

Hello, my name is Grace. I live in Brooklyn and am in 11th grade in high school. Thank you so much for holding this hearing today to listen to the stories and issues faced by so many New York girls and women every day.

I cannot remember the last time I walked out of my house and returned home that night without being sexually harassed at some point during the day. Be it the slimy grin and the threatening eyes, or the erection digging into my back in a sardine-like packed train.

The subway is where I experience it the worst. My phone does not work on the subway. I cannot quickly move away or off the train. I am completely alone. But this should not have to mean that I am completely vulnerable.

The moment which I have felt most degraded, belittled, and humiliated was at 6pm on a Saturday getting onto the 1 train at Chambers heading Uptown. I got on and noticed everyone on one side of the train. I didn't think too much about it and sat down on the two-seated bench furthest away from everyone. The doors closed and the train moved away from the station.

I suddenly noticed a man sitting across from me I hadn't seen before. He was white, old, and wearing a big tan jacket and a baseball cap. He had a friendly face.

His eyes flashed up to meet mine and I quickly dropped my gaze into my lap. I didn't want to make eye contact with him, just like with any stranger; I was worried he would misinterpret the eye contact. But it is ridiculous, really, that I feel I cannot look a stranger in the eye because it would give them reason to think I may be provoking or leading them on in some way. Has it really gotten to the point where I have to watch and reserve every move I make to ensure he doesn't make any of his own?

He shuffled his hands in his pockets.

The train stopped at Franklin Street.

No one got on.

The train doors closed and started on again.

He was fidgeting again, from what I could see from the corner of my eye.

I glanced up at him, against my better judgment.

The hands I thought were in his pockets were not. They were under the big sides of his tan coat. Masturbating.

I can't even remember what I felt at that moment. It was such a rush of so many emotions; it all washed over me and made me feel smaller than ever.

"Don't look at his eyes," I told myself, trying to keep calm, telling myself this wasn't really happening. How could someone possibly comprehend doing this? I tried to concentrate on my hands. They were turning ghostly blue as I squeezed them so tightly for any sense of comfort or release of pain, whichever one it was. I did look up, only to realize the one thing I wished above all was not true. He was staring right back at me.

I guess I must have been angry. I don't think I could feel it though. My fear and shock overpowered everything else such as the shame and embarrassment. The vulnerability and victimization. The fact that I was frozen. Unable to say a thing. Unable to move. Unable to fully comprehend or at least not letting myself. The train stopped at Franklin.

"Why me? Why now? What do I do?!" I screamed at myself inside. I thought I was going to explode. I knew that I should move or say something, anything.

The doors opened to the platform.

I wanted to get off then. I wanted to run off the train so badly. I wanted to scream at that man, who was so sick in the mind and inconsiderate, I just wanted to hurt him. I wanted to yell at the other people on the train, all huddled on the other side. They knew something was wrong, I could read right through their poker faces. I was in despair, and they did nothing. They didn't even glance in my direction. I was in an incomprehensible state.

I stared longingly at the platform. My eyes fixated, yearning to drag my body out of this nightmare, off the train, or even onto the next car. But I was stuck. Crushed.

I did not move. I did not say a thing.

The doors closed and the train moved away from the platform again. I stared down at my hands, concentrating on their wrinkles and creases.

I blame myself for the event. I could have moved to the other side of the train. I could have yelled at the creepy man. I could have gotten off at Franklin or Canal. I could have asked for help. But in the moment, I just could not do it. I ignored the masturbation five feet in front of me and suppressed my feelings. I clenched my jaw and carried on, just the way all girls and women seem to react to the harassment they face every day.

I got off at Houston, as quick as possible. I was relieved to even be that far away from the stranger. But at the same time the relief settled in, a wave of anger and regret panged inside my chest. I almost instantly wished I could have gone back on the train and had the courage and power to stand up to the stranger and let him know, in any way possible that he was sick, that what he did was messed up, that I shouldn't be blaming myself for it. That he was in the wrong and should be punished. It's basic morals, taught from when you're a kid. He had no right. Yet he got away with it.

I walked up to the street that day and continued on. I did not think to mention it to anyone because it didn't seem to matter. Who would care? And if they did care, what could they possibly do about it now? I cannot tell you how many times I have wished I could go back in time and done something.

I did not know what I would do for a while. But once Hollaback came to visit my class, I knew there was something I would do. I did not know that what happened to me was not unusual. That

men frequently masturbated openly to girls and women on the subway. I was one of many cases. I did not experience anything out of the ordinary life of a girl living in New York City.

But how messed up does that sound? How morally contorted are we that young girls are normally subject to such degrading public embarrassment? How messed up is this system that if I hadn't heard about the Hollaback organization, that if I hadn't heard about this hearing, I would still be burying these feelings inside, internalizing my pain and blaming myself for all the wrong that strange men have done to me.

I was not wearing anything that day to provoke him, just jeans and a T-shirt. But that should not have to matter. As my right, I should be able to wear what I want without having to worry about men taking advantage of me. I shouldn't have to leave social outings early just because it's past 9:30 PM and it's considered too "late" for a girl to be taking a long train ride by herself. I should not have to worry about the man at the Chambers Street station who every morning compliments me with a sexual subtext in his words.

Once, I was walking once just behind the playground of my school courtyard. I was not 3 feet away from the school premises when from behind, a man came up and pressed his body against mine. I could feel the heat off his skin, I could smell his hot stale breath as he blew my hair. "NICE ASS," he yelled in a loud, rude, and hostile voice. It was like he was putting me in my place, hammering me down, and reminding me of his authority and control over me. I felt helpless, a feeling I knew was exactly his goal, consciously or not.

I want other girls to know about organizations such as Hollaback. I want girls to know how to handle the terrible situations they encounter on the subway. I want people on the trains to help when they see something happening. I want to be able to ride the subways without having to be so constantly alert and cautious. I want to be able to wear what I want without it being an instigator for harassment. I want to be able to live in this city without having to feel below or undermined simply because I'm a girl.

I thank you for hearing me out. I thank you for listening to my stories that I have shoved to the back of my mind for so long, keeping them bottled up and disregarding them.

Please remember, that the experiences I shared are not unusual. They happen on a daily basis. I do not know one girl or woman in my life that has not experienced some form of sexual harassment in their life. I'm sure that this is true for almost every female you all know too. It is happening every day here in our city. I am only 16, and already I cannot remember half the traumatic experiences I have experienced due to male harassment. Thank you for listening, and please remember how great a help you all can be.