Street Harassment: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Young Women in Delhi

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Abstract
This study attempted to understand street harassment as experienced by young women in Delhi. Interviews were conducted with 20 women between the ages of 18 and 30 years to understand the nature of harassment they faced, its perceived consequences, their ways of coping with it, and the changes they felt were needed for them to feel safer. Findings revealed that harassment occurred most often in crowded spots and in broad daylight. High levels of harassment were attributed to factors like prevalent attitudes toward women and weak implementation of laws. Participants saw their lives as being restricted in several ways by the harassment. The police was seen as apathetic, and women took on themselves the responsibility for staying safe. Sometimes, women chose to defend themselves by moving away from harassers rather than confronting them due to fear of escalation. However, several participants felt that staying quiet allowed the perpetuation of harassment. The major change that women sought was more effective police functioning.

Keywords
street harassment, women, public spaces, safety

The sexual harassment of women is extremely widespread and has been found to negatively impact women’s workplace productivity, emotionality, and relations with family (Celik & Celik, 2007; Pryor, 1995). Present-day statistics from the Indian subcontinent depict a deeply disturbing picture of women’s lives. A report on crimes against women in India by the National Crimes Records Bureau shows that 8,233 cases of dowry deaths, 38,262 cases of kidnapping and abduction, and 24,923 cases of rape were reported in the year 2012 alone (National Crime Records Bureau Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). It must be kept in mind that the actual number of criminal offenses committed against women is far higher than these statistics reveal. Many crimes, in particular those that involve sexual violence remain vastly underreported due to a variety of reasons including shame, stigma, the fear of retaliation, insensitivity of the police, long and complicated legal procedures, low conviction rates and an overarching culture of impunity. Even a cursory assessment of Indian laws on sexual and other forms of violence against women shows that these laws were for decades wholly inadequate both in their framing and implementation. It was only after the brutal gang rape and eventual death of a young female medical student in Delhi on December 16, 2012, that nationwide protests compelled the government to enact a stricter antirape law. Similarly, laws to deal with the sexual harassment of women at the workplace were lacking at least till 17 years ago when, in 1997, the Supreme Court of India gave the basic definition of sexual harassment at the workplace and provided guidelines to deal with it. These came to be called the Vishaka Guidelines. Although several attempts were made to enact a law on this subject, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill eventually came into effect as late as 2013. While these changes, though belated, are significant, it remains to be seen whether the new laws will be implemented in the manner required to reduce gender-based violence.

Another form of sexual harassment rampant in this part of the world but seldom discussed is street harassment, also known as “eve-teasing.” This specifically refers to harassment that is faced mostly by women from men who are strangers, in public spaces like streets, parks, modes of public transport, and bus-stops. “Eve-teasing” was defined in 1984 by the government of New Delhi as

When a man by words either spoken or by signs and/or by visible representation or by gesture does any act in public space, or signs, recites or utters any indecent words or song or ballad in any public place to the annoyance of any women.

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Some behaviors considered to be forms of “eve-teasing” include making passes, obscene gestures, whistling, staring, pinching, fondling, and rubbing against women. Fairchild and Rudman (2008) have noted that street harassment shares many common themes with the sexual harassment that happens in other contexts, most specifically the component of unwanted sexual attention. However, street harassment is unique in that it is perpetrated by strangers (as opposed to familiar people such as bosses, teachers, or medical professionals) and that it takes place in public domains. In this study, we attempted to extend previous work by understanding street harassment as it is perceived and understood by young women residing in Delhi. Based on the work that has already happened in this area and the recent spate of sexual crimes against women across India in public spaces, we hypothesized that street harassment would be a key factor in determining how women negotiated their lives in the city, how safe they felt, and the amount of freedom they had in accessing public spaces, particularly at certain times.

The city of Delhi, although considered to be relatively cosmopolitan, modern, and one of the “best to live in India,” also faces problems such as overcrowding, tremendous pressure on its infrastructure, and rising crime rates. In the last few years, the city has garnered the reputation of being extremely unsafe for women (Roy Chowdhury, 2011). A 1996 study found that 91.7% of women hostelers of Delhi University reported facing harassment on campus roads everyday (Gender Study Group, cited in Mirsky, 2003). A more recent report submitted by the Delhi police to the Supreme Court of India revealed that complaints about harassment in public spaces registered a fivefold increase from 154 in 2012 to 793 in 2013 (Mahapatra, 2013). The findings of a survey conducted by “Jagori” (2011), a nongovernmental organization working on women’s safety, throw light on important facts about the harassment of women in Delhi’s public places. The report indicated that most incidents of violence took place in broad daylight. Roads and public transport emerged to be most unsafe. School and college students said that they hesitated to confront perpetrators due to lack of confidence, or even report incidents at home, for fear of being stopped from pursuing education. Although 70% of the women surveyed by Jagori nevertheless did report confronting harassers, Mitra-Sarkar and Partheeban (2011) found only 12% of women to do so in a study conducted in Chennai. Women may choose not to retaliate in the face of harassment due to the high risks involved. There have been several reports from all over the world of women being attacked on confronting their harassers. These attacks take various forms including threats, beatings, and being run over by vehicles. In 2013, a young girl in Florida was brutally attacked on the street by a man she refused to have sex with. The man unknown to her first dragged her into his car and choked her. Then he dropped her on the ground and ran over her multiple times, only stopping when witnesses intervened (Kearl, 2013). In another incident that occurred in an upmarket Delhi restaurant on International Women’s Day last year, a group of five men smashed a bottle on the head of a woman who protested against lewd comments being passed by them (Shekhar, 2013). Forms of retaliation from harassers also include throwing acid on the woman they target. Although no governmental statistics on acid attacks are available, several media reports indicate that acid attacks on women in India have been on the rise in recent years and many of them have resulted in the death of the victims (Dhar, 2013; Kumar, 2014). These attacks have continued in the face of recommendations of stricter regulation of acid sales by the Supreme Court of India and an amendment in existing laws to punish perpetrators of acid attacks with a 10-year imprisonment.

Despite the challenges that it creates for women, the issue of street harassment has been treated frivolously in the past. “Eve-teasing” is the most common form of sexual violence depicted in Hindi films (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003), typically shown as an act of romantic love rather than as a crime. Baxi (2001) states that the term “eve-teasing” itself is highly problematic as it constitutes women as “eves,” temptresses who provoke men, whereas “teasing” denotes that harassment is viewed as playful. Contrary to what is depicted in Indian movies, street harassment causes women to restrict their time in public places alone, be perpetually alert, and change neighborhoods and jobs (Kearl, 2010). Macmillan, Nieroibisz, and Welsh (2000) found that the more experiences a woman had being harassed in public, the less safe she felt in public. Harassment from strangers was associated with increased fears about safety when walking alone at night, using public transport, and walking alone in a parking garage. In the study by the Gender Study Group in Delhi (cited in Mirsky, 2003), 45% of women said that sexual harassment on campus affected their personal or academic development in some way such as avoiding library facilities, not joining various institutions, and avoiding particular courses.

Given the seriousness of the issue and the limited documented information available, the purpose of this study was to highlight the lived experiences of women in Delhi as they attempt to resist the harassment they face while going about their daily lives like commuting to work, walking to the market, going for a movie, and so on. Many reasons have been presented for why the issue of street harassment has been relatively neglected, even in research in other parts of the world. Bowman (1993) proposes that it has been overlooked perhaps because there is no legal recourse as it is almost impossible to catch strangers for harassment if they disappear instantly. Furthermore, Lenton, Smith, Fox, and Morra (1999) suggest that unless it rises to the level of assault, public harassment is not illegal; some men and women construe it as trivial or even flattering. Moreover, Gardner (1995) writes that stranger harassment is so pervasive that it is a part of the social fabric of public life and thus women experience the harassment believing that no one will think anything of significance has happened. We feel that it is the very
The pervasiveness of street harassment and the recognition of it as a phenomenon has been extensively studied. With respect to Bowman’s point, although it may be true that sometimes it is difficult to catch strangers in public places, it must be pointed out that in several cases, women can identify the men who are harassing them. For example, a man constantly touching a woman throughout the course of her bus journey can easily be identified and nabbed provided the woman believes she has someone to report the incident to. Also, regarding the idea that some men as well as women treat the issue trivially, we did not find this to be the case for the women who participated in our study. There are therefore several reasons for paying due attention to street harassment. It needs to be acknowledged that street harassment is on the rise, women’s lives are deeply affected by it, and most women in our experience do not trivialize it.

It is striking that while more urban Indian women than ever before are taking up higher studies and careers, are dating and pursuing social lives, and thus stepping into public spaces, these spaces are becoming increasingly dangerous for women. The positive strides being made by women are not translating into increased access to public spaces (Phadke, 2010). Several intersecting causes may explain the increased dangers posed by public spaces to women, particularly the threat of street harassment. Sociologists attribute the rise in street harassment to urban migration, destruction of mohalla culture, sudden upward mobility of certain caste groups, and new wealth. Feminists identify street harassment as a source of women’s disempowerment and as a part of their systematic oppression. Patriarchal societies are seen to share a discourse that discourages women from leaving the private sphere, which is the supposed site of patriarchal protection, whereas public space is imagined as inherently dangerous (Fregoso, 2003). When men are asked why they harass women, some of the reasons given include reliving boredom, entertaining their male friends, and because it is fun (Benard & Schlafer, 1996). The explanations provided by men connect clearly to the tendency to objectify women. Although harassment may be a conjunct of the objectification of women, the outcome for women of being viewed by others in sexually objectifying ways may produce a tendency of internalizing the harasser’s perspective, resulting in increased self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This connection was partly supported in a study by Lord (2009), which found that the more harassing behaviors young women experienced, the more likely they were to report experiencing fear and anger. Also, the more negatively the women felt about being harassed, the more likely they were to report lower self-esteem, unhappiness with their appearance, and preoccupation with their weight. In addition, it seems that women have come to be seen as “open persons.”

In our experience, women who fall into a category that allows civil inattention to lapse, such as someone who is accompanied by a child. Individuals who do not meet society’s standards for what is ideal may also fall into this category. It appears that men have for some reason learned to treat women as open persons. The consequence is that civil inattention becomes an important defense for women to develop if they are to avoid the intrusive attention of men.

Considering the mounting reports of sexual harassment, some agencies have taken steps to make Delhi’s public spaces more tolerable for women. In 2010, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation decided to reserve the first coach in every train for women, although the segregation of men and women does not address the reasons that lie behind harassment. In 2011, a “slutwalk” protest was organized in Delhi to highlight the daily violence that women experience. Moreover, several demonstrations and discussions have taken place in the media and other public forums after the heinous gang rape of 2012. Although these attempts create awareness about women’s discontent, there is a continuing need to understand how women in Delhi interpret their experiences of street harassment, particularly in the face of the contradictions of modernity and tradition that shape the lives of women in Indian cities and transformations being witnessed by India’s urban hubs. In this study, we looked not only at women’s views on the pervasiveness of the phenomenon and the reasons behind it but also attempted to identify the overt and covert reactions and coping mechanisms adopted by the women against the harassment. We also looked at the concerns expressed by the women’s families. In addition, we sought to understand what women found most dissatisfaction about the present state of affairs and the changes they desired to feel safer in the city.

**Participants**

The participants were 20 women between the ages of 18 and 30 years residing in Delhi. The women either belonged to the city or had been living here for a considerable period of time and came from middle- and upper-middle-class families. Twelve participants were students and were pursuing bachelor’s or master’s degrees in subjects like elementary education and literature. The remaining participants were working and engaged in professions such as journalism, medicine, and business. Fifteen participants were unmarried whereas the remaining were married. Nearly all the participants were Hindu by religion. One participant mentioned that her mother was Hindu and father was a Muslim, whereas her own religious orientation was “spiritual.”

The sample was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling and data was collected through face-to-face semistructured interviews. As all the participants and interviewers were bilingual, the interviews were conducted in Hindi and English. These ranged in length from 32 to 90 min. Each interview was audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. 

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The interviews were analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith & Eatough, 2007). First, the interviews were read to comprehend the essence of each interview. Thereafter, similarities and differences across all interviews were noted. Then initial themes were identified, organized into clusters, and checked against the data. The final themes and subthemes that emerged were then put together as a narrative account of the interplay between participants’ perspectives and researchers’ interpretations of same.

**Results and Discussion**

The themes that emerged from the analysis have been presented below with illustrative passages from the interviews.

**Omnipresence of Street Harassment**

The women we spoke to perceived street harassment to be extremely prevalent. Frequencies mentioned by the women ranged from being harassed on 50% of visits to public places to being harassed on all such occasions. Prevalence rates reported here are similar to those reported by other samples from Delhi (Gender Study group, cited in Mirsky, 2003) and samples from foreign countries such as the United States (Nielsen, 2000). Harassment took place in various forms such as men staring, passing lewd comments, and rubbing against women’s bodies. Once again participants’ responses indicate that street harassment occurs in similar ways across geographically distant places. Women in countries like Britain (Kearl, 2010) and Egypt have reported similar forms of harassment (Ilahi, 2009). With respect to the kinds of public spaces in which such harassment occurred most often, rather than isolated places where a woman may find herself alone with the harasser, harassment was reported to occur in crowded spaces. Although the perception may be that women are safer in places where they are among other people, this does not appear to be true with respect to street harassment. Mediums of public transport such as buses and the metro emerged to be spaces mentioned with the greatest frequency. At any given time of day, modes of public transport are extremely crowded in Delhi. This kind of crowding brings men and women in close proximity creating the possibilities of unwanted touches. It also makes it difficult for the woman to judge whether the behavior was intentional or unintentional and therefore to question the aggressor. The participants reported the harassment in modes of public transport to be so rampant that some had stopped traveling in buses altogether and traveled only in the ladies’ compartment of the metro. With respect to time of day, the participants faced harassment during broad daylight. These findings support those of the Jagori report. Women believed that harassment occurred after dark as well but said that because they avoided being in public places on their own after sundown due to safety concerns, they did not have to face the harassment. Ruhi, a 28-year-old freelance writer, said,

It happens the most during rush hours, when you are coming from office or going to office or school or college. There’s a lot of rush at that time. It’s very easy for people to (harass). At night, I wouldn’t know because I don’t travel alone. When I was using public transport, I would use it during the day. In the night I am sure that (the harassment) is worse.

There was no clear-cut consensus on the characteristics of men whom they were harassed by. Whereas some women considered younger men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to harass them most often, others said that they had been harassed by men of all ages, backgrounds, and educational levels. For instance, Sushmita, a 21-year-old student of chartered accountancy, said,

I don’t think I can pin-point a particular type because I have experienced being eve-teased by people of my grandfather’s age and people wearing proper shirts and ties and going to office. People like them and people who are absolutely useless, whiling away time on the streets. I don’t think there is any type.

The fact that no specific demographic characteristics emerged to be significant is not surprising. Past research has indicated that the sexual harassment of women is not usually related to a man’s age, marital status, physical attractiveness, or occupation (Gutek, 1985; Paludi & Barickman, 1998). Male harassers are more distinguishable by their psychological characteristics (Paludi & Barickman, 1998; Pryor, Giedd, & William, 1995) rather than by demographic characteristics.

**Perceived Reasons**

On being asked why they felt harassment was omnipresent in Delhi, the women provided several possible reasons. By and large, Delhi was perceived to be more unsafe, crime-infested, and prone to instances of street harassment than the other big cities of India. Some women connected increasing rates of street harassment to the presence of male immigrants who came from what were perceived to more oppressive pockets of the country. The participants believed that men who came from parts of the country in which women were expected to remain only within the domestic sphere, used harassment as a way to demean the women in Delhi who stepped into public spaces. For instance, Ruhi said, “Small town men in awe of Delhi women, very male ego thing. That why are women so strong, why are women traveling, why are they doing all of that stuff. So they try to put you down.” Delhi being the capital of the nation witnesses a large amount of in-migration. According to a report by the Indian Institute of Human Settlement (IIHS), the two largest streams of migration into the city are from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Better job prospects is one of the main reasons for migration into the city, with a majority of workers finding employment in the unorganized service sector (Delhi Human Development Report, 2006). To our knowledge, there is no past research that links increasing immigration into the city with rising rates of street
harassment. Neither is there any data to indicate that most harassers are men who do not belong to the city. Considering that studies have indicated men of all demographic profiles to engage in harassment, the views expressed by the participants need to be understood within the context of commonly held perceptions regarding immigrants. First, for example, there are widespread negative stereotypes especially among Bihari people such as being rural, poor laborers, and uneducated (Lynnebakke, 2007). Second, and linked to the first point, there have been instances of people in high administrative positions publicly blaming immigrants for the problems of the city. In 2012, the then chief minister of Delhi identified the “unbridled influx” of migrants into Delhi as a major challenge and blamed the burgeoning population for the city’s problems. Given the notions that exist about immigrant populations, women may perceive them to be a threat to their safety although the reality of these beliefs remain to be objectively tested. However, many participants saw the patriarchal culture within Delhi as perpetuating harassment. Komal, a 29-year-old woman working in a multinational company, said, “It’s purely got to do with the ethos of the men here. One, they feel that (harassment) is their right. Second, they feel that it’s right. They don’t feel it’s morally wrong.” Participants also felt that taboos around sex, the extremely lopsided sex ratio of Delhi (868 females per 1,000 males, which is lower than the national average), and the lack of close community ties contributed to the harassment of women. Other given reasons included weak and poorly implemented laws and lack of awareness about the laws. Most participants reported that they themselves knew little about the laws on street harassment. There is no law in the Indian penal code (IPC) that exists specifically for street harassment. However, certain sections of the IPC that pertain to men indulging in obscene gestures, remarks, or songs, showing pornographic material to women, making sexually colored remarks, and so on, can evoke imprisonments and fines. The findings point to the need to create awareness about the laws as well as their effective implementation.

Reactions to Street Harassment

Women reported a variety of reactions to the harassers ranging from nonconfrontational to highly confrontational. Sometimes women just ignored the harassment. At other times, they reacted, for example, by staring back at the harasser, hitting him, or shouting at him. For each woman, the decision to confront the harasser was based on certain considerations such as whether she was in a familiar place, whether she was with an elder person, or whether the harasser had crossed a certain line. At times, women chose to move away from harassers due to fears that the situation might escalate further. Although several reasons have been identified in Western studies for why women will not react in these situations, including societal pressure; concern about being called a feminist; fear of retaliation; or fear of being perceived as impolite, aggressive, or unfeminine (Swim & Hyers, 1999), the main reason given by participants in this study was fear of escalation. This is not surprising in light of the attacks on women we discussed earlier on. Some women also said that they did not want to “create a scene.” Appearing impolite, aggressive, or unfeminine were not mentioned at all. Most women believed that bystanders would be unsupportive in such situations because they were busy or because harassment did not impact their lives. This thought also compelled the women to abstain from confrontations. Despite behaving nonconfrontationally at times, many women felt that it was actually better to confront harassers and wished that they did so more often. Most participants felt that when women remained quiet, they sent out the message that they were submitting to harassment. Meenakshi, a 22-year-old student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in elementary education considered it important to “shame” the harassers. She said, “(When I lash out) people are taken aback. You can see shame on their faces that a girl said this to them and they walk off.” Yet, women also felt that while by confronting they were trying to tell that harasser to stop, he himself could misinterpret the confrontation as an invitation. Like Asmita, a 25-year-old journalist, said, “(Harassers) think this girl abuses, she must be really feisty. So it becomes (that) she is trying to encourage it, let’s come back.”

Being harassed was also associated with negative emotions such as feeling embarrassed, unsafe, disgusted, objectified, and frustrated. In line with the findings of Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001), we also found anger to be common among the participants. Women felt angry over the idea that harassment was ubiquitous, passed off as inconsequential, and faced by participants simply because they were women. Contrary to men’s reports that they intend to complement women by passing comments or touching them, none of the women said that they found such experiences flattering. Gardner (1995) has pointed out that even when the content of street remarks is complimentary, other features of the remarks might preclude them from being understood as compliments as they occur in a public place, are passed among unacquainted members of the opposite sex, the expected compliment response—thank you—is unacceptable and often produces escalating hostility and the remarks often refer to parts of the body not available for public examination. Hence, they do not serve the same function as compliments. Not only were acts of harassment completely unwelcome, each woman believed that street harassment incidents could take uglier turns such as being raped, being attacked with acid, getting kidnapped, and so on. A mounting body of evidence suggests that street harassment causes women to be more aware of their sexual vulnerability, one of the greatest fears being that of rape (MacMillan et al., 2000). Whereas some women reported suppressing these feelings, others said that they shared them with friends and parents. Means of coping also included crying to vent feelings or telling one’s self that it was a usual part of life in Delhi.
Ironically, although this thought provided a superficial sense of consolation, the idea that harassment was embedded in the city’s functioning was also what deeply angered the participants.

**Family Reactions**

While street harassment clearly affects the women who face it, their families are bound to be affected as well. However, concerns and worries of family members with respect to the harassment of women in public places have largely gone unstudied. Many participants reported that their mothers and fathers remained worried about their safety. To keep their daughters safe, parents were reported to use two kinds of measures. The first was imposing restrictions on where their daughters could go and what time they needed to come back. This inhibited some of the participants in talking to their parents about the issue because they were wary of the restrictions. For example, Komal said,

> So my parents would tell me don’t go out. If I discuss with them then my freedom is curtailed. So I don’t want to discuss it. They know they can’t make the world a safer place so they just want to reduce the chances of anything happening to me.

The second response from parents was advising their daughters on how to handle unpleasant situations. Some parents advised their daughters to take action against the aggressor. For instance, Meenakshi said, “My dad is like, even if you have to hit someone below the belt do that ... and if you feel overpowered, then and there call police.” Her father also advised her on other more nonconfrontational ways of remaining safe. She said,

> His reaction is that be safe no matter what it takes, whether it is conservative clothing. If you have to wear something flamboyant, suit your behavior and your transport accordingly ... don’t be too loud, don’t attract too much attention towards yourself.

However, some parents advised their daughters to simply get away from the harasser. For example, Sushmita said,

> Whenever I have started fighting (with the harasser), my mom gets scared and she tells me to stay away from it which is also I think one huge problem because that also somewhere tells you that you cannot do anything.

This indicates that though the participants understood their parents’ concerns, they were not willing to adopt everything their parents suggested and desired to use their own judgments in determining how a particular situation should be handled.

**Apathy**

The participants believed that there was general apathy toward women’s concerns about street harassment, which was seen to extend from politicians and police to the general public. They felt that harassment was seen as a “normal and regular affair” and thus ignored. Politicians were seen as extremely insensitive for blaming women for the harassment they faced. Devika, a 19-year-old student of literature, said,

> I remember there was this news correspondent who was returning after her work, late at night, and she was killed or harassed, something happened to her. And the chief minister simply said that why are women traveling so late at night when they know that it is not safe!

According to Ilahi (2009), street harassment may be partly ignored by authorities because women do not usually report cases of harassment to the police. This may happen for two reasons. One reason that has already been identified in previous literature is the difficulty involved in identifying the harasser. Like Asmita said, “It’s not that you can provide much information. (Police) will say ‘Who was it?’ I don’t know. What was the car number (of the harasser)? I don’t know.” The other reason may be the sense of mistrust women have toward the police. Some women reported that they had been stared at and whistled at by police personnel. Ruchi talked about how the police, like politicians, could pose a danger to women by blaming them. In line with this, Meenakshi discussed how when she and her friend decided to report an instance of molestation at the local police station, they were told by a woman constable that the kind of clothes Meenakshi’s friend was wearing was bound to result in harassment. Thus, the belief that the police could be extremely insensitive extended to female police personnel as well. Some women expressed dissatisfaction with police efforts. Sushmita said, “If you go to (police) they might do something. I myself have gone to police and police have shouted at (harassers). But if you are just standing there, I haven’t seen a single policeman come up.” Meenakshi said that attitudes of the police differed from one police station to another. Police personnel stationed near her college were responsive because they knew the college principal, but police stations further off were not. Perceptions of the police as apathetic seem widespread. Mitra-Sarkar and Partheeban (2011) found that 11% of the women surveyed by them sought assistance from the police and only a few found them helpful. Indian women’s movements have said that women’s complaints of sexual harassment are routinely disbelieved. Moreover Baxi (2001) asserts that assault reports are open to interpretation by the police. It is clear that what women believe about the attitudes of law-enforcing agencies has profound implications for how they approach incidents of harassment. When women believe the state machinery to be either unwilling or unable to redress their problems, as expressed here, it often functions to silence women around the issue.

**Strategies for Self-Protection**

When within public spaces, women anticipated facing harassment and actively adopted strategies to prevent it from
occurring. The strategies chosen by the women were directed at keeping attention away from themselves and marking their personal boundaries within the public spaces that they occupied. Phadke (2010) asserts that safety for women does not automatically come from institutional factors like infrastructure or policing but has to be actively produced by women on an everyday basis. The production of safety takes place with the implicit understanding that the responsibility of negotiating “danger” rests with women. Not surprisingly, as public transport was seen as one of the most common sites for harassment, some participants who were able to afford personal cars chose to travel by their own vehicles. However, even traveling in a car would not always be safe particularly after dark. Harshita, a 27-year-old information technology (IT) professional, spoke of how she ensured that every door and window of her car remained locked when she was driving alone because she had been followed and harassed even in her own car. While using public transport, women tended to protect their bodies from unwelcome touches and stares in various ways. For example, Meenakshi said,

When I am traveling in public transport I try to cover my breasts. I would just wrap my arms around (myself) or I will hug the pole in the bus . . . I make it a point to carry stole . . . When I am in a crowded place I try to wedge everyone with my elbows and I push people.

Hence, the women used certain nonsexual parts of their bodies and scarves to protect more sexualized parts such as breasts. Nupur, a 20-year-old student pursuing a graduate degree in psychology, said that in buses women would put their bags between themselves and copassengers to avoid being touched. Women have also been found to modify their public behaviors in order not to draw unwanted male attention (Guano, 2007). This was also found to hold true for the participants in the present study. Some women adopted “dead-pan” facial expressions and avoided eye-contact with strangers so as not to attract attention. Women also chose their clothing according to where they were going and avoided staying out till late. Harshita said,

As a girl you have to be conscious 24×7 in this city. You have to be conscious of where you are going what you are wearing, what time you are going to be there. You leave at a certain time, you be back at a certain time. When you are stepping out, then you anyways have to be careful about what you are wearing . . . You would not wear very tight t-shirts, skirts and all of that.

Because what women wear has been used to legitimize harassment, many women alter their dressing styles in the public sphere. They attempt to draw less attention to themselves by clothes that hide their bodies to attain more public freedom although they may not actually achieve this freedom. Despite the importance given by the women to dressing in a certain way, most said that women’s clothing was not responsible for harassment. Whereas some said that revealing clothes attracted unwanted attention, all the participants reported that they had been harassed while wearing loose clothing that covered their bodies. Nupur explained that despite knowing clothing could not provide protection from harassment and believing that clothes were not responsible for harassment, she continued to wear clothes that covered her body so that no one would get a chance to blame her for the harassment. In line with this belief, Phadke (2007) states that women who dress in a way that is socially defined as provocative are seen as “asking for trouble” and unlikely to receive public sympathy if they are harassed publicly. Another strategy for preventing harassment was to avoid going out alone at night. Interestingly, street harassment occurs mostly in crowded places, and at night, the crowds may be expected to be less. Despite this, women felt vulnerable going out at night especially on their own. It is apparent here that harassment had forced women out of public spaces at least at certain times and increased their dependence on men. Bowman (1993) has theorized that street harassment substantially limits the liberty of women in the most fundamental sense of freedom from restraint. It reduces the physical and geographical mobility of women, preventing them from appearing alone in public space and in the process accomplishing an “informal ghettoization” of women to the private space of the home. Feminists note that the reasons for keeping women away from public spaces may be rooted in the patriarchal demands for closely monitoring and controlling the sexuality and thus the mobility of women, particularly those who are young. Sen (1984) discusses the different ways in which patriarchal setups control and channelize young women’s sexuality. One of these ways is to dominate and control public spaces and for men to claim that public spaces are male-only dominions. When women do enter these spaces, they are tolerated only within very strict limits of movement, action, and dress and “transgressions” are often met with harsh retribution in the form of sexual and physical assaults. Anwary (2003) for instance discusses how the increase in acid violence against women in Bangladesh since the late 1980s may partly be a result of a reassertion of patriarchy in the face of perceived threats of female employment and independence. Similarly, it has been suggested that the postrevolution spate of sexual attacks on women in Egypt may be the result of a large-scale campaign from Egypt’s security forces to undermine the political opposition. By tarnishing political demonstrations with sexual violence, it is thought that elements of the security forces hostile to the revolution might discredit its moral standing and discourage female protesters from taking part (Holman, 2012). Here one senses not the state’s apathy but complicity in the pandemic.

Although most women believed that many strategies they adopted were effective in reducing the amount of harassment they faced, the possibility of getting harassed always remained. Thus, the strategies did not guarantee protection. Only one strategy was seen by every participant as an almost foolproof way of avoiding harassment, which was to go into public spaces with a male. Devika said,
When I am accompanied by a male . . . I don’t know why but I feel more secure. Because probably when accompanied by a male . . . the person who is the harasser doesn’t have that much of confidence to initiate an assault.

The word almost is imperative here as in both cases of the gang rape that occurred in 2012 and the incident in the marketplace that happened a few months later, the women were assaulted despite being accompanied by men. Men who attempt to intervene and stop the harassment may also be attacked as is what happened in 2011 when two young men were beaten and killed for defending their female friends from harassment outside a restaurant in Mumbai (McGivering, 2011).

**Required Changes**

Some participants felt that for harassment to reduce, a complete social change and “social upliftment” was required. For instance, Devika said, “you know I think there is a dire need for a change, a revolution wherein women are given the respect they need and they deserve. The disparities between men and women should really decrease.” Ruhi felt a certain amount of responsibility lay with women. She said, “It is not going to help unless it’s a collective consciousness, where women are actively taking a stand and going out and hitting (harassers) out and police is there to support you.” Also, women had to stop feeling embarrassed by the harassment, and sensitivity and awareness had to be created around the graveness of the issue as opposed to glamorizing it. Sushmita said,

If it is taught that, not only to the girls but also to the boys that it is wrong, it is not funny, it is not cool, it does not give you a right to raise your collar and walk around with your friends by eye-teasing a girl, that’s not really showing your manliness. From a woman’s perspective at a very personal level I think we need to stop getting embarrassed by such situations.

The participants also felt that the police needed to be more proactive. Sakshi, a 25-year-old entrepreneur, said, “There should be more awareness in police as well. They should make sure women can travel. There should be more police booths, more numbers where women can just call up. There is hardly any awareness about such numbers.” Stricter punishments for the harassers and a more supportive attitude from police personnel were also seen to be important. Participants also expressed that apart from being too busy or uninterested in helping, bystanders did not get involved thinking that they themselves would get extremely entangled in the complex legal process. Ruhi said,

It’s such a big issue that you need your police, you need governance in the city to help you do that. Our government should take strict action. They need to really start punishing these guys. I am sure there are a certain category of people who want to go out and help others but they can’t do it because they know it’s not going to leave them anywhere . . . If I am being harassed and your brother is on the road and trying to help me and he helps me and it becomes a police case, your brother is going to get pulled into it. He doesn’t even know me. He’s just going to get stuck. But if your brother knows that even if he makes a police complaint, or confronts this (harasser) his family life is not going to get effected in any which way, he will step out and do it.

Many women referred to the media as a source of information through which they learnt the frequency and types of crime that were being committed against women in the city. A majority of participants believed that the media could play a role in creating awareness against street harassment. For instance, Devika said,

I think media can play a very vital role because they can actually bring about a change by propagating the right kind of messages . . . they must encourage women to stand up for themselves, and stand up for their security and safety. They must encourage women to actually report to the authorities, to actually adopt certain measures for security probably like carrying pepper spray, indulging in martial arts, taekwondo, etc.

However certain others felt that the media was also prone to blowing issues out of proportion and portraying women as damsels in distress needing good men to protect them from bad men. Ruhi felt that although the media could bring attention to such issues, real changes would only occur if the judicial system took the issue more seriously. The combined responses of the participants thus indicate the need for simultaneous changes at multiple levels so that women can access the city in the ways that they want to.

In line with our expectations, we found that street harassment by male strangers was extremely influential in determining how women approached life in the city. The views presented by the participants enabled us to identify a number of factors and processes through which street harassment persists in being an impediment to women’s freedom and security. These appear to operate in a cyclical manner and have been presented in Figure 1.

Harassment within public places appears to occur in multiple forms with high frequency, most often in broad daylight and in crowded spaces. It is an outcome of a number of variables that appear to be interrelated. Within patriarchal societies, women are often treated as objects. This objectification is considered natural and justified. Women are also often blamed for the violence they face. In a society that largely operates on these premises, apathy from the police, poor implementation of laws, as well as indifference from bystanders toward women’s problems are excepted outcomes. Given the very nature of street harassment, the fact that it carries dangers of further harm, such as rape and acid attacks and the sheer dismissal of the issue at various fronts, women report feeling a variety of negative emotions in response to it.
including anger and fear. Anxiety is also experienced by the women’s families who have little control over what the women have to deal with in public places. Because women anticipate harassment and believe that help will not be forthcoming from other quarters, they actively adopt self-protective strategies to prevent it from occurring in the first place although no strategies guarantee safety. When confronted with instances of harassment, women's overt reactions that may range from moving away to confronting the harasser are mediated by a variety of considerations. Although women would rather confront the harassers than ignore them, it is most strongly the fear of retaliation and the concern that their reaction may be misinterpreted as an invitation that inhibits women from taking action. In such circumstances, confrontation may lead to further harassment. However, the choice to remain silent and ignore harassers is also a difficult one for women, as silence is also seen to perpetuate the culture of harassment.

**Conclusion**

The constant possibility of being harassed in public places controlled several aspects of the participants’ lives, including their timings of travel, choice of clothing, and behavior in the public sphere. However, there were two positive findings in the study. First, though self-blame has been found to occur
among women who experience harassment (Kearl, 2010), none of the women we spoke to attributed the harassment they faced to anything they did, said, or wore. The responsibility for harassment was placed squarely on the shoulders of the harasser. Second, although previous research has established linkages between street harassment and women’s tendency for self-objectification, we did not find this to be the case, for example, in the form of lowered self-esteem or greater preoccupation with weight or appearance. However, studying the relationship between levels of street harassment and self-objectification in Indian samples appears to be a relevant area for future research.

The detailed perspectives and instances shared by the participants point to the need to treat street harassment as a deeply serious matter. Of all the changes that the participants wished to see, the most significant was a change in the way the police responded to instances of harassment. The ineffective manner in which the police operated was perceived to further deter already apathetic bystanders from helping women being harassed. Moreover, police personnel were seen as potential harassers. Unless women believe that the police force of the city shall cooperate with them, they are unlikely to report such incidents. Crimes that go unreported foreclose the possibility of perpetrators being punished and allow offenses to occur repeatedly. It is thus imperative to create better redressal mechanisms and also for the police force of the city to proactively reach out to women to establish trust. The findings also indicate that contrary to common perception, police patrolling and the creation of safety are required not only at night and at isolated spots but also during the day and in crowded places. Modes of public transport need to be closely monitored, considering that they are seen to be extremely unsafe, so much so that some women had stopped using them altogether. In addition, creating awareness about laws is important in which the outspoken Indian media and once again the police can play an important role. Organizations like Jagori are already involved in such initiatives. Over a year ago, the Supreme Court has ordered that in the event of a complaint of harassment, the driver must take the vehicle to the nearest police station. If the driver does not, then the authorities must cancel his permit to ply. This was part of directions issued by the court to fight street harassment including the installation of closed-circuit televisions (CCTVs) and deputation of plainclothed female police personnel in public places. Effective implementation of these and other measures like adequately functioning toilets for women and men, proper street lighting, and gender sensitization programs based on feminist values, particularly in schools and colleges to enable young people to challenge misogynistic notions, shall be critical to reducing instances of harassment.

Like any research, this study has certain limitations. First, the study is intended to elucidate women’s experiences; however, it does not endeavor generalizations. The sample of the study was small and participants in this study were urban, young, north Indian, and moderately affluent. Women’s experiences of street harassment vary in accordance with race, age, and class. For example, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds would be even more vulnerable to harassment in public spaces considering that they are likely to spend more time in these spaces than women from more affluent backgrounds. Women who belong to different parts of the country, particular the north-east, may experience harassment in unique ways. Future research within this area needs to understand experiences of women from various castes, classes, and regions to understand how these categories interact with and shape women’s experiences in public spaces. Second, we cannot ignore the possibility that there may have been more to the experiences of the participants than the present interviews captured. The nature of any person’s experience is always in part inaccessible to others. Finally, the possibility of researcher’s bias cannot be ignored in a qualitative study. However, the researchers attempted to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process.

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