

A big thank you to Councilmember Julissa Ferreras and all of you for being here. Street harassment is an issue that affects so many people, and yet I think too often the response is that we ignore it, hoping it will go away. That clearly hasn't worked, and it's time for some action. I'm hopeful that the New York City council will notice how many New Yorkers are affected by street harassment—this hearing is standing room only— and take decisive action to end it.

At 32, I've experienced two decades of street harassment; I've been chased, flashed, grabbed and attacked by male strangers. I deal with it on my way to the 7 train stop in the morning, and on my way home at night. I've been harassed by old men, boys, weirdos, regular guys, construction workers, men in expensive suits, New York city police officers, and many many more.

I'm tired of it, which is why I wrote an oped on the issue for *El Diario*, available here en español: <http://www.impre.com/eldiariony/opinion/opinion/2010/9/14/el-acoso-callejero-210635-1.html> and in English: <http://thenewagenda.net/2010/09/21/street-harassment-the-uncomfortable-walk-home/>. I was struck by a point that Emily May of Hollaback made at an event for Holly Kearl's book *Stop Street Harassment* last month: harassment puts you on edge to the point where you can't even enjoy a basic "good morning," because you're worried it will turn into an insult if you don't respond the way the "gentleman" wants you to. I know women who've had bottles thrown at them by disgruntled catcallers. Street harassment creates a tense climate that's not good for anyone.

In my oped, I mentioned an incident that occurred when I was 13 years old—the first time I remember being harassed. A couple of men slowed down their pickup truck, and followed me down the street yelling what they wanted to do to me in graphic detail. When my oped came out in *El Diario*, what shocked me most about the response is the number of women who told me that at 13 they were already veterans of street harassment-- they first experienced it when they were 10 or even 8 years old. Children too young to go to an R-rated movie have already been hearing X-rated comments, and enduring X-rated behavior, for years. That's more than just creepy: it's a tragedy that teaches girls at an early age that public spaces are hostile territory.

I believe that nobody should deal with unwelcome commentary on the street, and it's important to note that street harassment is not limited to biological females; LGBTQ people of all genders face harassment as well, though today we are focusing on the experiences of girls and women. I'm particularly concerned about children experiencing it at such an incredible rate—girls are being forced to contend with men and boys' desires before they even have a chance to figure out their own. There's a great video called "Real Men Don't Holla," made by a group of New York City high school students that I'd encourage you to watch: <http://www.youtube.com/user/realmendontholla#p/a/u/2/X8fyFPEJBVM>. These girls are just 15—and they started getting harassed or grabbed in the streets at 8.

I'd like to identify what I consider to be the obstacles to ending street harassment, as well as opportunities to make it stop.

- 1) **Street harassment is minimized**—People say we ought to relax and enjoy the compliments, and they're unwilling to acknowledge that filthy street corner commentary might have a negative impact on the women who endure it everyday. Holly Kearl's research does a great job of challenging the perception that it's no big deal by demonstrating that 75 percent of women have been followed and 57 percent have been sexually grabbed by strangers in the street. Her research also shows that women who have been sexually assaulted are much less tolerant of street commentary, which makes sense. The U.S. rate of sexual assault hovers around one in four American women—and that's just what's reported. We need to share these stats to help men understand how frequently women feel unsafe—with good reason—and to put street harassment in context. For a rape survivor, a man shouting crass come-ons, blocking her path or following her down the street doesn't feel harmless.
- 2) **Street harassment isn't talked about:** it happens so often that it becomes part of the wallpaper. Women develop armor, but in the process of trying not to let it get to us, resignation replaces indignation. We have to return to indignation, ladies. We must remind ourselves that it doesn't have to be this way—that it isn't this way everywhere, as Holly's book shows—and that we must create a different, safer world for our children.
- 3) **The perception that women want to be harassed:** this one comes up often. Certainly, some women appreciate a compliment—and I think insecure young girls are particularly vulnerable to flattery. I know I was. But I've never met a woman who enjoyed being followed, grabbed or insulted by a stranger. We need to keep the focus on how frequently "compliments" escalate into insults or worse, so that people understand that this isn't just a question of us being overly sensitive or politically correct. Too many women spend too much time living in fear—we're used to mapping out escape routes, or ducking into shops to lose the guy who's been following us for blocks. We don't do this because we like to play secret agent, we do it because so many of us have been through the worst case scenario.

Opportunities:

- 1) **Education:** If the New York City council could do just one thing to address this issue, I believe it should be education. Children need to learn how to communicate respectfully with each other, and also what's OK and what's not OK when dealing with adults—this is crucial because it's very young girls who bear the brunt of street harassment. They need to know their

rights, and they need the boys around them to be allies instead of enemies.

I've written extensively about domestic violence (<http://www.thenation.com/article/beyond-gossip-good-and-evil>) and have been saddened that in this country, despite the fact that more than a thousand U.S. women are killed each year by their partners, only two states mandate education that covers dating violence prevention. In both Rhode Island and Texas, the families of girls whose boyfriends murdered them advocated for a curriculum to be included in schools, and they were successful. We should be preventing such behavior before it starts, instead of waiting for someone to get murdered or raped. I strongly believe that bad gender dynamics need to be challenged as early as possible, and I encourage New York to become a pioneer in teaching children to treat each other with respect. Harassers are reaching New York girls as young as eight; we need to get to them first. I'd also advocate a public education ad campaign, with the force of some of New York's legendary anti-smoking ads. Powerful, provocative ads get people thinking.

- 2) **Conversation:** I've found that people, particularly young people, are really eager to discuss this issue, and that while they may have conflicting opinions, they're open. A lot of young men have told me that they harass because their buddies pressure them to, but when confronted with how they're making girls feel, they often reassess their behavior. We need to start talking about street harassment, but we also really need to listen to young people like the girls in the Real Men Don't Holla video; they could teach us some lessons.
- 3) **Confrontation:** Every man who catcalls or makes a comment isn't a villain; a lot of men are just oblivious to how their behavior makes women feel. Obviously, confrontation is not the best strategy for every situation (or even most of them). Your safety is more important than educating every man who talks to you on the street— plus, who has the time? But on a few occasions, I've been pleasantly surprised. Recently, a young man on a bicycle followed me up my own street. When I asked him to leave me alone, and told him that no matter what he said, he wasn't getting my phone number, he seemed surprised and even embarrassed, as if it had never occurred to him that a woman wouldn't enjoy being chased at night. I told him that his behavior was intimidating, and he apologized to me. I hope that our conversation changed the way he approaches women. At the very least, it changed the way he approached me. A lot of men have just never put themselves in our shoes. Whether we're in sneakers or high heels, too often, it's a long, uncomfortable walk home.

Thank you again for putting together this hearing.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Mendez Berry,  
Queens resident.  
[www.mendezberry.com](http://www.mendezberry.com)