

# NAVIGATING AND HEALING FROM EXPERIENCES OF STREET HARASSMENT

— A GUIDE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, PRACTITIONERS, ACTIVISTS AND ALLIES IN THE MOVEMENT TO END GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

In 2011, Girls for Gender Equity (GGE)<sup>1</sup> published *Hey, Shorty! A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets*. This guide was a direct response to the stories and information that GGE participants shared with our staff about their experiences with sexual harassment. GGE has continued to work alongside young people to combat sexual and street harassment. Below is a summary of what we have learned over the years to support young people in navigating street harassment.

## WHAT IS STREET HARASSMENT?

There is no one commonly used name for street harassment. Activists and scholars are working to change this fact. As per Stop Street Harassment (SSH):<sup>2</sup>

**Gender-based street harassment is unwanted comments, gestures, and actions forced on a stranger in a public place without their consent and is directed at them because of their actual or perceived sex, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation.**

Street harassment includes unwanted whistling, leering, sexist, homophobic or transphobic slurs, persistent requests for someone's name, number or destination after they've said no, sexual names, comments and demands, following, flashing, public masturbation, groping, sexual assault, and rape.<sup>3</sup>

## DID YOU KNOW?

1. Street harassment involves sexual and unwanted behaviors, but is actually not about sex - it's about power! People who harass others are acting in a way that communicates aggression and hostility to make someone, who they see as inferior, feel scared or uncomfortable.
2. A national survey found that 65% of women experienced street harassment. Out of these women, 23% had been sexually touched, 20% had been followed, and 9% had been forced to do something sexual. Among men, 25% had been street harassed (a higher percentage of LGBT-identified men than heterosexual men reported this) and their most common form of harassment was homophobic or transphobic slurs (9%).<sup>4</sup>
3. Street harassment is never your fault and there are different strategies to respond to and cope with street harassment.

<sup>1</sup> GGE is an intergenerational organization that works to end gender-based violence and challenges structural forces -- racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, economic inequality -- that work to constrict the freedom, full expression, and rights of trans and cis girls and young women of color, and gender non-conforming/non-binary (GNC/NB) youth of color. Through direct service, policy & organizing and culture change, GGE encourages communities to remove systemic barriers and create opportunities for girls and women to live self-determined lives.

<sup>2</sup> SSH is a national nonprofit dedicated to researching gender-based street harassment.

<sup>3</sup> Stop Street Harassment. 2019. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/about/what-is-street-harassment/>

<sup>4</sup> Stop Street Harassment. 2019. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/>

As mentioned in *Hey, Shorty!*, sexual harassment, in and of itself can be traumatic. When sexual harassment happens in public, it can be particularly isolating, and can bring up a number of difficult emotions, ranging from guilt and shame to anger and rage.

No matter the complexity of what a survivor of street harassment may be experiencing, it is important to know that that they do not have hold it all on their own.

## COPING WITH STREET HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment can, at times, be difficult to address, navigate, and/or respond to in the moment.<sup>5</sup> Someone experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment may be unable to respond as the harassment is happening, may not know how to or have the energy to communicate their discomfort, or may even feel unsafe doing so.

After doing years of work to prevent sexual harassment in New York City public schools, GGE recommends that during and after an experience with sexual harassment you check in with your body, if possible. Remain in tune with what feels safest for you in these moments.

### 1. Honor Your Truth

- When folks who occupy marginalized bodies experience sexual harassment, often times, they are taught that if they speak up, others will not see them, hear them, or believe them. Honoring your truth and speaking with someone you trust about your experience can reinforce that your words, emotions, and story are all valid. Above all else, confiding in an ally will make space for you to brainstorm what in particular, you and others would need to feel safe, protected, and cared for before, during, and after experiences of harm.

### 2. Professional Support

- Professional support can come in many forms. While accessing consistent support may work best for your long-term healing journey, reaching out to a text or hotline could help with coping in-the-moment. Check out the numbers below for more ways to stay connected.

- Text and hotlines:

Crisis Text Line

Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 in US

24/7 confidential support to people in crisis.

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) – National Sexual Assault Hotline

1 (800) 656-4673

Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via phone and online chat.

- Healing resources:

The 'me, too' Movement [metoomvmt.org/healing-resources-library/](https://metoomvmt.org/healing-resources-library/)

### 3. Access Your Tools

- Consider creating a healing or self-soothing toolkit. A healing toolkit can encompass any and all of the things that support you in keeping yourself grounded in difficult moments. The items in your kit could be things that stimulate each of your senses-- essential oils or small candles for smell, coloring pages with bold markers for sight; crystals, clay, or soft pieces of cloth/ pom poms for touch; sweet candies for taste; and a healing playlist for sound. These are just some examples - feel free to adjust to whatever feels most accessible and comforting for you!

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<sup>5</sup> Hey, Shorty! A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets (2011)

## COPING WITH STREET HARASSMENT (CONT.)

### 4. Scope Out Your Community

- Resources can oftentimes be available to you in community spaces that you may already be a part of (or can become a part of!). On some campuses or in larger cities, small establishments have been trained to act as community safe havens<sup>6</sup> for community members facing immediate harm (look out for safe haven icons pasted on doors and/ or windows!). Here, you can take a breather, regroup, and be guided through next steps that can increase safety before re-entering the outside world.
- Outside of community safe havens, sit down with an adult ally<sup>7</sup> to identify survivor support networks, crisis centers, healing circles, and social justice spaces dedicated to combating sexual and gender based violence.

### 5. Networks of Care

- Certain folks in your life can be great at holding space for you in different ways. Try to think through the ways that you may feel most supported after experiencing harm and identify who may have the capacity and skills to show up for you in these ways. For example: your school counselor may be best to help you process and safety plan, while your bestie may be best to get lost in a new television series with you after school (whatever helps you in difficult moments!)

### 6. Get Creative

- There is more than one way to express your truth. Movement work can help you to feel more in your body, while creative writing can help you to find the words that best describe complicated emotions. Whether cooking or belting out original melodies, do whatever helps you to care for yourself in different points in your personal healing journey.

### 7. Speaking Up

- Publicly advocating/ speaking out against violence in their communities may be a tool of liberation for those who have experienced sexual harassment. While giving testimony, launching a campaign, or facilitating a support space may be tools that support you in your own healing journey, you certainly do not have to do so alone! Reach out to organizations like Girls for Gender Equity, who are committed to combating gender based violence on the community and policy levels to find out more about how your voice can be heard.

## CONCLUSION

Street harassment affects our lives in profound ways depending on our identities as young people, women, people of color, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, and/or members of other marginalized groups. All young people have a right to learn, grow, and thrive in a community that is free from street harassment.

We believe these tools and communities moving together to eradicate street harassment and sexual violence will bring us one step closer to making this vision of freedom a reality. We must work together to eradicate sexual harassment and violence before it even begins.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/security/crime-prevention/safe-havens/SafeHaven-locations.pdf>  
<https://www.cuny.cuny.edu/safety/safe-haven>

<sup>7</sup> An adult ally is someone who lends their support to a young person who has [experienced]... sexual harassment. Allies listen to and trust young people's experiences, opinions, and ideas. Hey, Shorty! (2011), Pp. 10.