

Stop calling me 'Baby': Baltimore activists campaign against street harassment

By Elizabeth Doerr
Baltimore City Paper • Dec 08, 2015 at 1:24 pm



(Dave D'Incau Jr.)

"Beautiful lips."

The words drift past you along with the crowd of people on the busy downtown Santiago street. It takes you a moment, but because the words are in English and they are almost whispered in your ear, you realize the comment is directed at you.

Flattered, you turn to see where the words came from, thinking in your 15-year-old mind that this could be the start of your brief, but exciting, Chilean romance.

You begin to mouth "gracias," as has become habit in your one week in the country, but mid-response, you realize the "compliment" came from a man in his 40s. Hair slicked back, wearing a crisp, white button-down shirt and business slacks, he stares at you with intense and suggestive eyes as he walks in the opposite direction.

After catching his eye, your stomach turns. "Was it a compliment?" You think. "Should I be flattered?" You turn to catch up with your parents walking several steps in front of you. They didn't hear the man.

For a moment, you wonder how you should feel. At 15, you're big-lipped and wiry, and the shape of your face and body haven't caught up with your distinct features. "Beautiful lips" feels, at first, validating, that

you're growing into your awkward proportions as you exit puberty. But you also feel dirty, like you did something wrong by acknowledging a man nearly 30 years your senior with your parents only a few feet away.

"With a show of hands, how many of you have experienced some form of street harassment?" Brittany Oliver asks her audience. All but a couple of hands shoot up from the women in the audience of 60 or so people. None of the hands of the dozen men in the room go up. "Take a moment to look around the room," Oliver says, "what you see is a variety of different people who've experienced harassment. It's something that affects everyone."

Oliver, co-director of Hollaback Baltimore, is speaking about street harassment at a forum at the University of Baltimore School of Law this past October. Hollaback, an international organization based in New York City, began in 2005 with a mission to end street harassment by working with local chapters like Hollaback Baltimore to create awareness campaigns, hold educational workshops on preventing street harassment, and share stories.

Oliver and her all-volunteer Hollaback team are attacking the problem in a variety of ways. They host monthly coffee chats to give victims of street harassment a safe space to vent. They partner with Baltimore Free Farm on regular (and free) self-defense workshops. They promote the use of their iPhone and Android apps to report street harassment. They train employees at local establishments, such as the Bun Shop and Ottobar, through the Safer Spaces program about how to help someone who they see is a victim of harassment.

They also hold events like the one at UB School of Law. Margaret E. Johnson from UB School of Law sees value in bringing together both lawyers and activists in order to "address the legal remedies for street harassment and that topic is not normally part of Hollaback Baltimore's events as it is a non-legal organization," she says. But she also notes, "it is important for lawyers to learn how activists problem-solve and identify areas where such activism may be more effective than any legal remedy." In fact, the school plans to hold an anti-street-harassment training in partnership with Hollaback Baltimore next semester to further that dialogue.

"We have a whole list of activities we'd like to do," Oliver says to an audience member who asks about their school trainings. "Right now we're trying to recruit a Hollaback youth coordinator. We're limited by the number of people who can volunteer their time and funding." In 2014 Oliver was featured in a street art campaign with posters around Baltimore neighborhoods, including Station North and Hampden, in New York-based artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's "Stop Telling Women to Smile" street art campaign. The goal of Fazlalizadeh's work is to feature illustrated portraits of women with "captions that speak directly to offenders," as her website states. She hangs the posters on buildings and lampposts all around the world.

Oliver is also focused on raising the conversation about intersectionality. "When I came on board with Hollaback," she says to the audience, "I got a lot of stories from black women who experienced street harassment." Her voice rises with passion at this point, with sounds of affirmations coming from the

audience. "We want to have events that specifically talk about the distinct experiences." Although women are the ones mostly affected, men, boys, and sexual minorities all experience harassment as well and Oliver understand their experiences and stories are vital part of the conversation.

And the stories start early.

"Most street harassment happens during puberty," says Debjani Roy, deputy director of the national Hollaback. Eighty-four percent of women first experience street harassment before the age of 17, according to a 2014 conducted by Hollaback and Cornell University researchers. Most women first experience street harassment between the ages of 13 and 14, the study found, after surveying more than 16,600 women in 22 countries.

"The first time I remember being catcalled was in eighth grade," says 29-year-old Baltimore resident Liz Courtemanche. "I was with a group of friends on a field trip to Philadelphia. Some guys watched us walk by and told us to 'shake what your mama gave you.'"

She was more aware of how her group of friends reacted than how she felt herself. "I was watching my friends go through this range of emotions," she says. "Some were offended, some were complimented, and others were kind of duking it out between the two emotions." What struck Courtemanche was that her friends felt compelled to discuss the event.

"I felt the opposite," says Megha Ghildiyal, a 34-year-old from New Delhi, India who lives in Baltimore. "The first time I was harassed, I didn't want to talk about it at all. I just put it all in my head. Street harassment happens when you're very young in India. It was also taboo and you couldn't talk to your parents about it. You had to learn how to deal with it yourself."

Ghildiyal can't remember the first time she was harassed, but by the age of 15, she had already "gone through the gamut of sexual harassment," including being groped on public transportation. Her experience is consistent with most Indian women, according to the Cornell study, in which 80 percent reported being harassed by age 15, and 23 percent had experienced it by age 10.

Ghildiyal believes the harassment she experienced also negatively affected her relationship with her brother. She recalls an experience when she was 15 or 16 when she and her friend were walking to the movies with her then 10-year-old brother. While they walked, two men (and two women) in a car pulled up alongside them and followed. Ghildiyal told the men to move along, but what she remembers most clearly was the thought, "What must my brother be thinking?"

"After that, he never went anywhere with me," she says. She speculates that he probably didn't know how to protect her given his size in comparison to the men who harassed her.

For many women, it not only affects their relationships, it affects them emotionally and psychologically. The Cornell survey found that street harassment is linked to low self-esteem, and even depression, in the long term.

"I often blame myself for it, even though it's happening to me," says Shannon Wrenn, a 31-year-old Baltimorean. She, like many women, questions whether it was what she wore, or whether she looked at them in a way that could be perceived as an invitation, or whether she should've taken a different route to work.

"Respondents used language like anxiety, fear, and anger," Roy says. "The impacts aren't too different from domestic violence. It impedes mobility, leads to depression and causes people to move out of cities. So, people aren't able to live their lives as they want."

The study found that in India, 80 percent of women reported that they were unwilling to go out at night because of harassment and in the United States, 72 percent of women reported taking different transportation. The moment a woman steps out her door, the choices she makes relate specifically to her safety and comfort. As Ghildiyal says, "when it comes to your own security, never give anyone the benefit of the doubt."

You don't know when you first heard it, but your memories of Ecuador at age 20 are flooded with catcalls. Every day: walking down the street in the city; riding on the bus to school; sitting at a cafe drinking coffee. Piropos, roughly translated as "flirtatious compliments" in Spanish, surround you, but they don't feel like compliments.

"Hey baby. Come to me."

"Hola chica bonita."

"I want you."

"Te quiero, mi amor."

At first, you chuckle to yourself while passing the security guard pursing his lips in the universal kissy face. You and your female friends regale each other with stories about the different comments you received on the way to school: the security guards (so many of them security guards!), the construction workers, the teenagers, the businessmen.

Several weeks go by, though, and the newness wears off. Each time you approach a group of young men, your stomach clenches and your forehead gets sweaty, preparing for an onslaught of hissing and taunting. They probably don't see it as taunting, but that's how you feel: a girl on display in the street for their pleasure.

You and your friends discuss strategies to avoid the comments.

"I think I get catcalled on the days I wear skirts, even the knee-length ones," you say to your friends.

"Yes! I wore shorts the other day and it was the worst," your friend responds.

You all agree to wear long pants from now on. You stop going on runs. The feeling of you and your legs being on display each day feels worse than not taking care of your body.

Frustration eventually becomes complacency. You expect the catcalls any time you leave your home; you're on high alert when you see the groups of teens, and the construction workers, and especially the lone security guards holding their empty rifles. But their whistles and their "hey baby"s pass through you like the polluted Quito air.

"Well, she's dressed that way," Courtemanche says with a mocking inflection, mimicking critics. "The conversation around street harassment, or even rape, falls apart when the conversation of clothing comes in. I mean, I can see it. You understand there's a gray area, but I love dressing up and I love wearing what I want to. There are nights when I want to dress up, but in some ways there's a fine line between what you wear and how you're perceived. But that's not an open invitation."

"I don't want to be a sexual object," Wrenn says. "It would just be nice to wear what I want. I like skirts and I like dressing up, and I have big boobs, but I don't want to be somebody's object."

Many women struggle with this everyday decision of what to wear and how it will be perceived. "I think women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies," says Hollaback's Debjani Roy. "If anything happens, the first thing people will ask you is 'what were you wearing?'"

Wrenn describes her clothing choices when she leaves the house, saying often she chooses to "go incognito." "You know, when I wear my baseball cap and my jeans that I wear in the garden," she says.

For Ghildiyal, it affects both her dress and how she acts toward others. For college, she attended one of the most "rowdy" schools in Delhi. "I just got tired of guys chasing," she says. "At first when they said something, I'd laugh and smile, but they took it wrong so I had to become a bitch."

"Normally I'm a happy and smiley person," Wrenn agrees, "but when I go to a city market, I have this bitch face that I put on."

When in defense mode, women are suspicious of even potentially harmless compliments or interpersonal interactions (like a simple "hello"). Should she respond? Is it rude not to? Will an answering "hi" be interpreted as an invitation? "History has told me that [this hello] is not an innocent thing," Courtemanche says. "But sometimes it is," she notes with a shrug indicating the rarity of those moments.

You live in an apartment that overlooks the Viña del Mar beaches off the Chilean coast while you're studying abroad in your 20s. The setting is idyllic and you love your runs on the promenade beside the beach you can see from your window. But the shortest path between your apartment and the promenade is a hidden dirt path wedged between two large apartment buildings. Each time you take the steps leading you to the hard packed dirt shielded from public view, your stomach clenches. Yet, you press on. There's a moment after passing a patch of shrubbery where your destination is in full view and your stomach unclenches and you run with ease toward the water and the bathers soaking in the gentle sea breeze.

One day, after weeks of taking this path, you pass that wall. After the moment of relief, you hear a rustling behind you. With a quick glance behind, you see a figure clothed in black spandex from head to toe,

including a hood made of the same spandex material concealing his face. The only exposed skin is his erect penis protruding from a cutout hole at his groin.

You turn and run. Heart pounding, you don't know how to react except to run. A strange, guttural noise rises from your throat, but you can't muster the ability to scream. You realize there isn't really anyone around to hear the scream anyway.

You turn to see how far away your pursuer is from you and find that he's closing in. Then you hear a skid and a thud. You turn and he's on his ass, allowing you to gain speed and enter the street only a couple hundred feet from where you began your sprint. All you can do is run.

What do you do? Do you tell somebody?

But you don't say anything; you just keep running. Sprinting, really. You run the same route you do every day, past the barefoot young lovers strolling hand in hand and the families building sand castles with the beige Chilean sand.

Do they know what just happened? Can they see it in your face, in your running? Can they tell you were almost raped? Why did you ignore your instincts?

You wonder if the men walking alone past you are the spandexed penis man. You wonder if any of them can be trusted.

You still can't quite grasp what just happened. "Would it feel equally surreal if he had raped me?" you wonder. "Would it have also felt like my fault?"

You never take that path again. But each time you pass the entrance—every day on your way to school and every day on your way back from school—the faceless man and his erect penis flicker in your mind.

"Street harassment is on a spectrum of gender-based violence," says Roy, explaining that it normalizes harassment. Beyond catcalling, the Cornell study also found that more than 50 percent of the international respondents report having been fondled or groped in public and 71 percent reported being followed.

In Courtemanche's case, she was traveling alone in Munich, Germany, in 2008 and noticed a man staring at her while shopping at a grocery store. He checked out immediately next to her and as she departed through an underground walkway, he kept pace behind her. She tried to dodge him, but he remained behind her. Once she entered the doors of the hostel she was staying at, she looked behind her and the man turned and walked away. "It's lucky that I was in a hostel and not in an apartment," she says, imagining what could've happened if she wasn't staying in a public place.

Whether men realize it or not, women often feel threatened by compliments, catcalls, and suggestive comments—particularly when men persist or follow them. Although there haven't been any studies directly linking perpetrators of street harassment to sexual assault, studies have been conducted linking sexual assault to certain predictors that are consistent among street harassers. A 2007 Journal of Interpersonal Violence study found that perpetrators of sexual assault exhibited less empathy, less adult attachment,

higher expectations for sex early in the relationship, more positive attitudes toward casual sex, stronger motives for sexual dominance, and a predilection for peer groups who support forced sex.

Dr. Michele R. Parkhill, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Oakland University and co-author of the study, sees these connections again in her more recent research about emotion regulation and its connection to sexual assault, the lack of impulse control in particular. "The greater [a person's] difficulties in controlling impulses, the more severe sexual assaults they had perpetrated," she says.

Although this research is primarily focused on sexual assault and is still ongoing, Parkhill sees links to street harassment. "A lot of the motivations for street harassment are rooted in the same predictors of sexual assault," she says. "My hypothesis is that the link between street harassment and potentially sexual assault is that lack of emotion regulation."

She sees catcalling as evidence of lack of impulse control among men who have learned that catcalling is the ultimate expression of masculinity. She argues that street harassers have a combination of two traits: poor regulation of their emotions and negative attitudes toward women. "So here is this guy who has an emotional reaction to a woman, but he has no respect for women and generally thinks negatively of them," she says. "This guy wouldn't think twice—impulse control—about catcalling."

A common argument on the part of the street harasser, and what women often hear from men, is that they meant it as a compliment. They insist their actions aren't at all rooted in negative feelings about women.

To that, Parkhill says, "I agree that they probably think what they're doing is somewhat complimentary. But part of me has to wonder how much they truly believe that." And, to top it off, she says, "Men perpetrate abuse and harassment because society has reinforced them for doing so and we live in a world where engaging in this behavior is rarely punished. Couple this with a lack of impulse control—and voila."

Because catcalls and trailing are not typically viewed as benign by women, they link street harassment as potentially leading to sexual assault and are fearful. Comedian Ever Mainard aptly described the universal experience in a 2012 stand-up set where she described being followed to a subway station. "Every woman," she says, "has that just like, one moment when you think 'oh, here's my rape!'" The audience laughs knowingly.

And statistics show Mainard's not far off.

According to a 2010 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, nearly one in five women in the United States has been raped and nearly one out of every two women experienced sexual violence victimization such as sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact (i.e. unwanted kissing or fondling). But the U.S. Department of Justice found in its 2012 criminal victimization study that only 28 percent of sexual assaults had actually been reported to the police that year, while 27 percent had been reported in 2011. The reason behind the lack of reporting—self-blame, guilt, shame, humiliation, fear of not being believed, and lack of trust of the justice system—are the same reasons women fail to report street harassment.

Rape survivors are much more likely to know their assailants than to have a stranger on the streets rape them. But that doesn't make women less fearful of strangers making suggestive comments as they walk down the sidewalk. It's a way men have of taking ownership of public places without regard for women's feelings, says Roy. "If you're trying to walk out and not have guys try to track you," says a kid of around 13 or 14 in a 2014 video released by Gothamist, "try not to wear like, tight clothes." This is followed by a man in his 60s claiming his "right as an American citizen" to say what he wants to say in public. As men claim these spaces, women can feel vulnerable in them.

Raising awareness is a first step in combating the problem.

"We are not recommending the expansion of the criminal justice system," says Margaret E. Johnson at the October Hollaback event. Johnson, an associate professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law and co-director of the Center on Applied Feminism who spoke on the Hollaback panel at the school, acknowledges that there are multiple challenges to dealing with street harassment. A punitive approach—arrests or citations—seems wrong-headed; fighting street harassment shouldn't contribute to the problem of mass incarceration. "What we need to recognize is that this is a systemic operation of gender oppression," she says. The work Hollaback does, she says, "reminds me of the old '70s feminist consciousness-raising circles where women would sit around in a circle telling each other stories of their experiences. It was very individualized and empowering."

"Hey. Hey. HEY! HEEEEEEY!" you hear from across the street. You turn, hoping that it's not directed toward you, but you know that it is. You turn not to acknowledge the comment, but only to make it stop. "Hey beautiful, you should come with me," he says. You scowl behind your sunglasses and turn back to your short walk home from work in East Baltimore.

A few minutes later, you pass a group of lanky, tattooed, smoking men in white tank tops lounging on a stoop you walk by every day. You tense—but you're too proud to walk across the street.

"Hey sexy," one of the men says loud enough for you and his buddies to hear, but not loud enough for other passersby to notice. You keep walking and when you reach the end of the block beyond the group of men, you look down at your loose-fitting navy work trousers and modest blouse and wonder what it is that warranted the two comments, five minutes apart. You think it's almost better than the men who tell you, "you'd be prettier if you smiled," because then you didn't need to decide how to respond, you could just ignore it.

These comments happen on a weekly basis, either on your walk to and from work or around your neighborhood. There are days when you walk to the market just two blocks from your office and strange men approach asking about your day. Sometimes—well, most of the time—it's different than just being friendly. You can't pinpoint what makes it different. You try explaining the difference to your male friends, but they don't see it and you can't explain it effectively. The difference is in how you feel: that broiling pit in your stomach, that instinct to back away, that chill of hair prickling on your neck.

But you've also gotten used to it. You don't even mention it to your husband anymore. You just let it happen, because what can you do?

Women rarely bring up the topic of street harassment with men. Courtemanche's husband, Ned, was surprised to learn how often his wife experienced harassment. For Wrenn's husband, Alex, it hit home when he experienced it himself—a young woman persistently yelled at him about his appearance late one spring night. Whenever he told women about it, their response was, "yeah, that happens to me all the time."

Baltimore writer D. Watkins noted in a June 2015 piece in *The Guardian* that he was brought up in an "abrasive culture where many men feel entitled to harass women." Unlike the men Courtemanche and Wrenn are married to, Watkins says he saw street harassment and what it did to women his whole life. Although the headline of his *Guardian* piece, "I've seen my friends harass women on the street. I can't be silent anymore," made it seem like he suddenly became fed up, he emphasizes that he has always spoken up when he saw women looking uncomfortable. "Women have told me nightmare stories," he says, and he can feel the sense of danger they have walking down the street. "It's evil and it hurts people and I don't think a lot of men know the damage that they're causing."

Men—and the general public, for that matter—are starting to see more about street harassment, though. In 2014, Hollaback released a video of a woman walking around New York City for 10 hours receiving, by her estimate, 108 comments. Earlier that year, the Elliot Rodger shooting rampage in California fueled by hatred toward women from past rejections, prompted many women around the country to share their own stories of harassment and sexual assault through #YesAllWomen. More recently, this July, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* released a video showing men's reactions to seeing video of their girlfriends harassed on the street. All of the men featured in the video were offended and outraged. They didn't realize the scope of harassment women experienced.

Brittany Oliver, from the Baltimore Hollaback chapter, hopes men will join the conversation about street harassment. When she organized a forum this June for African-American women in Baltimore to share their experiences, she invited male activists to the event. She wanted them to see and hear women's experiences and to show them the importance of the issue. "You educate them about it by sharing how you feel when harassment happens to you. That's the most effective approach, sharing how you feel."

She's smart to include men in the conversation. In a 2003 study published in the *Journal of American College Health*, researchers found that men were more likely to intervene in a sexual-assault situation when they perceived that their male peers were also willing to do the same.

You walk into the coffee shop and immediately notice the small group of six women and one man sitting in a circle around a couch. One woman is speaking animatedly. "This is who I'm looking for," you think.

You sit, and you listen to the stories that other women tell—stories of being followed, of being propositioned, of being threatened—and you feel the relief of understanding. This happened to you. You

know how these women felt, how they feel.

When you begin to speak, your stories flow out of you like water. No one blames you for what you wore or questions whether you're overreacting or suggests the comments were meant as compliments. You listen to the women of Hollaback, a small circle sharing stories at the Bun Shop on the corner of West Read Street and Tyson, and you wonder, maybe this is how change happens.

