

Don't 'Holla' at Me

By Lauren O'Neil

"Hey, sexy!" yells a teenager from his pickup truck, honking the horn at a female jogger in front of him. "Hey! What's your name, Blondie?"

Nearby, four men sit on a restaurant patio and ogle a pair of sharply dressed women exiting a coffee shop. A heavy-set member of the group puts down his bottle of beer to stand up and whistle loudly. His friends erupt into raucous laughter.

Spend a couple of hours people watching in any public space this summer, when sweltering weather dictates skin baring fashion, and you're likely to notice that leers, jeers and catcalls like these are far from rare.

Incidences of women experiencing everything from lewd comments and obscene gestures to stalking, indecent exposure and inappropriate physical contact in public are so prevalent that the problem has been given a name: street harassment.

"Girls can't go anywhere without being gawked at these days," says London, Ont. resident Laura Meloche, 24. "It happens at the gym, at the mall, at school. I've had guys lick their lips at me in the grocery store. It makes you feel like there are bugs crawling under your skin."

According to a 2000 study published in the Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 85 per cent of Canadian women have been the target of street harassment at some point in their lives.

While this type of behaviour may seem relatively harmless - some men may even argue that it could be considered a form of flattery - research conducted by American sociologist Ross Macmillan, among others, on the effects of harassment indicates that frequently receiving unwanted sexual attention from strangers can negatively affect a woman's self esteem and quality of life.

"Street harassment really impacts a woman's sense of safety," says Holly Kears, founder of advocacy website stopstreetharassment.com "It's hard for men to realize that even just whistling or something they think is innocent can seem scary to a woman... Women don't know how far a man will go, or what his intent is."

Out of the 811 women Kears surveyed while conducting research for a book on street harassment in 2008, 790 said they changed their behavior due to harassment in public. 45 per cent reported that they had avoided going out at night because they feared harassment. Fifteen per cent said they'd moved to a different neighbourhood for the same reason.

"It's scary," confirms Ashley Acs, a 23-year-old single mother from Chatham, Ont. who says she's pestered regularly by aggressive men when she walks home from work. "I had two guys pull up in a van beside me one time and yell that they liked my [chest], right in front of my son. They followed us for a while. I didn't know if they were going to get out and try to pull me into their car, or what. I just ignored them until they went away."

While Kears stresses that personal safety should always be a woman's first priority, she encourages victims of street harassment to respond to their harassers and let them know that the behaviour is unacceptable and unwanted.

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"A lot of guys just don't understand how it makes us feel," she says, pointing to a study mentioned in Cheryl Benard and Edit Schlaffer's 'The Man in the Street: Why He Harasses' which indicates that only 15 per cent of harassers actually intend to humiliate or anger the woman. "Most men do it out of boredom, for male camaraderie, or to give ill constructed compliments."

Raising awareness about the issue, says Kearl, is another way women can fight back. By sharing their stories, she explains, victims can help bring attention to what is still considered a largely invisible social phenomenon.

"I think, for the most part, a lot of the public doesn't really see it as a big problem," says Lisa Rahman, a 21-year-old Ryerson University student and co-creator of the anti-street harassment website HollabackTO. "But it's something that affects every woman I've talked to."

Rahman discovered the Hollaback movement - a network of blogs that allow women to share their stories and expose incidences of public harassment- after a venting session with friends inspired her to take action.

"I got really sick of going out every day and having somebody either yell something rude out at me or leer at me for the entire subway ride home," she says. "It just sort of came to a head and I wanted to do something about it."

With the help of website co-creator and friend William MacMillan, she joined the grassroots initiative in August 2008 by opening Hollaback's Toronto chapter - one of more than a dozen sister sites that have sprung up across the United States and Canada since the 2005 inception of HollabackNYC, the network's original New York City-based photoblog.

"This creates somewhere where people can go and share their stories and know that they're not alone," Rahman says. "There are those people who think we're just a group of like, men-hating women - but this website is not to lash out at guys at all. Most guys are actually really supportive - it's just a select few who don't get it."

Those who don't get it, she says, often hold the misconception that if a woman didn't look a certain way she wouldn't get "holla'ed" at.

"But I think we need to get it straight that it's a power issue. It doesn't have a lot to do with what a girl looks like or what she's wearing," she says. "There's no excuse for making somebody feel unsafe or uncomfortable."

Anti-street harassment activists like Rahman and Kearl are demonstrating that, by harnessing the incredible power of new media technologies like the internet and working together in the spirit of solidarity, young women can make a big difference when it comes to social change.

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"Our main goal is just to make things better out there for girls," says Rahman. "We shouldn't have to wear sweaters in the summertime just because we don't want to get leered at."

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