

PERSPECTIVES ON  
SOCIAL PROBLEMS

PUBLIC HARASSMENT

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MEN:

HELP STOP PUBLIC HARASSMENT

“STUCK-UP BITCH!”

Brian Martin

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### **BACKGROUND TO A LEAFLET FOR MEN ON PUBLIC HARASSMENT**

Since the early 1980s I have participated on university sexual harassment campaigns and committees, with a special interest in trying to prevent harassment through publicity and education. But in spite of all this activity, until reading Carol Brooks Gardner's penetrating and sensitive account of public harassment in her book *Passing By*, I was only vaguely aware of how serious the problem is. Because I wasn't harassed myself, it was easy to remain oblivious to the impact of public harassment on others. Spurred on by her comments on p. 26 that there are no equivalents for men of the "protect-yourself" guides for women, I wrote a little leaflet, reproduced below. After obtaining comments and encouragement from others on our sexual harassment committee, I sent it to the 60 or so student newspapers in Australia. Several at least have published it. With limited feedback, it's difficult to judge the impact of such an initiative. I see it as a small contribution to a process of social change that needs to take place at many different levels. Here is the leaflet's text:

Streets, parks, railway stations and other public places should be for everyone to enjoy. Yet for many women they are the scene of unpleasant harassment. Men can help reduce this problem.

## THE PROBLEM

As Mary walks down the street, a group of men makes comments about her face and figure—"Hey, good looker!" "Nice tits!" "9 out of 10!" She walks on without comment, a little flattered but annoyed at the intrusion. Then the comments get nasty—"Stuck up bitch!"

Natasha is standing in a queue for a bus. Suddenly she feels a hand grab at her breast. She looks around but isn't sure who did it. She feels violated and too stunned to say anything.

Li notices a man following her on the way home from work. He stays quite a distance back but is there day after day. One day he comes closer and calls out. She is afraid and changes her route and travel time to avoid him.

These are examples of what can be called *public harassment*. It is similar to sexual harassment, except that it takes place in public places which have not been a focus for sexual harassment policies. Public harassment is behaviour in public places that is unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated.

Most public harassment is by men against women. Women can be harassers too. Other prime targets are lesbians and gays, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. For convenience, the examples used here are of men harassing women.

Three main types of public harassment are comments, touching and trailing. These may not seem to be a big problem, but they can be quite upsetting. Few men realise how big the problem is, because they are seldom the target of harassment themselves. Even men who are opposed to harassment may not think there's anything to get concerned about. But there is.

Some women cannot pass through a day without encountering unsolicited comments, requests for their phone numbers, touching, grabbing and so forth. They can't just go about their business without having to ward off unwelcome approaches. Some women avoid public places because of harassment. A few develop agoraphobia (a pathological fear of open spaces) partly as a result of public harassment.

At the more serious end of the harassment scale are assault and rape. Sometimes a pleasant comment is followed by a hostile one. Women may fear that minor harassment is the first step towards a more serious attack.

## ARGUMENTS AGAINST PUBLIC HARASSMENT

- Women deserve to be able to go about their business just like men. Public spaces should be for everyone without discrimination.
- Public harassment has serious adverse effects on some women.
- Expectations of "public aid"—coming to person's service if they drop something, need directions, and so forth—can be undermined when these occasions are used for unwelcome approaches.

- If women are worried about harassment, they can become suspicious of innocent gestures and hostile even towards non-harassing men.

## WHAT MEN CAN DO

- Don't do it yourself. Learn about the problem so that you become more sensitive to what might offend others.
- Don't cooperate with groups of men who harass. Act to frustrate or oppose harassment.

## DON'T DO IT YOURSELF

- Don't make comments about passing women.

If a woman doesn't respond, almost certainly she didn't welcome the comment. Even if she smiles or says thank you, inwardly she may resent the intrusion. She may be polite out of fear that the situation will escalate.

Some men seem to think that they have a right to make comments about women's appearance. No one gave them such a right. It doesn't matter what women are wearing. It is simply presumptuous and rude to make such comments, even if they are favourable.

- Don't ask for her name and phone number.

It's an intrusion to ask a person for personal details, unless there is some pressing reason. Sensitive men wait for women to make the first approach.

If a woman says no to your approach, don't try again. Persistence in this case is continued harassment.

There are plenty of places where it is appropriate to meet women, such as dancing clubs, sporting clubs, private parties and singles bars.

- Don't grab, slap, pinch or otherwise touch.

Some men may think that it is flattery when they feel a woman's breast or pinch her rear. They're wrong. It's intrusive, unwelcome, sometimes painful and occasionally dangerous.

- Don't follow a woman.

This is a serious form of harassment.

## DON'T COOPERATE WITH HARASSMENT

- Refuse to join in.

If you're with a group of guys and they start shouting at or commenting loudly about women, you can help in various ways.

Don't make any comments yourself.

Discourage the others, for example by saying "give it a miss," "she's not enjoying it," "don't be a jerk" or some other suitable way.

At a suitable occasion, raise issues about public harassment.

- Show your opposition

If you notice a situation where a woman seems to be being harassed, you may be able to help. If someone is badgering her, you could go over and ask "Is someone bothering you?" If a woman in a crowd shouts out about being pawed, you might be able to voice a supportive comment to the crowd, such as "Whoever did that, it's not welcome."

If you see a woman who has been abused verbally or physically, you can ask her if there is anything you can do to help. (If she says no, leave. You don't want to be another intruder on her personal space.)

As a man, trying to oppose public harassment by other men is a delicate business. You should try to help but not by being a hero. You may even be criticised by the woman, who is likely to be feeling upset or angry.

## COMPLEXITIES

Others who are likely to be harassed include:

- lesbians (and women who are thought to be lesbians);
- gay men (and men who are thought to be gay);
- ethnic minorities;
- people with disabilities.

Expectations for public behaviour vary from place to place and situation to situation. In an Australian city, two strangers walking down the street towards each other may not look at each other at all. If they do, a common pattern is to look at the other person while at a distance, drop one's eyes when closer, and look into the distance when passing by. In a country town, this might be considered unfriendly.

When different groups from different cultures interact, there can be misunderstandings. Staring can be polite in one culture and offensive in another.

Another complexity is that some women use public encounters as a way to meet men, such as asking a man for the time as a pretext to meet him. This sends confusing messages to some men, who think that any woman who asks for the time really wants to meet them.

The reality is that men are far less likely to be harassed than women. Therefore, a sensitive man should assume that women want to be left alone unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. If in doubt, you can always ask-if she says "no" or "go away," just do as she says!

## FURTHER READING

Carol Brooks Gardner *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). A detailed analysis of public harassment.

Martha J. Langelan, *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1993). A superb treatment of how women can take action against harassment, with a chapter about how men can help.

Sue Wise and Liz Stanley, *Georgie Porgie: Sexual Harassment in Everyday Life* (London: Pandora, 1987).

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