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Don't Walk Alone

Sarah Hughes, Faculty Mentor Bonnie Boaz

Abstract

Women are continuously exposed to street harassment in their daily lives, however this issue lacks the recognition that it deserves as a societal problem. This paper explores to what extent men control public space and the effect that street harassment has on women both psychologically and physically. Data has been collected from scholarly articles as well as published studies. Unfortunately the research finds that society accepts the mistreatment of women through street harassment as a social norm due to the presence of male dominated institutions. Consequently women are forced to alter their behavior in order to accommodate the ideal of a male dominated public space. Women also face a diminished sense of self worth when exposed to continual harassment in public. In order to address the issue of street harassment society needs to develop a vocabulary to describe instances of street harassment in order to shed light on an issue that lacks recognition.

Introduction

Street harassment can be defined as unwanted comments, gestures, and actions forced on a stranger in a public space, directed at the victim based on their gender. Typically street harassment involves a male harassing a female without their consent. Street harassment is often considered to be a trivial issue, one that does not require more recognition as a serious societal problem. However, women's mobility is severely limited by street harassment. Women may be forced to change their route to work or other locations in order to avoid harassment. Society conditions women to believe that they should not walk alone or that they need to use the "buddy system". Men are not faced with the responsibility of constantly being vulnerable in a public space.



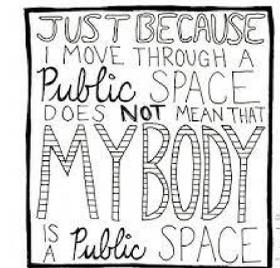
Discussion

Street harassment encourages the idea that women are aesthetic objects for male observation and evaluation, where men are not subjected to this behavior. Harassment objectifies women by reducing them to sexual parts and functions (Acker 1992). Bowman (1993) argues that street harassment contributes to an informal ghettoization of women, restricting their mobility and preventing them from freely entering public space. Research shows that women who experience even low levels of street harassment are more likely to have more negative psychological outcomes such as lower self-esteem and less confidence (Fairchild 2008). The bystander effect (Daryl 1968) contributes to the lack of societal recognition for this issue and explains why people do not stop street harassment when they see it happen. Society has conditioned people to believe that this is an acceptable behavior therefore it has been normalized and people do not feel the need to intervene when they see harassment taking place.



Conclusion

A step in preventing the harassment of women in public space is deeming street harassment to be an unacceptable behavior. This will help to break down the bystander effect and encourage people to step in when they see harassment taking place. Making street harassment an unacceptable behavior can be accomplished by teaching the youth to develop a mutual respect between genders and teaching future generations that harassment is a behavior that will not be tolerated. Fairchild (2008) argues that by developing a vocabulary for young women to talk about the harassment they experience society can begin to make visible an invisible issue.



Works Cited

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