

Street Harassment

Old Issue, Ongoing Struggle, New Movement

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“Damn, sweet cheeks!”

“Honey, you lookin’ fine.”

“Come on boo, gimme a smile.”

MY NAME is not *sweet cheeks*, *honey*, or *boo*, but as I walk on city sidewalks and ride public transportation, street harassers refer to me as all three, and those are just the names that are fit to print. Harassers comment on my appearance, my clothing, the bags I carry, the direction I’m walking, the books I read on the bus – in short, reinforcing the message that as a woman in public, my very presence makes me fair game for unsolicited and undesired attention. Women around the world are routinely subject to demeaning, embarrassing and threatening displays of street harassment as part of their daily lives which produces clear differences between how women and men experience the same public spaces. As the anti-street harassment movement grows, planners have an opportunity to create meaningful change.

Harassment in public is surely among the oldest issues facing women in cities. Ask a woman if she has ever experienced street harassment and you will hear stories about being bombarded with sexually explicit comments as a teen walking home from school, being catcalled while eight months pregnant or being groped on subways and buses. You will hear stories about crossing the street in order to avoid walking in front of a group of men, returning home early so as not to be in public alone at night and jogging with headphones just to ignore the insults hurled from cars as they speed by. Then there will be the stories from women whose street harassment evolved into stalking, assaults and death threats.

Street harassment encompasses incidents occurring in public, meaning public spaces like streets, sidewalks and parks, as well as modes of public transportation. Street harassment refers to unwanted or undesired attention in public including verbal comments or catcalling, physical contact such as groping or touching and non-physical contact such as gesturing or leering. Incidents may evolve, beginning with verbal comments or leering and escalating to include physical contact such as groping. Or incidents may unfold as more than one harasser takes part.

Photographer Ruth Orkin immortalized one such moment in her famous black and white photo titled “American Girl in Italy” which depicts a distressed woman walking alone down a city block lined with men whistling, gesturing and staring. Although this photo is partially an attempt to reenact the travel experiences of both Orkin and the woman in the photograph – they met in Italy while traveling alone and agreed to shoot photos to capture their experiences on city streets – the multiple and varied responses directed at the woman are real. And, although this photograph was taken in 1951, harassment of women on public streets is still an ongoing issue more than 60 years later.

Although it is most common to hear about men harassing women, same sex harassment happens, as does harassment based on gender expression or assumptions about one’s sexual orientation. But street harassment isn’t limited to sex or gender, and can also be driven by

intersections of race, ethnicity, class, age or ability. The frequency with which women experience street harassment can be seen as a proxy for sexism and patriarchy in public; however, intersections with other systems of oppression such as sexuality or race reflect dominant narratives based on heterosexism and whiteness.

Street harassment also differs from sexual harassment in the workplace. Unlike the public spaces of cities, places of employment are subject to sexual harassment laws and policies, and employees are often required to complete trainings defining harassment and detailing the consequences. Urban dwellers are subject to no such



laws or trainings, leaving public space as a highly unregulated realm where women frequently experience harassment when they traverse the city. In other words, street harassment is often an expected occurrence with unacceptable implications for women’s access to public space.

Despite the widespread presence of street harassment in public space, the issue receives little city-level attention. On one hand, addressing street harassment from a physical planning perspective presents a bit of a spatial challenge. Although built environment strategies such as increasing lighting or creating more open spaces are used in an attempt to increase physical safety, it is un-

realistic to assume that defensible design practices will prevent verbal comments or obscene gestures. However, it is also likely that many city planners are simply unaware that the issue exists, or worse, do not see street harassment as a planning problem.

But organizers, urban dwellers, and other community

planners *are* taking action, and an anti-street harassment movement is building at the individual level where residents are engaging in creative projects designed to respond to harassers, and among activist groups who are spearheading organized campaigns to resist street harassment. For instance, in a recent project Yale MFA student Hannah Price began photographing men in the moments after they harassed her in public. In interviews she describes the photos as her way of dealing with the sudden uptick in catcalling after moving to Philadelphia from suburban Colorado. In New York, street artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh creates posters with hand drawn sketches of women that include messages to potential harassers such as “My Name Isn’t Baby,” or “Stop Telling Women to Smile.” The posters can be seen on the streets of major cities across the country.

Anti-street harassment organizations such as Hollaback! and Stop Street Harassment collect stories from those targeted by street harassment, and offer a public venue for sharing experiences, receiving support and finding resources. Hollaback! also maps where street harassment is occurring, and chapters are now active in more than 70 cities and 24 countries. Additionally, both individuals and organizations are taking to social media to continue raising awareness, share experiences and discuss strategies for combating street harassment.

Street harassment is also present on college campuses, the surrounding neighborhoods where students live,

and even along routes K-12 students take when walking or biking to school. As part of the growing movement against street harassment, several college campuses have added Take Back the Streets campaigns to the annual Take Back the Night events organized around women and safety. Another next step? Addressing street harassment of minors, especially within the context of national level *Safe Routes to School* initiatives. According to the National Center for Safe Routes to School, these programs focus on “connecting the trip to school with safety, health, and community...” In short, public health and community safety are issues that easily connect to addressing and reducing street harassment of students on their way to and from school.

What can city planners do? Join the conversation, for one. Recognize street harassment as a safety issue impeding equal access to the city. Need proof? Look to Twitter and other social media for cues about street harassment in your city or region. Survey residents and find out where street harassment is occurring and how. Seek out the individuals and community organizers who are resisting harassers and harassment every day. Raising awareness is effective, but only gets us so far. Now is the time to expand dialogue to broader audiences, and to continue organizing for local solutions and responses. Hopefully 60 years from now we will no longer talk about street harassment in terms of “what can be done,” but instead be celebrating what works. **P²**