

## **Processing the Issue of Street Harassment-- Key Issues**

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### **I. Problems of Definition -- Is street harassment in the eye of the beholder?**

Among the girls that I've worked with, the experience of street harassment was 'subjective' and ambiguous. Being intensely stared at was considered harassment and/or violence by some girls. For others, street harassment was viewed as "violence" only if it led to sexual assault or a physical act of violence.

### **II. No Scrubs -- What's the difference between being 'picked up' and being harassed?**

For the girls that I work with, the difference between flirting and harassment is context. How the behavior is experienced by girls depends on three factors:

- a. Who does it?
- b. How they approach her?
- c. Where and when it happens?

Carol Brooks Gardner (1995) highlights women's romanticization of public harassment. She writes: "Women's selection of high-status, attractive men from whom they say they do not resent harassment, their scorn for those who do not meet their standards is more than a coping device." Rationalizing the public harassment of women supports and shores up the danger on the streets. Romanticized interpretations of street remarks work to help women internalize responsibility for affecting and controlling men's general public harassment of women.

It is important to make the point that highlighting women's romanticization of public harassment is in no way an attempt to blame women for their victimization. Rather it points to the extent that everyone in the culture has internalized and normalized misogyny. Women who believe that street remarks are actually complimentary unintentionally internalize the current social order and inadvertently help reinforce the status quo.

### **III. The Urban Landscape for Girls and The Fear of Rape**

The girls that I work with talk about what happens on their street vs what takes place off their street. This serves as a way to situate their experiences and to make sense of them. Some girls talk about their lack of fear in walking around their neighborhoods. This lack of fear is usually attributed to the fact that they "know everyone" on their block. Others were more anxious in their neighborhoods for precisely the same reason. These girls didn't feel "protected" by knowing everyone on the block.

Scrutinizing gazes and "flattering" street remarks actuate women's ultimate fear of rape and violence. Little girls grow up being admonished "not to talk to strangers." By this, most understand that stranger is actually a code word for "strange men." Interestingly, the reality is that 75 to 80% of rape victims are assaulted by someone they know. This suggests

that the fear of stranger rape is in fact misplaced. Yet, all girls in this culture grow up with the specter of being assaulted in a dark alley by a stranger. As such, men and women experience public places in vastly different ways.

We need to probe street harassment as an issue in order to fully understand the effects of the fear of rape. The fear of rape must be taught to and understood by men if public harassment of women is to change.

#### **IV. Identities -- Different strokes for different folks.**

Girls of color, disabled girls, LGBTQ girls, girls who trade sex for money and survival needs, marginalized girls of all sorts, are generally INVISIBLE in our culture. In contrast, marginalized girls are highly VISIBLE on the streets and in other public places. They are often targets for abuse. As, these young women are going to experience public harassment in unique ways that must be probed and understood.

#### **V. Oppression and Social Control of Women**

The reality is that “men are the primary architects of women’s fear in public places.” Street harassers can operate with a cloak of anonymity. They can say something and walk away -- unknown and unaccountable. Gardner (1995) makes the case that “public places offer citizens a site in which to practice discrimination that has been outlawed in other spheres and to practice it in circumstances that offer the highest probability of harming targets and escaping punishment (p227).”

Radford (1987) suggests that a woman who is not seen to be controlled by one specific man can at will be controlled by any man who so wants [see Sarita’s quote for an illustration of this]. This informal social control is referred to as part of a continuum of sexual violence that serves to keep women oppressed and unequal.

#### **VI. Responses and Strategies**

Stanko (1990) takes the position that violence is an ordinary part of life and that most of us learn to “manage” it in some way. We “normalize” violence in order to protect ourselves and ultimately to control our fears. This certainly applies to the issue of street harassment. Many girls normalize the aggression as a way to cope and to control their fears. Girls employ a number of strategies in order to cope with daily street harassment -- including avoidance, absence, wearing baggy clothing, walking with male friends, pretending not to hear, staged compliance, answering back, and fighting back. However, the fact that they need to “manage” their public interactions and that they need to “strategize” should not lead us to embrace the status quo. The fact that girls are “resourceful” doesn’t mean that we should not challenge harassers and demand that the social order change.

**Reference** -- Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment by *Carol Brooks-Gardner* (1995)

## **KEY TERMS/ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION AS YOU DISCUSS STREET HARASSMENT**

### **Individual/Interpersonal Issues**

[The focus of most of the public discourse about street harassment]

Dating Market  
Flirting  
Older Men/Younger Girls  
What are you wearing?  
Victim-blaming

### **Societal/Systemic Issues\***

[The hardest and yet most necessary part to convey and to reinforce to teens and adults]

Public Harassment  
Urban Landscape  
Safety  
Fear of Rape/Crime  
Cloak of Anonymity

Sexual Terrorism  
Continuum of Violence against Women  
“Grooming”

### **Historical/Social/Cultural Contexts**

[Using popular culture as a tool to raise these issues and concerns]

Objectification  
Devaluing women’s bodies  
Power and Control  
Oppression/Social Control  
Hip Hop Culture

**Interventions** [Discussions about how to solve the problem and take action]

The Role of Law Enforcement (Contested)  
Community Accountability  
Economic Justice (Jobs)  
Education  
Girls’ Individual Acts of Resistance