

STREET SWEEPERS

Hollaback! and the global surge in antiharassment activism

BY KATIE HAEGELE • ILLUSTRATIONS BY  ANTIAGO UCEDA

In her memoir, *BossyPants*, Tina Fey writes about attending a workshop led by Rosalind Wiseman, the author of the book *Queen Bees and Wannabees*. As part of the workshop, which Fey went to as research for the movie *Mean Girls*, the 200 women in attendance were asked to answer the question, “When did you first know you were a woman?” And, as Fey recalls, despite the racial, age, and economic diversity of the crowd, the answers were depressingly similar: “Almost everyone first realized they were becoming a grown woman when some dude did something nasty to them. There were pretty much zero examples like ‘I first knew I was a woman when my mother and father took me out to dinner to celebrate my success on the debate team.’ It was mostly men yelling shit from cars.”

I can relate. I have been stared at, hissed at, kissy-faced, told to smile, given the thumbs-up, tailed by men in slow-moving cars, proposed marriage to, called a bitch, called a cunt. One morning when I was about 20, my bottom was grabbed heartily as I walked down a crowded city street. I whipped around to see who’d touched me, but the perpetrator had disappeared into the crowd. A few minutes later, a man came up and told me he saw it happen and that it was terrible because “I seemed like a nice girl.” I’m a cisgendered woman who presents fairly hetero, and on many occasions I’ve been told I should take this stuff as a compliment. I never had a name for it, or a reliable strategy for dealing with it. Like the women in Wiseman’s workshop, and probably like many of you, I just lived with it.

That was before I heard about Hollaback!, which both named the problem—street harassment—and offered those whom it affects a place to chronicle these incidents as they happen. Hollaback! was cofounded by Emily May, who is now the organization’s executive director, but it was inspired by another woman. In 2005, 22-year-old Thao Nguyen was on a New York City subway train when a middle-aged man sat across from her, stared at her, and began openly masturbating. Nguyen looked around for help and, seeing none, snapped his picture with her phone. After she left the train, she took the photo to the police to report the incident. They told her there was nothing they could do. A frustrated Nguyen posted the photo on the underground classified-ads site Laundromatic.net and, as other voices echoed her disgust, the photo went viral, and the story eventually landed on the cover of the *New York Daily News*.

The incident—the subway onanist turned out to be a well-known chef—captured the attention of May and six of her friends, three men and three women, all New York City residents also in their early 20s. The men, it turned out, had no idea just how commonplace stories like Nguyen’s were: As May recalls, one of them (Samuel Carter, who now serves on Hollaback!’s board) said to her, “Emily, you live in a different city than we do.”

“We were all like, why is this stuff happening and no one is talking about it? But of course, the history of gender-based violence is that it’s all silenced,” May says. In point of fact, May and her friends talked about it often, trying to figure out how to handle it. They’d shout at the men who bothered them, she said, but that sometimes caused the situation to escalate. But they’d never heard much *public* discussion about it.

So in 2005, using Nguyen’s act as a model, they decided to create a space to offer just that. They set up a blog and reached out to feminist websites and blogs, inviting stories and photos of street harassment and responses to it. And in they came—submissions from girls, women, and LGBTQ folks about abusive language, slurs, gropes, flashes, lewd gestures, and even physical assaults seen and heard on the street. May was surprised by how similar the stories were to her own: all these people, all putting up with the same crap.



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Though the appeal of Nguyen’s action had something to do with the way she so publicly outed her harasser, May emphasizes that Hollaback!’s point has never been just to shame harassers—it’s more about bringing attention to a problem that is too often ignored or minimized. “We live in a world where, when women tell stories of sexual violence, it’s assumed that they are lying, exaggerating, or being oversensitive. By sharing our stories, we are able to turn the lens away from ourselves and back onto the people who are harassing us.”

At first, Hollaback!'s founders didn't know what to call the problem they were addressing. "One of our cofounders, Kaja Tretjak, who is on the board of advisors of Students Active for Ending Rape, said, 'We can't call it catcalls. That doesn't legitimize it. It's harassment,'" May remembers, adding, "We didn't actually invent the term 'street harassment'—I think someone coined that in the '80s. But it was so not talked about that we *thought* we'd invented it."

Still, naming the behavior appropriately had a powerful effect. As May points out, simply identifying it as a problem, rather than a fact of urban life, was crucial. "One personally transformative piece of this for me has been learning that being a strong woman doesn't mean harassment doesn't hurt, that degradation doesn't hurt. I thought for a long time that it did. But that's just not the case."

Hollaback! grew fast: Within six months of launching the blog, May and friends were interviewed about it on *Good Morning America*, and soon people in other cities got in touch, wanting to host their own local Hollaback! affiliates. Though at first they had few resources to facilitate this, the group, which relaunched as a nonprofit organization in 2010, is now able to support the creation of affiliate teams with a three-month launch process that includes training via webinar. Currently, there are websites based in more than 20 cities, including Portland, Oregon, and Columbia, Missouri, in the United States and Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Mumbai, India, internationally. Scroll around the sites' interactive maps—users add a "pin" to denote a place or address where harassment occurred—and you'll see a powerful visual of harassment around the world. The myth that street harassment is a big-city problem is dispelled by the pins on less-populated places like South Pekin, Illinois (population 1,200), and Waterford, Maine (population 1,455); the myth that it's about men seeking to "court" women is countered by submitted stories about abusive language, racist slurs, fat bashing, homophobic hate speech, and rape threats.

That street harassment, and the tacit acceptance of it, hurts in practical ways as well as personal ones was made startlingly clear to graduate student Holly Kearl when she began researching her master's thesis on grassroots response to sexual harassment. In 2008, she, too, began a blog to chronicle stories of street harassment. Then, in 2010, she published a book on the subject, *Stop Street Harassment*, for which she created an informal online survey that was filled out by more than 900 people in 23 countries and 45 U.S. states. (The participants were 89 percent female, 78 percent white, and they came from a good mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas, Kearl said.) One of the questions she posed was whether interaction with strangers had impacted the participants' lives in concrete ways. The respondents said yes: They wore clothes they

thought would attract less attention, exercised in a gym instead of outside, and avoided certain places altogether.

"It was stunning," Kearl told me in a phone interview, to realize how women's lives are diminished by harassment. "I couldn't

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believe the ways it has [impacted] my own life—changing class schedules, routes I would take in order to feel safe—without my even realizing it." Like Hollaback!, StopStreetHarassment.org allows users to submit photos of harassers and map their stories. It's also a wealth of resources, listing books and studies about the impact of gender-based harassment, and information on how to report harassers or request a city or town council hearing.

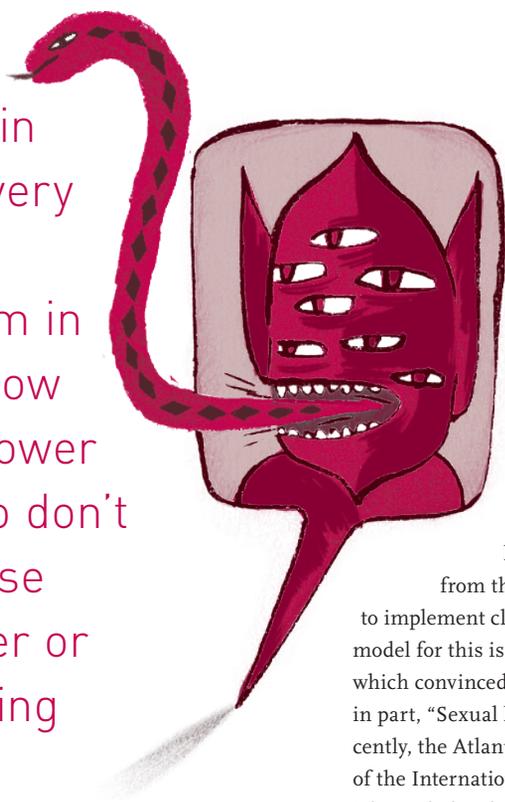
Combating street harassment is a fight that's gone global. Jordan's objeDEFY Harassment, which offers public-service announcements and workshops on combating harassment in the Arab world, launched in 2008; Egypt's HarassMap, which launched in 2010, allows users access to a variety of social media to report harassment; England's straightforwardly named 101 Wankers deals specifically with the harassment of women who use bicycles to get around. But the different laws and policies in different countries affect what the ultimate goals of the sites' campaigns to raise awareness can be.

Many countries and cities, for instance, already have laws pertaining to harassment on public transportation, though, as Kearl notes, they are more likely to focus on flashing, groping, or public masturbation than on verbal harassment. Such laws also tend to be gender-neutral, so they don't protect against gender-based harassment in particular—which can, as Thao Nguyen found out, compound the difficulty of having incidents taken seriously by police. Stop Street Harassment has reported on a few official efforts to clarify and further such laws: In the fall of 2010, for instance, the city of Independence, Missouri, made it illegal for someone in a car to harass a pedestrian. An effort initiated by Boston Transit Police in 2008 aims to stop physical assaults by posting undercover cops, nicknamed the "grope patrol," on trains and subways. And in the past several years, women-only buses and train cars have been introduced in countries like Malaysia and Japan; in Mexico City, the sex segregation on some subway cars is reinforced by police.

But May emphasizes that Hollaback! doesn't endorse criminalizing harassment. She points out that the police themselves



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harassment on public transportation, says site codirector Crystal Rodgers. Since the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority currently has no policies that address this, the local Hollaback! group has spent several months conducting a survey of riders. Their hope is that presenting MARTA with a report

from the trenches will convince the transit organization to implement clear policies against sexual harassment. (Their model for this is the original Hollaback! group in New York, which convinced the city’s transit authority to post ads that read, in part, “Sexual harassment is a crime in the subway, too.”) Recently, the Atlanta group has also joined forces with organizers of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Islamophobia, hoping to draw attention to, as Rodgers puts it, “the often invisible intersections of street harassment with other forms of oppression.”

“have a long track record of harassment, especially in low-income communities and communities of color”—communities in which women, many beholden to off-peak commutes on public transportation because of their jobs, are particularly vulnerable to street harassment. “When the people enforcing the law are also participating in the behavior, it doesn’t make anyone feel particularly safe,” she says.

Instead, Hollaback! focuses on working to effect policy change. Hollaback! Israel, for instance, takes the information submitted to its site straight to municipal officials. The group’s project New Stop deals primarily with bus stops where harassment takes place. Codirector Naomi Weiner explained in an e-mail that once the site receives a few reports about trouble in an area, they take a report to city representatives and request that action—such as installing better lighting—be taken. Likewise, many of the stories received at Hollaback! Atlanta involve

This June, Hollaback! launched a new campaign called I’ve Got Your Back, which addresses the “bystander effect”—in this case, the phenomenon of people ignoring harassment that is happening in front of them. May hopes to encourage people to jump in and say something. The message is simple: “If you see someone being harassed, ask them if they are okay, and if there is anything you can do to help.” Maps and apps for iPhone and Android, which allow people to map not just instances of harassment but their responses to it, are also available.

“Changing power dynamics in the street is very different than changing them in the Senate,” May says. “How do you give power to people who don’t have it because of their gender or race? By getting together. Supporting someone can show the harasser that the harassee is not as vulnerable as they seem.”

This seems to me to be the most powerful thing Hollaback! has to offer: community. Reading through the stories on the site has been painful; it’s brought up feelings I learned to push down a long time ago. But it opened up a space to be angry, too, and that feels good. For the first time in my life, I feel like there might be a way I can push back, and knowing I’m not alone is what makes it possible. **b**

Katie Haegele is a freelance writer who lives outside of Philadelphia. Her first book, a memoir, will be published by Microcosm in 2012.