

I am extremely glad that the New York City Council's Committee on Women's Issues called today's hearing on street harassment. Policy makers, activists, and members of the public in Argentina, Egypt, India, and Mauritius are currently collaborating on initiatives to combat street harassment, and it is heartening to see a city in the United States starting to do the same.

Street harassment has been a research focus of mine for four years. I wrote my master's thesis at George Washington University on the topic and recently authored the book *Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women* (Praeger Publisher). I also run the blog Stop Street Harassment and post stories from women around the world. In the last four weeks alone, I've received 20 stories from women in eight U.S. states and seven countries. Three stories were from women in the New York City area.

Street harassment is a global problem, particularly in crowded cities. Recent academic and government studies showed that 80 to 100 percent of women surveyed in Indianapolis, the California Bay Area, Yemen, India, Canada and Egypt experienced street harassment. No formal studies exist that track street harassment rates in New York City.

As part of my book research, I informally surveyed more than 800 women from 23 countries and 45 U.S. states. Two hundred were from New York City. Ninety-nine percent of the 800 women experienced street harassment. The most shocking findings were that men had made sexually explicit comments to more than 80 percent of the women, followed three-fourths, groped more than half, and assaulted one-fourth.

What I know is especially alarming to many of us here and why we feel so strongly about creating change is the young age at which street harassment begins. In my study, nearly 90 percent of the 800 women said the harassment began by age 19 and almost one in four said it

started before they turned 12 years old. Many women recall it beginning around puberty.

Women in their teens and twenties tend to experience it at the most frequent rate.

Studies, articles, and girls' stories from all over the world show that girls and young women traveling to and from school are particularly vulnerable to street harassment – not just on the bus or subway, but also at bus stops, on subway platforms, and at neighborhood carpool pick-up spots. This is not okay.

Street harassment is a form of sexual terrorism. Women never know when it might happen, by whom, and how far it may escalate. Because of street harassment, from a young age women learn that public spaces are male territory. They learn to limit the places they go, they try not to be in public alone (especially at night), and when they are alone, they stay on guard.

No country will ever achieve gender equality as long as street harassment continues since it prevents half of the population from having equal access to public spaces. Ultimately, street harassment is not just a “women’s issue.” It is a human rights issue.

What can we do to help women and girls achieve gender equality in New York City?

The NYC-based activist groups here today are suggesting three ideas: 1) a citywide street harassment study that would show the true prevalence and deep impact of this issue; 2) an anti-harassment PSA campaign at bus stops; and 3) creating “harassment free zones” around schools.

I agree. The citywide study in particular is necessary before we can create meaningful policy.

Since I have the opportunity to do so, I want to suggest four more ideas.

1. Age-appropriate sexual harassment information for students at every school and every grade level, just as there are anti-drug and disaster preparedness initiatives. Sexual harassment training is more relevant to their daily challenges both in and outside of school. They should know what it constitutes so they do not accidentally engage in it

- and they should be taught empowering ways to deal with and report it when they are targeted or when they are a bystander.
2. Well-publicized protocol and sensitivity training for police officers about street harassment. On my blog, I've received very mixed feedback from New York City women who have reported harassers to police officers. There must be set, uniform and appropriate responses from all officers if we want people to report harassers and, consequently, if we want harassers deterred from their behavior.
 3. Signs saying, "How's my behavior? Call XXX-YYYY if I am harassing you" posted on all public worksites, including delivery trucks, taxis, and construction sites. Employers should not tolerate harassment on company time and this simple sign and phone number could help deter employees from harassing people and provide people (including bystanders) with a straight forward way to report it.
 4. "Harassment-free zone" signs for business owners to post outside their worksites. Some street harassers congregate outside stores, restaurants, and bars, and then harass women walking by and the women entering the businesses as customers or as employees. The harassment can make businesses lose customers and cause employee turnover. By enforcing harassment-free zones outside their establishments, business owners could improve their own bottom line and improve women's lives.

Thank you again for holding this historic hearing. I know it will result in positive change in New York City, and I hope other cities will follow suit and work to address their street harassment problems. I am happy to answer any questions.