



HOLLY KEARL – Stop Street Harassment

What could be more basic than the right to walk down the street, without facing harassment? Because of gender-based street harassment, this is a right that girls and women and some men, especially in the LGBTQ community, are routinely denied, including in Philadelphia.

My name is Holly Kearl and street harassment is my area of expertise. It's what I wrote my master's thesis on at George Washington University in 2007 and it's the topic of two books I authored. Currently, I am a consultant to the United Nations' Global Safe Cities Initiative and I run the nonprofit Stop Street Harassment. Among our programs is International Anti-Street Harassment Week, which Philadelphia community members participate in each year.

Street harassment is both a local problem, as Hollaback! Philly's survey shows, and it's a global problem. Recent studies conducted in places like Egypt, Yemen, Peru, India, France, Canada, and a few American cities show that most – if not all – women have experienced it, including sexually explicit comments, following, flashing, and groping. This is not okay. What is very alarming is the young age at which street harassment begins. In an online study I conducted, nearly 90 percent of 811 women said street harassment began by age 19 and almost one in four said it started by age 12. Many women recall it happening as they traveled to and from school.

Gender-based street harassment also impacts men in the LGBTQ community and some straight men who may look less "masculine" (such as having long hair). Transgender individuals face the most frequent and violent types of harassment, by citizens and sometimes by police officers.

All people who experience street harassment tend to feel less safe and comfortable in public spaces, especially while alone. They may keep their head down, walk fast, wear sunglasses and ear phones and try to look invisible. They may change routes and routines, give up hobbies, and stop going to the most convenient bus stop or store to try to avoid harassment. In my study, I even heard from people who moved neighborhoods or changed jobs.

Street harassment is a human rights violation because it keeps harassed persons from having equal access to public spaces and the educational, economic, and leadership opportunities there. For this reason, in March, the United Nations tasked countries with addressing this problem...and it's time for cities in the USA to follow this directive, too, including Philadelphia. What can we do to stop street harassment in Philadelphia? Here are three suggestions.

1. Conduct community safety audits around the city to empower citizens to evaluate their neighborhoods and make concrete recommendations to address problem areas. This is a strategy the UN uses all over the world. In the U.S., I helped lead audits in Washington, D.C., and the NYC Council has co-led ones in their city.
2. Age-appropriate sexual harassment information for students at school, just as there are anti-drug and disaster preparedness initiatives. Sexual harassment is more relevant to their daily challenges both in and outside of school. They should know what it constitutes and how to deal with it.
3. Addressing harassment on public transportation. Transit authorities in Boston, Chicago, New York and Washington, D.C. have funded anti-harassment PSA campaigns. In April, Hollaback! Philly sponsored really powerful anti-harassment ads on SEPTA and I would like to see the Philadelphia transit system fund it going forward.

Everyone deserves equal access to public spaces. It's time for the Philadelphia City Council to work with community members to achieve that goal. Thank you.