

ENDING STREET HARRASSMENT : NEW VOICES SPEAKING OUT

HANNA BERNARD sheds light on worldwide initiatives aiming to end street harassment, considering their efficacy and potential.

Worldwide, 80% of women endure at least frequent street harassment, 45% feel that they cannot go alone to public spaces, and 50% have to cross the street and find alternate routes to their destinations to avoid harassment (according to data gathered by Holly Kearl, for her nonprofit organisation Stop Street Harassment). The pervasiveness of the problem has catalysed several different initiatives worldwide attempting to reduce the prevalence of street harassment, with mixed results.

In the last decade, women have been rising up across the world, in efforts to change the narrative. One example is Cheer Up Luv, created in 2017 by Eliza Hatch, a London-based photojournalist.

Cheer Up Luv takes a stand against street harassment, which Hatch considers 'a constant in [her] life'. The name of her project emerged from a recurrent pick-up line with which she had been approached, once too many times. She says 'the number of times I have been told to 'cheer up' by a strange man is countless, and it never gets any more acceptable'. The project began on a small scale, by asking women in her surroundings if they had street harassment experiences that they would agree to share. This first step revealed that not only did her female friends all have stories of harassment, but that her male friends were completely oblivious to the extent of the situation, a perfect illustration of the lack of awareness surrounding the issue. Hatch then put women in the foreground, through a combination of photographs and testimonies, published on her website, Cheerupluv.com. When asked whether she had

any trouble finding participants, she answered that most women she asked sent her at least three stories to pick from. The project quickly expanded as more women reached out to her, asking to participate. Cheer Up Luv achieved the major goal of 'creating a wider support network for... women and a solidarity between them', giving

a voice to women and allowing them, through the photographs, to present themselves as more than victims of sexual street harassment.

Associations worldwide have undertaken various responses to street harassment. Like Hatch's, many of these initiatives focus on sharing testimonies, such as



Gamblers by Erna Mist

The Everyday Sexism Project, which provides an online safe space where victims can share their experience and discuss with individuals who have undergone similar experiences.

But talking is not enough, and in the face of inactive higher authorities, individual, action-based initiatives have also been sparked. With Covid having starkly heightened the frequency of instances of street harassment, the girls of Maryfield College in Dublin took the matter into their own hands. They began by interviewing a range of a hundred young women under the age of twenty, and discovered that some 60% said they had been the subject of catcalling – such as whistling, jeering or sexual comments – during the previous week. They then established a twofold plan of action. On one hand, increasing the space dedicated to combatting street harassment in the education system, and on the other, lobbying TDs (the Irish equivalent of MPs) to consider laws such as France's 2018 anti-street harassment law.

While this initiative is laudable, the law itself has proven ineffective. A year after it was voted in, police data showed that the results were more symbolic than effective, with only 731 fines distributed in the French territory for 'sexist outrages', primarily given in cases of perpetrators caught in the act. This led feminist groups to fear that the small number of

verbalisations may become the official data used to quantify the phenomenon, playing down the scale of the problem.

This goes hand in hand with the fact that in France, 66% of women responding to a survey by the feminist group *Nous Toutes* have reported a poor reception when trying to file a complaint for street harassment at the police station. And there is no shortage of stories like these in the news, such as the recent condemnations of the misogynistic culture rooted deep within London's Metropolitan Police Service.

Women have consistently risen up for the protection of their rights, to overcome the pervasive inequalities that remain in our society. Until now, many of these initiatives have achieved the important first steps of placing the issue in the foreground, giving a voice to the victims and changing the narrative. Yet most of the solutions explored involve the victim taking action: few are institutional, and if they are, they often have a frail impact on real life situations. We must now shift focus, to make both the institutions and the norms of our society evolve, to permanently do away with street harassment, and the culture to which it belongs.

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Untitled by Victor Saint Bris