

ALWAYS ON GUARD: WOMEN AND STREET HARASSMENT

BY HOLLY KEARL

“I feel unsafe almost every day on my walk home from the subway after work. I am constantly cat-called, harassed, touched, whistled at, threatened, followed, leered at. My neighborhood is my home, though, and I don’t want to leave. But what else can I do?”

—Anonymous survey respondent



A LOOK AT THE AUTHOR

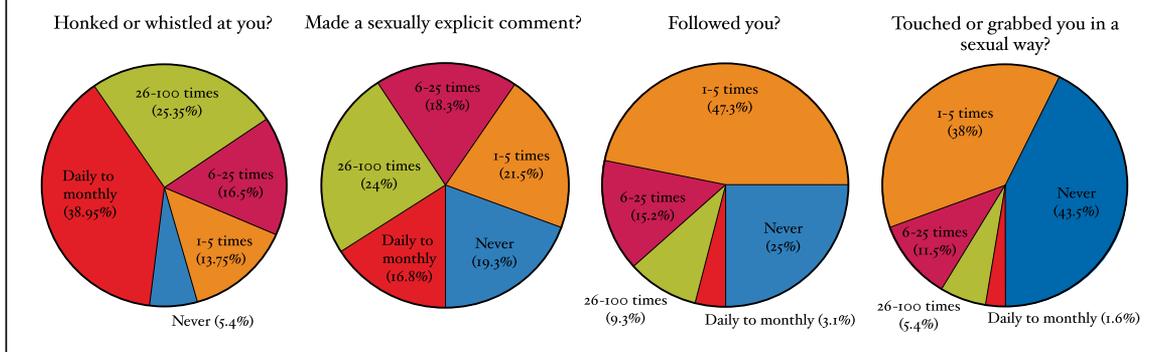
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Holly Kearl is currently working on a book on street harassment.

MOST WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED SEX-BASED public harassment by strangers, termed “street harassment” or “public harassment,” at least once in their lives. Simply by being in a public space, girls and women can and often do become targets of sexually charged comments, gestures, whistles, and honks—and sometimes far more serious criminal behavior involving stalking, groping, assault, and even murder.

A Canadian study in 2000 found that more than 80 percent of women experience stranger harassment and that it negatively affects women’s perceived safety in public.¹ Another study, in the San Francisco Bay Area, found that 68 percent of women of color report experiencing street harassment of ten or every day compared with 55 percent of white women.² In a third study, conducted in Indianapolis, researchers

Prevalence of Street Harassment: How many times has a stranger...



interviewed 506 women and men about street harassment; remarkably, every woman in the study could cite several examples of being harassed, while every man admitted to at least one time when he was a harasser.³

In my own research, the 811 women who completed an informal, anonymous survey on my website similarly reported high levels of harassment in public (see chart). These findings represent a wide range of female experience, including girls and women ages 13 to 83 of various races and sexual orientations and from a variety of geographic locations, including at least 45 states, 23 countries, and five continents.

Even though women around the world experience street harassment and feel unsafe in public because of their gender, it is largely an invisible societal phenomenon, especially when the actions are less severe than assault. In part, street harassment is invisible because it often occurs when women are alone or when people nearby may not notice it happening. Women tend to feel embarrassed and may second-guess what happened or blame themselves.

A woman who experiences harassment and talks about it may be told that she should be flattered by the

attention or that it's her fault because of what she was wearing or doing. As a result, many women keep silent about how often street harassment happens, its severity, and the ways it restricts their freedom in public.

Restricting Freedom in Public

Street harassment has real consequences in women's lives because it limits their freedom in public and impedes their journey toward equality with men. Street harassment shows us that public spaces are for men and that, as women, we are not always welcome in them. Frequent whistles, honks, sexual gestures, and comments about women's looks (both positive and negative) can make women feel like they are just objects to rate, not human beings to respect.

"It's not really about any one incident, but about the constant, daily wearing away of your sense of safety. Every day I am reminded that we live in a world where women are a commodity because, every day, I am treated like a piece of public property."

—ANONYMOUS SURVEY RESPONDENT

NOTES 1. Macmillan, Ross, Annette Nierobisz, and Sandy Welsh. (2000) Experiencing the Streets: Harassment and Perceptions of Safety Among Women. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 37 (3), 319. 2. Nielsen, Laura Beth. (2004) *License to Harass: Law, Hierarchy, and Offensive Public Speech*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 41. 3. Gardner, Carol Brooks. (1995). *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995, 89-90.

What Can We Do?

- Educate boys and men to respect women (see Todd Denny's *Unexpected Allies: Men Who Stop Rape* and Jackson Katz's *The Macho Paradox*).
- Encourage girls and women to share their street harassment stories and increase public awareness about the problem.
- Pass laws against street harassment.
- Teach girls and women self-defense and provide them with realistic tactics for dealing with harassment.
- Teach male allies ways to prevent or stop harassment incidents.
- Organize and participate in grassroots efforts to stop street harassment, such as online activism (HollaBack websites, www.hollabacknyc.com), street demonstrations (Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team and Street Harassment Project, www.youngwomensactionteam.org), and providing safe rides home for women (RightRides, www.rightrides.org).
- For related strategies, visit the AAUW online Resource Library for ideas and resources to end sexual harassment on campus and in the workplace (www.aauw.org/advocacy/laf/lafnetwork/library).



PHOTO BY MARK GODDARD

From a young age, girls are often taught to fear stranger rape and assault, despite statistics showing that men who commit these crimes usually target someone they know. These admonitions and the fact that stranger attacks are random and usually well publicized can cause women to feel unsafe in public. Women never know which harasser might escalate his actions into an attack or whether they will be a target of a random assault.

“Street harassment still freezes me up and terrifies me every day, especially with the haunting and lingering dread of coming across that person who will not take no for an answer.”

—ANONYMOUS SURVEY RESPONDENT

Like sexual harassment at work or school, which can cause women to “choose” to quit their jobs or drop a class, public harassment and assault can cause women to “choose” to stay home at night, avoid going out in public alone, opt to exercise indoors, scowl at strangers, wear headphones, take longer routes to their destination, and restrict their clothing choices. Of the 811 women who took my survey, 62 percent say they “always” constantly assess their surroundings in public because they’ve experienced or fear experiencing harassment. Another 18 percent say they do so regularly (monthly or weekly). This is no way for women to live their lives!

The above sidebar includes several suggestions for ways to end street harassment. You can also visit my website to share your street harassment stories and ideas, to read suggested strategies, and to find other helpful resources (www.stopstreetharassment.com). 