



Street Harassment of Women and Girls in New York City - 10/28/2010

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When Maggie Hadleigh West's groundbreaking film, *War Zone*, was shown at the small student-run cinema on my university campus in Atlanta, GA in 1998 I sat livid in the theater as the credits rolled, and then immediately organized with my classmates to bring Maggie to our campus to lead a discussion about street harassment. Some 500 students attended that event, so in 2003 when I moved to New York City, I organized a screening of the film again--and packed the theater so full that people stood side-by-side and blocked the aisles.

Four years later, I worked with a group of teen women at Girls for Gender Equity who were so moved by Maggie's film that they created a 20-minute documentary of their own called *Hey Shorty!* that explored the impact of street harassment as experienced by young women of color in this city. Today there are several more short films that have been made on this topic--including *Walking Home* and *Back Up!: Concrete Diaries*--some of which can be viewed on YouTube. Independent and mainstream media have also covered the issue--locally, nationally, and worldwide. Holly Kearl and I have both written books that illuminate the problem of street harassment in the United States, and how women are responding to it--individually and collectively. Yet street harassment persists.

For me, *War Zone* gave a name to a behavior I endured daily on my way to and from my college classes. But more importantly, it validated my fear and anger at having to endure this hostile behavior from men and impressed upon me that street harassment was *not* acceptable and that I shouldn't be expected to tolerate it. But as we all know, just because something is wrong doesn't mean it doesn't happen... and happen often. (Survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault can attest to that.)

Although I knew that the majority of women and LGBTQ people are subjected to men's public comments and physical threats regularly, the result of that knowledge was not empowerment. It was an overwhelming sense of futility to stop it. Like other types of gender-based violence, this one also has deep systemic roots—and ending it requires cultural shift in how we think about gender, race, class, sexuality, the right to public space, and safety. And cultural shifts are messy. And they take a long time. And they require resources to back them, as well as popular support from people of all genders.

Last week at a panel discussion at Barnard College on feminist responses to street harassment, a young woman made a comment near the end of the discussion that mirrored the frustration and futility I felt over a decade ago, and continue to feel today. She said that while she appreciates that conversations about street harassment now happen outside of small, intimate gatherings with friends and in institutional settings, like a prestigious college campus, that she would not be leaving the panel with the encouraging feeling that a new movement against street harassment is bringing the behaviors to an end. She said she would be leaving with the unsettling feeling of its ubiquity and (for the most part) invisibility. And the pat response to her comment that change *is* happening because people are invited to testify before the same city council that just three months ago cut sexual assault prevention and victim's services funding wasn't enough. Because testimony isn't going to intervene when the next guy comes at her with his entitlement to public space blazing. And it isn't going to give her the tools she needs to respond in that moment or to mobilize her community to set in motion tangible results beyond simply talking.

The point is that while conversation about street harassment is good and necessary, it is only lip service when it is not coupled with on-the-ground action and the commitment of adequate resources in the service of social change. There are numerous groups in New York City doing work to end gender-based violence: RightRides for Women's Safety, the Audre Lorde Project, Men Can Stop Rape, and Sylvia Rivera Law Project are but a few. I ask you to support these necessary service and advocacy organizations. Because they are the changemakers and grassroots leaders who are on the frontlines every single day working collaboratively with individuals and communities to make this city a safer place for women and LGBTQ individuals.