

My name is Alison Roh Park. I currently work in media relations at the Center for Constitutional Rights, a non-profit legal and education organization that was founded during the Civil Rights movement. I am a poet, cultural worker and activist, and I also teach as an adjunct professor at New York University as part of a graduate program there.

I would like to thank you for creating the time and space to hear stories about street sexual harassment in our city. Every young woman and girl I know has experienced street harassment in some way, shape or form, with national statistics saying that up to 70 percent of women will have experienced it by the time they are 41 years old. And though so prevalent, this is a rare opportunity to speak to the issue safely in a public space and engage in conversations about creating the change needed to shift the paradigm of sexual harassment. I am here as a New Yorker who has experienced street harassment daily for nearly the past two decades. I have experienced street sexual harassment up to three times while walking down one city block, often first thing in the morning when I step outside my apartment building. I have heard similar stories daily; a friend once told me she was sexually harassed 23 three times during a single commute between Jersey City and Manhattan.

I am a lifelong resident of Queens and attended New York City public schools throughout my life until I enrolled at Fordham University. Over the years I've spent a great deal of time all over New York City, Manhattan and the Bronx in particular. I am fortunate to have always been a part of multiracial, multiethnic, immigrant and mixed-class neighborhoods with visible gay, lesbian and transgender¹ communities.

The first time I recognized sexual harassment, I was 11 years old. My sister, who would have been 14 at the time and I'm sure already familiar with sexual harassment, and I often made the 14 block walk between home and our church and parish center that had a swimming pool and basketball court. Men would leer at us; block our path on the sidewalk, sometimes

¹ Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" (self-identification as woman, man, neither or both) not matching one's "assigned sex" (identification by others as male, female or intersex based on physical/genetic sex). "Transgender" does not imply any specific form of sexual orientation. (Wikipedia)

even preventing us from walking forward; come extremely close to us; hiss, whistle or make kissing sounds; make other obscene gestures; or follow us.

As a young girl at a critical developmental age in learning how to have healthy relationships with boys and men, these experiences left me powerless. I was too young to define sex or sexuality, or sexism and sexual violence to understand what exactly was happening to me, but the daily experience of street sexual harassment profoundly inhibited my self-esteem. The advice and comments I received from the women and men around me then and now have been to: “toughen up,” “ignore them,” “don’t let it get to you,” “what were you wearing,” “then don’t walk down that street,” “that’s just how guys are,” “you’re too thin-skinned” or “there’s nothing you can do about it.” When I tried to confront my harassers, I was met with curses and insults, derisive laughter or the situation escalated to violence or the threat of physical violence. As is common during public sexual assault or rape, passersbys were always silent or completely ignored the situation.

During those years as a victim or observer of sexual harassment, as a women of color and an Asian American woman, it was made clear that harassment is often compounded by racist slurs or sexual stereotypes. I also learned that, for women and girls, the New York City public transportation system is often as unsafe a space as its streets. I was fourteen the first time I saw a man masturbating across from me on the subway. I have been followed off the train to close to my home and nearly sexually assaulted within view of an MTA agent in a token booth. I have been stared at for the duration of an entire commute by a man who was known in my community to follow Asian women. I commonly witness sexual harassment by police officers who use warrantless stops to intimidate women who do not respond to their flirtation and sexual advances, abusing their power to demand phone numbers and home addresses. I know a woman who was propositioned for sex by a police officer in his patrol car when she was 14 years old, and another who experienced sexual assault by a police officer under the guise of a stop-and-frisk.

I cannot find the words to accurately convey the cumulative psychological and emotional effect that these daily stressors and experiences of violence—all because of my gender—have had on my life and personal development.

A group that works to fight street harassment by empowering residents to speak out against gender based harassment, called Holla Back DC!, defines public sexual harassment or street harassment as an something that:

“occurs in a public space when one or more individuals (male or female) accost another individual—based on the victim’s gender—as they go about their daily life. This can include vulgar remarks, heckling, insults, innuendo, stalking, leering, fondling, indecent exposure and other forms of public humiliation. Public sexual harassment occurs on a continuum starting with words, stalking and unwanted touching, which can lead to more violent crimes like rape, assault and murder.”

It is important to note that my experiences of street sexual harassment only represent my specific experience as a cisgender woman. Cisgender can be used to describe the other end of the gender spectrum as opposed to transgender, and describes someone who is comfortable being the gender they were assigned at birth. Also important to consider that while it is possible for a small fraction of men to be sexually harassed by women—and that some women do not consider to be harassment what I and many others here may consider to be harassment—because of underlying male supremacy, machismo and the persistent threat of rape, it is essential to center discussions of sexual harassment around the experiences of women and people of other historically endangered gender groups.

Street sexual harassment is about reinforcing gender roles and expectations, placing limitations on what women can or cannot do and where they may or may not go. In that way, street sexual harassment regularly results in violence against gay, lesbian, queer, genderqueer² and transgender New Yorkers. Sexual harassment both reinforces and nourishes the cultural

² Genderqueer (GQ) and intergender are catch-all terms for gender identities other than man and woman. People who identify as genderqueer may think of themselves as being both man and woman, as being neither man nor woman, or as falling completely outside the gender binary. (Wikipedia)

and systemic limitations, dehumanization, objectification and sexualization of women and violence against historically marginalized or forgotten communities—every day and all the time.

Everywhere I go, I can find images and media that values women as commodities, a persistent reminder that women and girls are worthy only as consumers; objects used to sell products from cars to technology to shampoo; and sexualized objects. And, this is all in a country with a shameful level of access to sex education and the highest rate of sexually transmitted infections in the western hemisphere.³

Young girls and boys today have unprecedented access to violent sexual images and entertainment that exploit women's bodies and the limited choices of women within the entertainment industry. Furthermore, as Jamia Wilson of the Women's Media Center notes, "With six media conglomerates controlling the vast majority of media content, we're seeing a dramatic decrease in alternative and positive representations of girls in entertainment and news media. As technology becomes advanced, the viral promotion of these images and messages becomes increasingly problematic. The media tells girls that they have all kinds of options, but starts really young offering them a limited set of choices. Studies show that the more TV a little girl watches the fewer options she believes she has in life."⁴

It is no coincidence that violence against women is increasing at an alarming rate. Between 2006 and 2008, for example, a government report showed a 42 percent increase in reported domestic violence and a 25 percent increase in the reported incidence of rape and sexual assault.⁵ It is important to note that some U.S. studies have found that up to 46 percent of domestic violence survivors do not contact the police.⁶

³ Keynote address, SPARK Summit: Pushing Back Against the Sexualization of Girls (October 2010) Hunter College, New York, NY

⁴ "Ypulse Interview: Jamia Wilson, Women's Media Center" (October 2010) Ypulse.com

⁵ "US: Soaring Rates of Rape and Violence Against Women: More Accurate Methodology Shows Urgent Need for Preventive Action" (December 2008) Human Rights Watch Press Release

⁶ "Domestic Violence Report" (2008) Minnesota Crime Victims Survey

And yet, presented with this information, views on street sexual harassment remain much like those towards domestic violence, rape and sexual violence, welfare, abortion and sex work: though hundreds of thousands of women collectively share these experiences, there still exists this notion of “personal responsibility” and a judgment of whether a person deserves or “asks for it,” as in mistreatment and even violent punishment for perceived infractions against expected roles, such as style of dress, body language or behavior.

Though I am most familiar with street sexual harassment as it occurs in my own community, I have been harassed by men of many races and ethnicities in different neighborhoods throughout New York City. Because of the racism that is so deeply embedded in all aspects of our society, and men of color are stereotyped as violent sexual predators, it is critical to recognize that while sexual harassment and violence against women has many different expressions in different cultural, racial and class contexts, it is an underlying male supremacy and existing gender roles that create and perpetuate street sexual harassment and a lack of safety for women in public spaces.

To rely solely on the legal or judicial system as a quick fix to street sexual harassment will only result in the criminalization of people of color and guarantees unequal access to or enforcement of any such policies. My organization, the Center for Constitutional Rights, released an expert report this week on the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) stop-and-frisk practice—and the findings clearly illustrate that a dramatic majority of stops are made on the basis of race and not crime. This is a clear example of how laws and policies are manipulated by institutions and their agents to the detriment of communities of color.

Similarly, relying on legal or criminal remedies will only make some communities more unsafe. Take Secure Communities for example, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) program that blurs the line between local law enforcement and federal civil immigration enforcement. This program is an example of how our own government agencies can put

communities in jeopardy, such as an undocumented immigrant survivor of domestic violence or sexual assault who will not call the police for fear of detention and deportation.

By not actively working to eradicate sexual and street harassment, we all will essentially be perpetuating the existence of an underclass of New Yorkers with less access to public space; protection under the rule of law; self-esteem; physical and emotional safety; and freedom of movement—what many would describe as fundamental human and civil rights.

The solution must be crafted by the communities whose realities are often ignored in the privileged circles that are empowered to make change on an institutional level. Namely, solutions must definitively include women of color; poor and homeless women; differently abled women; immigrant women; and our youth. And, it is essential that men are part of the solution and do the work needed to shift the attitudes of other men and young boys towards women.

Any remedy should be similarly representative in its benefit, changing the day-to-day quality of life for all women and New Yorkers, and be reflected in the kinds of relationships girls and boys; boys and boys; girls and girls; and women and men share with each other—and with themselves and their bodies—with a genuine openness and respect for every person's right to express their gender as they choose. In the way that masculinity, sexism and self-worth are learned constructs of our society, they can be unlearned if we work together for equal access to public space for all New Yorkers.

Thank you.

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