CATCALL

Catcalling is a serious issue that is not receiving enough attention that is best solved with public intervention and through early education. Gender-based catcalling is a form of verbal harassment that is unwanted and derogatory towards women and is forced upon them in a public space. The origin of catcalling dated back in 1693 in the world of theater, but in a different context. Rather spewing hated based on someone sex and appearance it was used to express discontent of a specific actor based on purely acting. It was used on the stage in the audience by hollering at the actor to cause them untold discomfiture. The audience used catcalling as a weapon to disturb the performance and vent of their disapproval.[[1]](#footnote-1) To better address the issue by showing statistics of how often this is happening, which neighborhoods are the worst, and are there laws against it and also upheld, through factual research and numbers can educate people on the affect it has on women to be more responsive when it occurs can be a possible resolution. Artists and activists also brought attention to the issue either through art or performance, by showcasing the seriousness and negativity it has on women. By addressing the issue through an artistic approach, it spreads awareness and potentially changes minds about the possible damage of catcalling. The problem is best solved through early education, spreading awareness, and knowing your rights.

How often does street harassment occur? Studies show that most catcalls happened in the subway or crowded tourist areas. Union square is constantly flooded with people especially in the springtime becoming a potential target to catcalling. In a online survey in 2007, the Manhattan Borough President’s Office gathered about 1,790 participants regarding sexual harassment on the New York City subway system. More than two-thirds of the respondents identified as women. Women are more likely to be a victim to sexual harassment than men; according to the survey 63% experienced being sexually harassed and one tenth experienced being sexually assaulted. Due to the methods used to collect the information on the report “Hidden in Plain Sight: Sexual Harassment and Assault in the New York City Subway System” is not statistically relevant, but it suggest that most women experience harassment in subways due to its crowded and isolated nature. [[2]](#footnote-2) In a recent survey in 2014, SSH commissioned a 2000- person national representative survey conducting what percentage of women experienced different forms of sexual harassment. The survey showed that 65% experienced street harassment, 23% of women experienced being sexually touched, 20% experienced being followed, and 9% were victims of rape. In another survey directed toward men only 25% experienced street harassment but mostly toward men who identified as gay male. Rather than being catcalled and sexualized for their male traits the harassments were based on a feminine trait or a homophobic slur, because being remotely feminine is seen in a negative way. Because of the way our society is designed based on gender and patriarchy being a women or feminine is open to receive harassment.[[3]](#footnote-3) The reason why street harassment isn’t significant and consider a very miniscule problem in today’s society is because it is an under-researched and inattentive topic, but existing studies shows that it is a prevalent problem. To further prove the importance of this issue is how a large mass of women was massively affected women to street harassment. In this conducted informal survey, the stop street harassment founder collected data from 1,141 people to learn more about women’s experiences when dealing with street harassment. The survey states:

Spring of 2007, she asked the 225 respondents:

“Have you ever been harassed (such as verbal comments, honking, whistling, kissing noises, leering/staring, groping, stalking, attempted or achieved assault, etc) while in a public place like the street, on public transportation, or in a store?”

Ninety-nine percent of the respondents, which included some men, said they had been harassed at least a few times. Over 65 percent said they were harassed on at least a monthly basis.

For the second online survey, conducted across a month in fall 2008, there were 811 female respondents (916 total).

Over 99 percent of the female respondents said they had experienced some form of street harassment (only three women said they had not). In one question they could indicate the types of interactions they have had with strangers in public, here is a sampling of their responses.

***Leering***

Ninety-five percent of female respondents were the targets of leering or excessive staring at least once, and more than 68 percent reported being a target 26 times or more in their life.

***Honking and whistling***

Nearly 95 percent of female respondents were honked at one or more times and 40 percent said they are honked at as frequently as monthly. Nearly 94 percent of female respondents were the target of whistling at least once and nearly 38 percent said it occurred at least monthly.

***Sexist comment***

Over 87 percent of women said they were the target of a sexist comment, and about 45 percent said they’ve been a target of a sexist comment in public at least 25 times in their life.

***Making vulgar gestures***

Nearly 82 percent of female respondents were the target of a vulgar gesture at least once. About twenty percent said they had been a target at least 51 times.

***Saying sexually explicit comments***

Nearly 81 percent of female respondents were the target of sexually explicit comments from an unknown man at least once. More than 41 percent have been the target at least 26 times in their lives.

***Kissing noises***

Just over 77 percent of women said they were the target of kissing noises from men and 48 percent said they’ve been the target at least 25 times in their life.

***Following***

Seventy-five percent of female respondents have been followed by an unknown stranger in public. More than 27 percent have been followed at least six times.

***Blocking path***

About 62 percent of women say a man has purposely blocked their path at least once and 23 percent said this has happened at least six times.

***Sexual touching or grabbing***

Nearly 57 percent of women reported being touched or grabbed in a sexual way by a stranger in public. About 18 percent said they have been touched sexually at least six times.

***Masturbating***

More than 37 percent of female respondents have had a stranger masturbate at or in front of them at least once in public.

***Assaulting***

About 27 percent of women report being assaulted at least once in public by a stranger.

The survey concluded, that women dealt with some form of street harassment at least once in their life. [[4]](#footnote-4) Even though street harassment isn’t considered a serious offense but it affects every single woman.

While there is no law against catcalling because it goes against our freedom of speech, there are other laws to protect people from getting harassed. It is very important and imperative to know your rights to prevent yourself and others from receiving harassment. There are variety forms of street harassments that are illegal in New York City, such as verbal harassment, up-skirt photos, indecent exposure, stalking, following, groping, and hate crimes. (in regards of gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion or religious practices, and age) If there is any indication or reason that you are being harassed you can report it to the police and appropriate penalties will charged to the harasser. Knowing your rights and penalties for both the harasser and the victim is one way to prevent street harassment from happening and less likely to happen. Street harassment is an attack and should not be ignored.

How have artists or activist responded to this, or brought attention to it in the recent past? One Brooklyn-based artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh brought catcalling to attention through series of posters with the faces of victims who experienced catcalling and below showcasing the crude statement they received. Fazlalizadeh has been battling street harassment with her own campaign “stop telling women to smile” that consist a series of posters of women with powerful messages such as, “critiques on my body are not welcome” and “women so not owe you their time or conversation.” The campaign started in Brooklyn and then spread to other major cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston. Recently the campaign traveled to Mexico City where sexual harassment is rampant and a campaign addressing the issues of harassment is most needed. Sexual harassment in Mexico City is so dominant that the city provided separate transportation exclusively for women. The campaign is part of an impressive new interactive project at Fusion, a joint startup between ABC and Univision, two huge mainstream companies aimed to attract millennial.[[5]](#footnote-5) Another artist Sarah VanDenbergh collaborating with HollaBack NYC a organization to stop street harassment teamed up initiating a campaign “Hot Pussy is No Way to Say Hello” addressing the issue of objectification of women. VanDenbergh created six life size silhouettes of men and placed them in Union Square and attached commentaries saying crude remarks and signs that say: “I objectify women’s bodies” “I like catcalling women” to represent men who objectify women to view the cut outs in a third person. By doing so, it addresses the issue at hand and giving men who do catcall another perspective how catcalling is perceived. The artist took inspiration from the project from her own experience from street harassment and wanted to showcase the objectification and verbal abuse women receive. They even passed out cards saying “Hot pussy is no way to say hello” and on the back saying “sexual harassment is a crime, from crude comments and threats to stalking and indecent exposure… if you see a perv holla back, take their picture and file a police report” encouraging women to take action and stop it from happening. [[6]](#footnote-6) Using art as a platform to address and solve an issue can have a huge influence to the public encouraging people to stop the problem and preventing street harassment.

The problem of cat calling is best solved through educating the younger generation and conditioning equality and respect among all genders. Men learn at a young age that men and women are divided and society encourages and condone men to belittle women. Through social condition men are taught they are superior to women and should always assert their dominance to assure their position over women, thus catcalling is a form of dominance and power to assert women of their position. We see it everywhere in the media; every commercial with women are over-sexualized, every TV show is typecast of young skinny women while the men are the complete opposite, and its even in marketing where women should be meek and fragile while men should be aggressive and alpha. Gender inequality is everywhere to the point where people are numb to it and accept the fate that men are superior thus condoning catcalling. The younger generation should be educated about street harassment and the severity of the issue. Because we live in a gender-based society we a naturally taught that women’s bodies are meant to be objectified, and women are taught to be ashamed of our “sexual” bodies rather than celebrate it. Men only see women’s bodies as object where they can pick and choose what body part to sexualize. Objectification is what it means, to be seen as an object not as a whole person. Catcalling is unpopular topic for men and even some women, because it is seen as a feminist ideal and feminism is an unpopular concept in its self. The perception of catcalling shouldn’t be viewed as a want from feminist and anything that deals with women’s rights but rather a given right for women and natural right as a human. If street harassment had a strong negative connotation such as being outwardly racist there would be far less street harassment happening in the city. A possible solution or goal is to make street harassment a serious issue, almost taboo to potentially decline the statistics of street harassment.

1. "What Is the Origin of Cat Call?" What Is the Origin of Cat Call? Accessed May 11, 2015. http://www.innovateus.net/innopedia/what-origin-cat-call. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/statistics-academic-studies/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2015/02/10/384994475/stop-telling-women-to-smile-denouncing-jackals-and-catcalling-in-mexico [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/toolkits/art/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)