

**Direct Action, Education, Consciousness-Raising, Activism and the Internet:
Methods for Combating Street Harassment**

Why Men Harass: A few pieces of street harassment scholarship particularly looked at why men harass women. In an interesting study discussed in “‘The Man in the Street:’ Why He Harasses,” Cheryl Benard and Edit Schlaffer report that they interviewed sixty men who harassed them as they were walking in the streets of four major cities around the world about why they harassed women. The men reported doing so out of boredom, for sport, for male camaraderie, for ill-constructed compliments, and only 15% said they did so to humiliate and anger the women.¹ Of the 213 men that Gardner interviewed in Indiana, many said they would “harass women any time, anywhere, to anyone, except those accompanied by men.”² Most men made it clear that they, “without shame,” felt it was their right to evaluate women.³ Some men said the public sphere was a good place for the sport of “girl-watching.”⁴ Men also reported that they would shout compliments or touch women they did not find to be attractive out of pity and to make them feel better about themselves.⁵ Making evaluations and attempts at acquaintance were the reasons most frequently given by the men for their behavior.⁶ In her research in Washington, D.C., Langelan found that some migrant workers, working class white men and some black and Hispanic harassers said they specifically target white upper- and middle-class women as a way of expressing hostility to the racial or class privilege the women represented.⁷

¹ Cheryl Benard and Edit Schlaffer, “‘The Man in the Street:’ Why He Harasses,” 395-397.

² Carol Brooks Gardner, *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 89-90, 195.

³ Gardner, 187.

⁴ Gardner, 191.

⁵ Gardner, 193-194.

⁶ Gardner, 195.

⁷ Martha Langelan, *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Fireside Press, 1993), 61.

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In her documentary “War Zone,” filmmaker Hadleigh-West interviewed 1,053 men about why they are harassing her while she walks down the streets of New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago and New York. Of the 53 incidents she includes in her 71 minute film, the men react with bravado, embarrassment, or anger in response to her question of why they are treating her, a complete stranger, the way that they are; very few apologize for their behavior or see anything wrong with yelling out sexual comments at a complete stranger.⁸ During an interview with *Time* magazine she expressed surprised at the level of men’s aggression on the street, particularly when the interaction they initiated with an unknown woman did not go the way they planned. She said, “If it doesn't go the way the man wants to, suddenly you find yourself in this racist, or sexist or homophobic circumstance. Like a real woman would like this aggression, whereas a frigid lesbian bitch, or a bitch, would not. You might be a ‘white bitch,’ or a ‘nigger,’ or whatever racial slurs might come up. Or even ageism comes up. I've had men say, ‘You're cute, but you're old.’”⁹

A writer for Salon.com wrote an extensive piece on street harassment in 1999, part of which included the responses of men she interviewed after they harassed her. The following are two of the responses she received: "Aw! There y'all go, there y'all go! Always complainin' when you should be happy. We like you, get it? We human men. We like your bodies. We like your ... your ... okay, I'll say it and it's your fault because I don't even talk like this -- we like your titties! We like titties. We men. We like women, ain't no fags round here." Another one said, "It's a compliment, alright, jeez. Why is it so

⁸ Maggie Hadleigh-West, “War Zone,” Film Fatale, Inc., 1998...Viewed during the Street Harassment Summit in New York City on May 5, 2007.

⁹ Timehost, “Watching All the Girls Go By: A conversation with Maggie Hadleigh-West, director of the film “The War Zone” about sexual harassment on the street,” *Time Magazine*, 15 September 1998, <http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr091598.html> (18 October 2006).

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wrong to tell you that you're pretty? How much time you spend getting dressed this morning? How much makeup you got at home? Huh? It's for me, right? For men."¹⁰ Responses such as these show that many men seem to feel they are generously bestowing a compliment on women, that women are dressed for their pleasure, and that “complimenting” women proves their own manliness. As scholars like R.W. Connell, James W. Messerschmidt and Margaret Wetherell discuss in their articles about hegemonic masculinity, the concept of hegemonic masculinity sets a hierarchy where white, heterosexual men are at the top, and the subordination of other forms of masculinity, such as homosexuality, is related to the subordination of women by men, and to achieve hierarchy within the masculine framework or prove their manhood to their peers, men can harass women.¹¹

According to Langelan, there are three main categories of male harassers of women. One category is men, such as those who flash women or masturbate in front of women, who find the harassment of women itself to be sexually gratifying and are categorized as sexually predatory harassers. The second category is men who seek power over women through intimidation and fear are dominance harassers. The third category is territorial harassers who have an economic objective and want to exclude women to protect their own interests; this is more common at work-based sexual harassment.¹² The dominance form of harassment is usually the most frequent kind as “men assert their status and reassure themselves that their masculinity commands respect and female

¹⁰ Debra Dickerson, “Too sexy for my shirt,” *Salon*, 21 May 1999, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/05/21/harassment> (20 October 2006).

¹¹ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19 (2005): 829 – 859; see also Margaret Wetherell, “Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices,” in *Feminism and Psychology*, 1999, accessed online at <http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/conference/WetherellPaper.pdf> (24 July 2007).

¹² Langelan, 41-45.

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deference.”¹³ This again reflects the concept of hegemonic masculinity and these men’s desire to prove their masculinity to themselves, their peers, and the women they harass.

¹³ Langelan, 45.