

## **Women – Victims of violence in public sphere**

Mirela Anghel<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania*

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### **Abstract**

The violence against women on the streets has always been a touchy subject for the present society as it emphasizes the lack of policies to deal with it. In the less civilized countries violence against women on the streets is widespread and the local services lack the programs to prevent and, more importantly, to protect women against such abuse. Street harassment is irritating and annoying. In some cases it can also be traumatizing and the feeling of helplessness and frailty is present. Whether this type of harassment is avoided and overlooked it might well be taken to a forward level i.e. more severe crimes such as stalking, rape, violent aggressions and even murder. The present article is based on a recent research on the topic.

**Keywords:** *street harassment; violence against women; social policies; research; culture; communication.*

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### **1. Literature review**

The violence against women on the streets has always been a touchy subject for the present society as it emphasizes the lack of policies to deal with it. In the less civilized countries violence against women on the streets is widespread and the local services lack the programs to prevent and, more importantly, to protect women against such abuse.

First and foremost we need to clarify what does “violence against women on the street represent”. Is it considered a mocking and rude word addressed to women on the street? Is it the random slap on the bottom? Is it the staring on the forms of women? Or is it the actual physical assault? Street harassment exists ever since ...well, roads were invented. It used to be a social problem in previous centuries and it continues to be today. Whether we are talking about the ladies who were travelling by carriage and were attacked by sneak thieves or just the modern lady who is walking on the streets is it appropriate to be catcalled at? Street harassment is irritating and annoying. In some cases it can also be traumatizing and the feeling of helplessness and frailty is present.

Whether this type of harassment is avoided and overlooked it might well be taken to a forward level i.e. more severe crimes such as stalking, rape, violent aggression and even murder. The idea of this topic came into my mind recently although I have been contemplating the subject for some time. While shopping for groceries at the local market I overheard a man that had just passed by uttering “You’re beautiful!”. Most certainly that was meant to flatter me, was it? And if I think about it I must admit that he used nice words. But why did it not feel right? Why did it trouble and upset me? It

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\*Mirela Anghel. Tel.:004-0720-842-698. E-mail address: [mirela.anghel@sas.unibuc.ro](mailto:mirela.anghel@sas.unibuc.ro).

was not the first time men catcalled me on the street and this situation was one of the nice ones. "The reality of severe street harassment and the chance that "complementary" harassment can escalate into severe harassment must be taken into consideration; it reveals that overall street harassment is not as harmless as it appears if one only considers the stereotype of a man yelling, "Hey, gorgeous!" out his car window to a woman in a skirt walking by. The sheer amount of harassment women experience also affects how they view it" (Kearl 2010: p. 94).

I witnessed an episode of harassment recently while waiting for a friend on a popular street near the centre of Bucharest. While talking on the phone I saw a young man firmly slapping the bottom of the girl that just passed by. I reacted instantly by telling him to back off. The girl continued her walk ashamed and most certainly terrified, another lady stopped irritated and amazed by the fact. The man, who was in his early 20s, looked at me with an obvious intent to attack me for interfering and I could see on his face the disappointment of not being able to conduct his assault as the street was quite populated and it was mid-day.

This is just one situation from thousands witnessed by females all around the globe. It was the most frustrating situation I witnessed in years. The inability to do anything, the poor system that lacks the proper policies of support, leads towards the acceptance of this vile behaviour.

Street harassment against women includes: groping, grasping, a more persistent push in the public transportation, a most uncomfortable leering, honking and/ or whistling, usage of improper words and vulgar gestures etc. Most of the women have dealt with street harassment at least once in their lifetime. It's sad that at times it feels depressingly common. All that is left after such experience is disgust, fear, anger and depression. Victims of street harassment feel guilty and devaluated. The combination of these feelings could lead to a sense of helplessness by creating different types of trauma that would lead the victims to certain decisions when it comes to getting out of the house. They would choose proper hours, avoid less taken roads, avoid public transportation at late hours, etc. "The idea of women's inferiority has been analysed in literature, philosophy and religious works. For example, Aristotle said that "a woman is a woman in the virtue of lacking certain qualities. We need to consider the character of women as suffering from a natural imperfection". Thomas d'Aquino perceived the woman as being a "failed man" and "a random being". The sayings of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer is already famous stating about women as having "long skirt, small mind" (Rujoiu 2013: p. 14).

At European level, the gender differences and "the inferiority" or "the vulnerability" of the woman, it is a known and accepted issue and can be observed, even from the promotion of the principle of "gender equality", starting from the Treaty of Rome. But although, there have been many progresses in this area, we can see that today, there is still gender discrimination (Ilie Goga 2014: p. 204).

In the same time, there are authors who regard women differently as we notice from the following:

John Milton: The woman is a beautiful fault of nature.

Maxim Gorky: Out of love for women, the most beautiful things in the world emerged.

Napoleon Bonaparte: "A beautiful woman pleases the eye, a good woman pleases the heart; the first one is a jewel, the second is a treasure".

Auguste Mere: Beauty is the first gift that nature offers to women and the first to ask back.

Alexander Dumas: There are two ways in proving your love for a woman: marrying her, if she's free, and respecting her if she's not.

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) when asked how men would be without women he replied: First of all happy! Then, there will be less and less of them.

Xenofon: The women are not inferior to men except the lack of power.

Oscar Wilde: "Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood".

Camil Petrescu (Romanian writer): "If you have never seen a woman in love, then you have never seen a beautiful woman".

Petre Anghel (Romanian writer): "A woman is life in itself, it's the visible and tangible being of divine creation. She is the lullaby of life and permanent stimuli for her life partner. Apparently weak, she has got enormous physical and psychological resources. Strong when it comes to life troubles with an unparalleled force, she witnesses her competences in every human aspect: being a daughter, woman or mother. She is the most precious crown of the man".

Most likely, women are targeted to become victims of street harassment. Although the popular culture might not consider it being such an issue, the victims of street harassment totally disagree. As women are considered sensitive, there is obviously an enormous impact that street harassment is having on us. Most of the times, women's reaction towards this antisocial behaviour depends on the context that it occurred. Instinctively they try to protect themselves either by remaining silent, fleeing the scene, trying to get around other people that could protect them, respond fiercely – either verbally or physically, but that rarely happens – getting a deep sense of helplessness, feeling ashamed and inadequate. For some women, street harassment might not make them feel unsafe, but it causes a constant state of irritation.

Harassment isn't just annoying but it's also scary and traumatising. Most unfortunately this anti-social behaviour has been accepted as an everyday reality due to its daily occurrence. If action is not being taken, a gateway for perpetrators will be opened that would encourage them towards more serious expressions of violence (stalking, assault, rape etc.).

There is a constant need for people to get engaged together in order to reach the same goal, in this particular aspect, to raise awareness of this inappropriate anti-social behavior regarding women. "Human communication processes are indispensable in constituting each social group. The psycho-sociologists underlined that in team working, communication has an important part of individual efforts regulation and synchronization. It is difficult to imagine where human community would have reached – if it had reached – without such capacity of communication" (Anghel 2004: p. 5).

Due to exposure to street harassment some women could have a range of different feelings such as shame, anger, injustice, helplessness that could lead to a loss of self esteem, lack of trust in her social skills. Just as every citizen is entitled to walk freely, so are women's right to walk without having to be put in a position of vulnerability. Most of the aggressors might not be aware of what they are doing and only realise afterwards the consequences of their actions. Some of them become aggressors due to the fact that they might've experienced a similar behaviour from somebody else as they were growing up. Some might have had early childhood experiences that made them to

distrust women and treat them disrespectfully; therefore they are continuing their early experience in the adult life.

Studies have shown that the more permissive a parent's attitude towards aggression is, the more aggression is shown by the child. Sears, Maccoby and Levin showed that another important factor in aggressive behaviour was the extent to which children were punished for it. The parent may provide a model for aggressive behaviour: the child sees that when their parents become frustrated they hit out, and he may then decide to imitate them. Some children may be naturally aggressive and frustrate their parents to such an extent that they have to resort to physical punishment – the causation problem. Boys usually show more aggression than girls; this may be caused by differences in the way they are treated by their parents (Hardy and Heyes 1979: p. 154).

Due to the fact that women become more desirable, men might feel entitled to harass women, which is absolutely unfair. Women should feel free to get dressed in whatever they might choose without fearing the reactions of males on the streets.

Some women get harassed daily and other only a few times in their life. I assume this happens due to a number of contributing factors such as: if a woman lives in a community where everybody knows her, the chances to get harassed are quite slim; a woman in the rural areas will not be exposed to harassment as ladies in the urban areas as the chances to encounter strangers is limited; older women seem to get less street harassment than younger ones, maybe because they are seen as less vulnerable and are not sexually objectified; women who are in company of others experience less harassment; women who drive are less exposed to harassment, although there is a different type of harassment that she might encounter in traffic due to the fact that some men might feel that they are the only ones entitled to drive cars and they consider women as incapable of driving vehicles.

When we become aware that this is no longer acceptable, we should witness a change in public's perception over the issue. It all starts with taking action in dealing with the matter by stating bravely that this kind of behaviour is not acceptable. That might mean taking aggressive measures in public campaigns, changing in policies, passing serious laws and, basically, acknowledge the problem and trying to tackle with it. "Scientific research or different studies made in the social welfare area in order to acknowledge, understand and explain certain social phenomena need to respect certain conditions, to respect the professional principles and values in order to get viable, objective results" (Nistor 2012: p. 35).

As all people are free, we understand that by keeping the streets safe for women is mandatory. Each of us has the need to feel secure and that also involves eradicating harassment and assault on the streets. By being united in the same goal we can reach a stance when streets will become safe for everybody. This might involve taking revolutionary gestures in order to make a difference in the lives of millions. As Goethe said, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now".

## **2. Research methodology**

My research is based on a questionnaire of 21 questions. I have 141 respondents amid a week I posted online the questionnaire. Out of these, 130 are women, as somehow expected and 11 men. Below, I present the data of this research.

For the first question: What do you understand by street harassment? We got the following results:

**1.1** Nasty words addressed to women - 81,3% total agreement; 4.5% total disagreement

**1.2** Whistling towards a woman - 37% total agreement; 46% partial agreement; 11.8% partial agreement; 5.5% total disagreement

**1.3** Obscene gestures – 81.3% total agreement; 11.7% partial agreement; 2.7% partial disagreement: 4.5% total disagreement

**1.4** Physical aggression – touching, pushing, slapping, tickling, pinching – 94.7% total agreement; 4.5% total disagreement

**1.5** Persistent leering over women - 21.7% total agreement; 48.7% partial agreement; 24.4% partial disagreement; 5.5% total disagreement

**1.6** Persistence in them providing their name and asking for their phone number - 63.1% total agreement; 25.3% partial agreement; 10% partial disagreement; 1.9% total disagreement

**1.7** Accompanying them alongside the road without permission – 80.2% total agreement; 15.4% partial agreement; 1.9% partial disagreement; 2.8% total disagreement

**1.8** Honking – 38.4% total agreement; 41.1% partial agreement; 15.2% partial disagreement; 5.4% total disagreement.

For the second question “Do you consider street harassment as being a taboo topic in the society?” 84 respondents out of 114 agreed that the topic is being prohibited or restricted by social custom.

The third question tried to find out the reasons why women are subjected to street harassment. We offered a range of possible answers and these are the results we’ve received:

**3.1** due to provocative clothing – 27.7% total agreement; 40.4% partial agreement; 24.8% partial disagreement; 7.1% total disagreement.

**3.2** due to lack of education of the aggressors – 80.1% total agreement; 16.3% partial agreement; 3.55 partial disagreement; 0% total disagreement.

**3.3** they are considered vulnerable beings, therefore they cannot react – 35.5% total agreement; 48.9% partial agreement; 10.6% partial disagreement; 5% total disagreement.

**3.4** they are interested in establishing a relationship but they do not know how to do it - 7.8% total agreement; 44% partial agreement; 31.9% partial disagreement; 16% total disagreement.

**3.5** due to lack of punishment when it comes to these types of manifestations – 70.9% total agreement; 19% partial agreement; 7.8% partial disagreement; 1.4% total disagreement.

**3.6** the one that commits the aggression does not feel like his gesture is damnable – 40.4% total agreement; 46.1% partial agreement; 8.5% partial disagreement; 5% total disagreement.

For the 4<sup>th</sup> question in the questionnaire “What are the most often contexts where street harassment against women occur?” we received the following responses:

**4.1** on the streets – 96.5% total agreement; **4.2** in public transportation – 73% total agreement, 27% considered that does not happen; **4.3** at night, once it gets darker – 96.5% answered that this is a context that is prone to street harassment; **4.4** in less populated areas – 97.9% agreed to this statement; **4.5** in bars/ clubs – 80% agreed that this is a milieu where women might be considered targets; **4.6** in highly populated areas – half of the respondents agreed and the other half disagreed.

The 5<sup>th</sup> question tried to find out on how should women feel when they are street aggressed?

**5.1** they should feel complimented, considering ugly women/girls don't get to be whistled at – 97.9% totally disagreed that this should be the case;

**5.2** it is a normal thing for a man/boys to signal the presence of a beautiful girls/ woman on the street – 90.8% of respondents said this is a negative statement;

**5.3** it is humiliating for a woman/ girl – 73.8% agreed; 26.2% disagreed;

**5.4** it is not a big deal, it often happens – 89.4% disagreed; 10.6% agreed;

**5.5** women/ girls should feel offended and they should react accordingly – 69.5% agreed; 30.5% disagreed;

**5.6** total indifference – 44.7% agreed that this is how women should react when confronted to street harassment while 55.3% considered that this is not the case.

The 6<sup>th</sup> question referred to the reaction a woman/ girl should have to street harassment. **6.1** to respond to the aggressor's provocations – 71.6% totally disagreed and only one respondent considered that a reply should be provided towards the aggressor;

**6.2** ask for help from the relevant authorities – 62.4% were in total agreement that this should be the most appropriate reaction and only two respondents considered that this should not happen;

**6.3** ask for help from the passers-by/ witnesses – 51.1% were in total agreement on the fact; 39% partially agreed; 9.2% partially disagreed and 7.1% totally disagreed;

**6.4** to yell – 39.5% totally agreed; 31.9% partly agreed; 25.5% partially disagreed; and 10 respondents totally disagreed;

**6.5** to react violently by slapping the aggressor – 42.6% were in total disagreement that victims should react in this way; 27% partially disagreed; 19.15 partially agreed; 11.3% totally agreed.

**6.6** act as if nothing happened – 26.2% total agreement; 29.8% partial agreement; 21.3% partial disagreement; 22.7% total disagreement.

The 7<sup>th</sup> question focused on whether they think there is social involvement when a person is the victim of street harassment. 122 respondents considered there is no implication and only 19 respondents witnessed social involvement on such social cases.

The next question focused on what women/ girls should do in order to prevent street harassment:

**8.1** dress decorous – 26.2% considered is very important to pay attention to the way they get dressed; 30.5% considered this is a moderate concern and 10.6% regarded it as being not important;

**8.2** stay in at night – 41.1% considered that this is not important when it comes to preventing street harassment. Women consider themselves brave enough to go out regardless of the danger that might expect them when it comes to street harassment; 24.1% considered this is only a bit important; 27% considered this action as being a moderate one and only 2 respondents answered that this is a very important act to consider;

**8.3** wear long skirts and large pants – 64.5% considered this is not at all important; 22.7% think this is a bit important; 12.8% believe is a moderate action to consider; and there was no respondent to consider that this matter is of high importance;

**8.4** attend self defence classes – 27.7% believe this is a moderate response to prevent street harassment and only 11.3% considered that an investment in taking self defence classes is a good idea;

**8.5** to permanently have a accompanying person, either male or female – 32.6% considered this matter as being not at all important and only 14 respondents would choose the company of somebody else to prevent street harassment;

**8.6** avoid crowded places where nobody taken responsibility – 27% believe this is not important; 22.7% think this is just a bit important; 21.3% offered a moderate concern; 12.1% believe this as being important and 17% offer a very important consideration on this action.

The 9<sup>th</sup> question wanted to find out whether there might be a connection when it comes to the level of education and street harassment against women.

60.3% believe that it does not depend on the level of education.

39.7% considered that those who have a high level of education do not street harass women.

Question number 10 focused on the reasons the aggressors have when they choose to street harass women.

**10.1** They were harassed themselves, either by their colleagues or the family – 52.5% consider this is true; 47.5% consider it as false;

**10.2** They have no reason, they do it out of pleasure – 77.3% agree; 22.7% disagree;

**10.3** They want to show that they have the power and they express it on women/ girls – 92.9% agree; 7.1% disagree;

**10.4** They consider it as complementing – 59.6% agree; 40.4% disagree;

**10.5** They want to get into discussion and do not know how – 54.6% agree; 45.4% disagree.

The 11<sup>th</sup> question referred to the action the witnesses to street harassment should have:

To intervene – 95.5% agreed;

They pass by regardless, they cannot do anything anyway – 99.3% disagreed;

To alert the competent authorities – 93.6% agreed;

To respond to aggression with aggression – 91.5% disagreed;

To film/ take photos/ record the event - 64.5% agreed; 35.5% disagreed.

The next question referred to whether they consider street harassment as being specific to Romanian culture: 83% consider this is not specific to our culture and 17% believe that this is true.

The 13<sup>th</sup> question in my questionnaire focused on the knowledge the respondents have with regards to the law regarding street harassment: 75.9% have no knowledge on the laws regarding the matter; 24.1% have an idea of the law. The Romanian law consider street harassment, if proved, to be crime at a penal level; therefore the aggressors can get just a fine. The medical law doctors give the proofs that are required and approved. Basically, based on the doctor's psychical investigation, further police investigation takes place. Although, there are certain psychological trauma that need to be addressed to a certain specialist and, unfortunately, the law does not require the input of a psychologist. There are no specific Romanian policies that address directly to the problem of street harassment.

Further, I wanted to find out whether my respondents felt the need for studies/research on street harassment. Not surprisingly, 90.1% totally agreed on this matter. 87.5% think that the research and studies should be focused on the street harassment victim and aggressors as well. In the same time, 62.4% believe that debates should take place on the topic of street harassment.

When asked how street aggressiveness can be eradicated, 98.6% believe that this can be done by a proper education in the family, 97.2% school education, 90.1% by continuous education, and 89.4% consider that by ample actions from the police, street harassment actions can be eradicated or at least prevented.

The 19<sup>th</sup> question was targeted on finding out whether the respondents have ever been the victim of violent street behaviour and 56% admitted being at least once in their lifetime in this situation and 44% claimed they have never been faced with such a anti-social behaviour.

Apparently, 88.7% believe that street harassment occurs mostly in the urban areas and less in the rural areas. Half of my respondents (50.4%) believe that law is punishing street harassment, but they do not know what the measures are from the authorities when it comes to actually tackling the problem. In the same time, 96.5% believe that the current law is not enough when it comes to punishing street harassment.

### **3. Conclusions**

The most important outlines in my study are related to the fact that there are no social policies to protect women against street harassment. In the same time, there is a cultural bias when it comes to actually admitting that street harassment occurred at an individual level. Additionally, it is noticeable that women do not feel comfortable being a victim of street harassment and even though unpleasant situations might occur, women's social life is not altered to what might happen on the streets. There is a stringent need for the society to admit that there are no social policies that would address the matter directly. Most of my respondents are not aware of the legal steps that need to follow when faced with street harassment.

Raising public awareness towards the topic is one of the most important steps that need to be taken when it comes to ending street harassment. This can be done by public campaigns, television debates, courses taken in schools and faculties, having a blog,

writing about it on social media, producing a documentary, sharing your story online or to friends, join an anti-street harassment group etc.

In order to raise awareness on street harassment there is also a need for male allies to address the issue of gender based street harassment. A better chance of succeeding in efforts to end it might be to get men involved as well, so they can bring different perspectives and men who do harass women might be more willing to listen to them. "In addition to educating men, empowering women, and raising awareness that street harassment is a problem, to help stop it we can trust it into an "issue" that organizations, groups, and individuals can work on in a cohesive, comprehensive way" (Kearl 2010: p. 186).

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