

Fatem, who declined to give her full name for fear of retribution from her husband, said she has been staying with her daughter at a townhouse in Virginia that shelters homeless women of different faiths. The people who run the shelter are tolerant of her Muslim faith, Fatem said, but it is difficult to be homeless, to have nothing, to lose the respect of her family.

"I lost everything," said Fatem, who has two children from a previous marriage in Mali whom she has not seen in almost eight years. "I don't have anything no more. I feel really shamed for my family living in just a shelter."

But Fatem said she feared for her life if she stayed with her husband, a social worker.

"He made me hungry," she said. "He was sleeping with his ex-wife and made her pregnant. Every little money I make I had to give to him. He beat me. He pushed me to fall down. My daughter cried. She think I'm going to die."

Imam Hassan Amin of Masjid Us Salaam in downtown Baltimore said more Muslim women are seeking shelter. "I've been dealing with women who would come to us and don't have any place to stay. . . . It's a big issue."

If the women end up at Christian-oriented shelters, they are asked to "come out of their Muslim dress," Amin said. "There are almost always prayer circles, and they play gospel music. Muslim women . . . are pushed to be a part of that group."

Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the D.C.-based National Coalition for the Homeless, said the Washington region has about 12,000 homeless people on any given night. There are more than 740,000 nationwide, according to 2005 data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Stoops said most shelters are privately run. The largest shelter organization is Catholic Charities, he said, followed by the Salvation Army and the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions. Traditionally, Stoops said, many Christian-oriented shelters -- he called Catholic Charities an exception -- have offered clients "soup, soap, sleep and salvation."

Stoops added: "I've always found that to be offensive. Shelters in this country need to get with this century."

Phil Rydman, spokesman for the Kansas-based Association of Gospel Rescue Missions, said policies on attending worship services vary within the association's network. "It is generally not required," he said.

Steve Morris, commander of the Washington area Salvation Army, said the Christian charity imposes no worship requirement on people it shelters. "Each of our housing programs in D.C. offer opportunities for worship, but it is clearly at the discretion of the client," Morris said. "We have a chapel on site and hold regular services there, but clients are free to choose to attend."

Most women staying at al-Mumtahinah in Baltimore were dressed in scarves and long robes. Some covered their faces almost completely. McIntosh opened the shelter, whose Arabic name means "to be examined," in March with help from Muslim donors.

In 2003 and 2004, McIntosh was homeless herself in Texas after she lost her job. She said she was assured when she sought shelter from the Salvation Army that she would not have to attend church services, which she would have considered a sin against her Islamic faith.

But the first night she was there, McIntosh recalled, the woman who had given the assurance ordered her to go to Christian worship or pack her bags. "I left," McIntosh said.

Based on her experience, McIntosh decided to open the shelter when she moved to Baltimore. She said she was stunned by the extent of the problem. "A lot of sisters are sleeping at the mosques," she said.

Kenyatta El Sa'id Farag was one. A Muslim convert, she makes \$25 every Friday cleaning bathrooms at a nearby mosque. That is not enough to support her and her 12-year-old daughter.

"I know I'm going to have hard times and easy times," said El Sa'id Farag. "I have a roof over my head."

She squabbles frequently with McIntosh, who is trying to encourage her to get a better-paying job instead of waiting for someone to come rescue her from homelessness.

"I know good and well I'm not going on welfare," said the mother, while mopping up syrup with a waffle in the shelter kitchen.

Out of earshot, McIntosh explained why she has been encouraging El Sa'id Farag to look for more work.

"This is not a free thing," she said. "I have to pay for it. If you're not using the space to help better yourself, I can't help you."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company