What's Up, Girl?

How Women Experience and Resist Stranger Harassment
in Public Spaces in Amsterdam

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Abstract

Although the Netherlands is often seen as a country which is far ahead when it comes to women's emancipation, stranger harassment of women is still very common. In an effort to bring attention to this often normalized form of gender based violence, this article explores what kind of harassment women in Amsterdam experience in public spaces and how this harassment and its potentiality influences their behaviors in these spaces. The article is based on an audiovisual, ethnographic study in which women from Amsterdam were extensively interviewed and accompanied on their daily movements through the city. Apart from this article, the study and its findings are presented in the ethnographic film *Hé Meisje* ('*What's Up, Girl*'). Findings reveal that women, in an effort to avoid uncomfortable situations and as an answer to their fear of getting physically harassed, often make evaluations on where to go or how to behave in public. This shows how they have incorporated the potentiality of harassment into their daily lives. The fear of harassment restricts women's mobility, showing how this emotion is political, as it helps to reinforce patriarchal ideas on who 'owns' public spaces. Although experiencing harassment sometimes might seem subjective, we should not forget that this is a shared experience between all women who are moving through public spaces which are gendered. Still women resist harassment by being resilient and by speaking up about it (mainly) outside of actual harassment incidents.

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Introduction

On the 15th of October 2017 American actress Alyssa Milano posted a tweet on Twitter saying: 'If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem'. In response to her call women from all over the world started to open up about how they have experienced sexual harassment. News sites reported that according to Facebook within twenty-four hours 4.7 million people used #MeToo in their messages (and that numbers did not take into account hashtags like the Spanish #YoTambien or the French #balancetonpor).[1] Milano's call started a global public debate not only about the scale in which sexual harassment takes place but also about the casual way in which harassment towards women is often treated (Maryville University, s.a.).

In the case of MeToo, harassments are often executed by a person one knows, who is abusing his or her power. But these kind of harassments are not the only ones that are treated in a casual way. The MeToo-movement is part of the current feminist fight against and recognition of all kinds of harassments against women. One of these is harassment that is executed by strangers in public spaces. In 2014 a YouTube-video called *Ten Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman* (Bliss and Roberts 2014) went viral. The video, which is filmed with a hidden camera, shows how a woman is repeatably approached by men making comments on her appearance while she is walking on the street. The video inspired many more women to make similar images to attract attention to this form of harassment called street or stranger harassment.[2]

Studies on stranger harassment show high numbers on women experiencing harassments in public spaces all over the world.[3] The Netherlands is no exception to this rule. According to Fischer, Tamer and Sprado (2017), who researched harassment commissioned by the municipality of Rotterdam, 94% of the women in the Rotterdam say to have been harassed by a stranger on the street in the year of 2016. In Amsterdam 84% of all women between 18 and 34 have experienced harassment in public spaces in 2018 (OIS Amsterdam 2018). These numbers are especially high if one considers the Netherlands' reputation for being a progressive and emancipated country. Although the municipalities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam have attempted to prohibit 'hissing' at women in public spaces in the past, these prohibitions have been abolished because they were too difficult to maintain and because the higher court ruled that this 'hissing-prohibition' was against the right of free speech.[4]

The cancellations of these laws and the enormous amount of women confronted with this form of gender-based harassment show just how much it is rooted in Dutch society. That stranger harassment is so common even in the Netherlands, a country which is considered to be 'good' to women (GIWPS 2019), shows that these harassments are not bound to a certain location. Instead, they are the result of how gender takes shape in public spaces in general. In line with the current feminist wave, this research draws

[1] see: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/ or https://www.vox.com/2017/10/16/16482410/me-too-social-media-protest-facebook-twitter-instagram

[2] an example of such videos is: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNfE_Det2Fo;

[3] the website of the Stop Street Harassment organization provides an overview of academic and community studies in 37 countries. http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/statistics-academic-studies/

[4] see: https://nos.nl/artikel/2315425-sisverbod-rotterdam-in-strijd-met-vrijheid-van-meningsuiting.html

attention to stranger harassment in the belief that this 'gendering' in public spaces, and the implications that it has, is something to pay close attention to.

By working closely with women from Amsterdam, this research presents findings on what things women experience as harassment and how they, as women, have certain perceptions on safety which are related to these experiences and which influence how they behave in public. Finally, it shows how women actively resist harassment, even if this is in ways which not seem very active at first sight. This research is not only discussed in this article, but is also in the ethnographic documentary *Hé Meisje* ('*What's Up, Girl*'). *Hé Meisje* opens up a conversation about harassment and visually introduces the themes which I elaborate on in this article. This means that the combination of these two products provides a complete overview of the findings.

Methods

This research is based on a two and a half month fieldwork period which took place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. During this period I have spoken to many women of whom I have worked closely together with four. This article and the ethnographic film mainly draw on my collaboration with these women called Nathalie, Rosie, Xing and Una. In doing this research it was very important to reflect on how I fit into the research context (Pink 2013: 27-36). As a woman from Amsterdam who experiences stranger harassment herself, I felt that my own thoughts and feelings related to the topic were very insightful. This research therefore is partly auto-ethnographic, as I also draw on the harassments which I encountered during the fieldwork period myself. Also involved in this research are several men, with whom I talked about how they feel about street harassment in general and of women in particular. Their contribution is only visible in the film, as this article solely focusses on women's experiences.

The research draws on qualitative methods as engaging in conversations, conducting semi-structured interviews and mapping. Next to this, I engaged in doing participant comprehension (Collins 1984) by accompanying women on their daily activities in public spaces in Amsterdam. To produce *Hé Meisje* I relied heavily on audiovisual methods. I used this methods believing that the camera is an instrument to intervene in daily life. It has the power to lay bare things that are considered to be normal and therefore are often overlooked. Film on its own, has this intervening quality as well. I will elaborate on what I exactly mean when I speak about the intervening function of the camera and film at the end of this article. As for now it is useful to first look into the theories and findings which are represented in this research.

Stranger Street Harassment

Before we can get deeper into women's experiences in public spaces in Amsterdam, it is important to define what stranger harassment is. Stranger harassment is a form of sexual harassment wherein the harasser is unknown to the person who is being harassed (Saunders et al. 2016). The harassment takes place in public spaces (Fairchild 2010); therefore often being called street harassment. It can include physical assault but often takes place in non-physical forms as well, as is the case with '*catcalling*'. Catcalling 'involves men using verbal and non-verbal cues to comment on a women's physical appearance in a way that objectifies women' (Farmer and Jordan 2017: 205). Examples of these 'cues' are staring, making whistling sounds or saying something about how a woman looks like (Fairchild & Rudman 2008). Catcalling is so normalized that it is 'often viewed as a tolerated and accepted type of sexual harassment' (Farmer and Jordan 2017: 205). This is confirmed by one of my informants who told me that most of her experiences with street harassment involve men making sounds to her which make her feel like 'she is a cat'.

Although we now have an idea what stranger harassment is, it is important to note that there are instances in which harassment is subjective. When it comes to more 'subtle' harassments, like for instance staring, it differs from person to person and situation to situation if this is harassment. This is because something can only really be called harassment if the harassed person experiences it as such. It depends on the emotions that an incident triggers for that person. Still, harassment rather *seems to be* subjective, instead of really *being* so, if we think about subjectivity as something which is individual and intrinsic. Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that emotions are not 'in' a person. Instead they are shaped by and in contact with others; they are relational. They do not exist 'in' somebody, but in the space between two (or more) bodies. What emotions come to surface between objects depends on how the objects understand that contact. This means that whether or not a woman might experience emotions which make her view a situation as harassing, depends on how she understands her contact with a man in a public space. In that sense, harassment still is subjective in that it depends on how a woman apprehends the man and their contact in a certain way. When I refer to subjectivity, I use the term in this way, rather than in the way that it suggests an individual emotion which is somehow inside of a person. How women experience emotions is the result of and influenced by gender inequality, as it is the result of gender-related narratives which they have incorporated into how they understand the world. I explain how this works by looking at women's fear and their perceptions of safety.

Perceptions of Safety

The women I have talked to in this research mention how they, from ever since they were little, have had ideas on how they have to act and how they are treated in public. By things like their parents telling them 'to send a message when they arrive' or by learning that it is unsafe to walk alone at night, girls grow up with the idea that they have to be on guard in public spaces. Kelly and Torres (2006) call this process the 'socialization of safety'. Their research shows how women see and experience worrying about personal

safety as an integral part of being a woman. It also shows how women who are not even experiencing danger, might still feel that they are unsafe. The fear that women are taught to have, is to get physically and sexually harassed. Therefore it is not strange that 'in contrast to men, perceptions of safety among women are intimately connected to fears of sexual assault' (Macmillan et al. 2000: 308). The narratives on women's vulnerability have implications on how women relate to public spaces, as it alters how they move through and behave in these spaces. It alters them in the sense that women 'restrict' their bodies, as Ahmed (2014) puts it, where men 'expand' theirs. Later I will show what this 'restricting' actually entails. The way in which fear is incorporated into how some genders, like women, move through spaces is what Weseley and Gaarder call the 'gendered geography of fear' (2004: 647).

But it is not only social conditioning that makes women feel like they have to be on guard. It also has to do with them actually experiencing those things that they learn to be afraid of. Janz and Pyke (2000) show that women's feelings of insecurity are directly connected to them experiencing harassments in public spaces. Women, through socialization, are taught to be afraid to get sexual and physical harm done to them, and this fear grows by them actually experiencing sexist treatments in public. I will show how even 'smaller' forms of harassment, like catcalling, seem to remind women of the intrinsic fears related to their vulnerability. Taking this into account it comes to no surprise that women make certain decisions on the street to minimize the chance of getting harassed (Koskela and Tani: 427). This shows how the unevenly distributed emotion of fear is very political (Ahmed 2014). As it contributes to and reflects unequal power relations in public spaces.

Gendered Public Spaces

It is clear that women experience public spaces in a certain way because of their gender (Koskela and Tani 2006; Wesely and Gaarder 2004). That public spaces are experienced differently by different genders, means that these spaces are gendered. It means that there is a spatial expression of gender. The gendering of spaces concerns 'the ways that gender takes shape in space, and the ways that space breathes life into gender norms and relations' (Muller Myrdahl 2019: 1). It concerns the ways wherein gender norms are reflected in, but also by, spaces. Rinne's article (2002) on women doing laundry in early modern Rome makes clear how this gendering of spaces used to work. She shows how Roman women doing laundry at public water sites were associated with prostitution because their bodies were partly bare and wet whilst doing it. This caused for tensions between men and women when men wanted to bath at these sites. As a solution it was decided that women could only do their laundry at certain times and only at sites in the periphery of the city. It is clear that gender norms were not only reflected *in* spaces - by women being sexualized while they were actually executing a mundane activity - but also *by* these spaces as city planning was altered in favor of men, who were free to bath whenever they wanted and did not have to go to the peripheries of the city. Historical city planning, not only in early modern Rome but in general, caused that women had less access to, and less power in, urban spaces (Spain 2014; Rinne 2002). The societal position of men and women was reflected in the way in which cities were designed and simultaneously this design was maintaining this social hierarchy.

The idea that 'the streets' were owned by men is one that is dominant in most historical works on the gendering of spaces (Van den Heuvel 2019). But nowadays, in many societies women are getting more

and more visible in public. Especially in a society like the Netherlands wherein women's emancipation is seen as an important political issue, we could say women are just as present in public spaces as men. But I want to argue that despite women's presence, there still is a 'spatial expression of patriarchy' (Valentine 1989). As I will show, patriarchal structures become visible in the way in which women endure harassment and in how their perceptions of safety are influenced by anticipation of this harassment. Although 'ownership' of public spaces might now seem to be shared more equally between men and women, street harassment still reminds us 'whose bodies and actions are welcome and whose are not' (Muller Myrdahl 2019: 2).

When a man whistles at a woman or makes a sexual comment on her appearance, we may assume that he does so because she is female. And even if this is not the case, then a woman probably reads their contact in a certain way because she has other experiences with men doing so or has incorporated certain narratives about interactions between men and women in public. This means that the harassment that occurs is, at the very least partly, on the basis of gender. Therefore stranger harassment is often a form of gender-based violence. This relation between gender and stranger harassment also becomes visible in the hostile ways in which people with gender-identities other than female or male, like gender queers, are often treated in public (Muller Myrdahl 2019: 5). Although city planning might be favoring men less then it used to and although people with other gender identities are (in many societies) visible in public nowadays, my discussion of the harassment stories of women from Amsterdam shows how 'the streets' are certainly not yet 'co-owned' by all genders.

Resistance and Resilience

Being afraid of harassment and getting used to feeling on guard is part of the way in which women learn to 'perform' their gender in public spaces (West and Zimmerman 1987). Literature shows how this does not make women merely 'victims of patriarchy' (Gordon 2017: 35) as they also resist gender related violence. Wade (1997:25) describes resistance as:

> any mental or behavioral act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible. (Wade 1997: 25)

Instead of actively resisting harassment by always responding to an harasser when they are harassed, most women resist stranger harassment mainly by mentally guarding themselves against it (Chubin 2014; Gordon 2017). This form of resistance goes beyond the actual happening of harassment and is more about a 'spatial confidence' which 'can be interpreted as manifestation of power' (Koskela and Tani 2005: 428). Cumiskey and Brewster (2012) come to an interesting conclusion in their research about self defense tools used by women. By showing that women see their phones as a more valuable self defense tool than pepper spray, the authors argue that defending oneself psychologically is more important than defending oneself physically. Feeling safe is about a mental state rather than about having the tools to defend yourself at the moment when something is happening. This shows that, although some women do resist harassment by responding in a direct way (by, for instance, confronting the harasser), the most obvious way in which they

respond is through being resilient (Gordon 2017). Women's spatial confidence is the result of this resilience, which is defined as 'an individual's ability to successfully manage or overcome adverse experiences, manage stress and rise above disadvantages' (Szymanski and Feltman 2014: 161). Resilience is rather a way of being than a way of acting. Feeling resilient then is one of the 'silent' ways in which women cope with, respond to and resist harassment in public spaces.

This research looks at how the theories on stranger harassment make sense in relation to the experiences of women in Amsterdam. I start by discussing the emotions that these women experience when they are harassed and how these emotions can be linked to their fear of physical assault. While elaborating on the topic of subjectivity, I show how the stories shed light on the shared nature and extent of stranger harassment in public spaces. Finally, I consider the ways in which women from Amsterdam resist harassment not only through resilience but also through assertively responding to harassers.

Findings

(1)

I get up off my seat to get off the bus. I notice that the man who was sitting next to me is getting up as well. He steps off the vehicle before me and instead of walking off, he stands still in front of the bus' exit. With an intense glance in his eyes he looks at me. He grins. He keeps on standing there, partly blocking the door where I need to get out. I feel myself getting tense.

Harassment and Emotions

When a woman gets harassed by a stranger in public this can trigger many feelings or emotions. My findings confirm former studies saying that harassment mainly triggers fear which makes a woman feel like she has to be on guard. As an addition, I found that there are also feelings of discomfort and anger involved.

On Discomfort

When a woman is harassed she often initially experiences feelings of discomfort. This discomfort has to do with the fact that stranger harassment is a form of sexual harassment (Farmer and Jordan 2017). It can make women uncomfortable to be sexualized. Una, 22, tells me that during summertime there sometimes are days wherein multiple men try to look under her skirt when she is cycling through Amsterdam. 'I think looking at each other should be allowed. It's part of being in public. But if I'm looked at so many times and I literally see men putting in effort to look under my skirt (…) It makes me feel really self-conscious. I just don't like to be remembered of my own visibility all the time'. Suzanne, 27, mentions this self-consciousness as well. She experiences it often because she is regularly catcalled by the same man when she goes out for

groceries. She says: ‘The other day he said ‘your ass is so hot’ (…) then I just felt very uncomfortable and wanted to cover up my body’. In these cases it is quite obvious that the harassing has a sexual undertone, as it is sexualizing the female body.

In other situations the sexualization is less obvious. This for instance goes for situations wherein a strange man tries to strike up a conversation with a woman. Corinne, 27, tells me a story about how a man came to sit next to her on the tram and started to talk to her. ‘Even though I stared at my phone I saw he was staring at me. He then said I had a nice hairband’. Explaining why it made her feel uncomfortable: ‘That in itself is not really nasty but I knew that he didn’t say it in a neutral way’. She continues: ‘Even though I made clear I wasn’t interested in a conversation he started to ask questions like ‘which stop are you getting off?’ and ‘what are you doing tonight?’ ’. The content of these questions confirmed Corinne’s feelings that this was not, as she says, a ‘neutral’ situation between two strangers on the tram. It was not neutral because Corinne felt like the man wanted something from her, he wanted something from her *as a woman*. Many other women speak to me about men ‘wanting something’ from them. Speaking about a situation where a man started cycling next to her, Rosie, 31, explains: ‘If a guy starts cycling next to you when you are cycling home at night… It’s quite obvious that that has a sort of sexual undertone (…) you just know that there’s a potential there. A potential I wasn’t interested in’. Rosie as well as Corinne mention how they know when they are being sexualized. This makes them experience feelings of discomfort because this sexual interest is not mutual.

If we take a look at the short fragment from my experience on the bus, we see the same. When I wanted to step off the bus and the man blocked me and kept on staring at me, I felt like he did this for sexual reasons. I experienced his ‘intense glance’ as a sexualizing look. Stories like these, and Rosies and Corinnes, show how women read their contact with men in a certain way. When a man establishes contact with a women, she often ‘just knows’, as Rosie said, that he does so because he is sexualizing her. It confirms Ahmeds idea that how one ‘apprehends the world’ influences what emotions surface between two people (2014: 7). A woman experiences discomfort because she already has certain ideas on men to begin with. I will show how these ideas are the result of not only gender normative narratives but also earlier harassment experiences.

Although Corinne showed the man on the tram that she was not really interested in engaging in a conversation with him, he went on asking questions. The man did not seem to take into account what she wanted and that is why, when she got off the tram, she looked over her shoulder to check if he was not following her. This is where the feelings of discomfort turn into feelings of fear.

(2)

He stares at me while I step off the bus and pass him. Immediately I start walking off and I notice he's starting to walk behind me in the same direction. As if I have eyes in my back I follow what he is doing. There's not really a crossing here but I have to cross the road to get to my home. At a random point I start to cross and the man does exactly the same. Am I going to be followed now? In my mind short fragments of possible scenarios pop up. Him catching up with me and saying unpleasant things. Him following me all the way to my house, walking up the stairs towards my door. I think back to the day that that happened. What strikes me is that I don't really feel anything noticeable at all. These feel like regular, almost unconscious thoughts.

On Fear

The discomfort that harassment triggers is strongly related to the feelings of fear that women experience. After I felt uncomfortable because I felt like the man on the bus was sexualizing me, this discomfort turned into fear as soon as I felt like he was following me. This becomes clear through the thoughts that went through my mind, like the fear of 'him following me all the way to my house'. As I showed before, theory on women's perceptions of safety clearly say that getting harassed on the base of your female gender, triggers a fear to get sexually assaulted (Macmillan et al. 2000, Janz and Pike 2000). This is confirmed during a conversation with Xing, 34, who tells me that she often gets men yelling words like 'sexy' to her when she is biking through the city. When I ask her why she minds if men do that, she answers: 'The thing is… I've had all kinds of incidents in my life. I've had experiences where I know that in a bad situation… I could get raped. Some people get raped and killed'. She goes on by telling how she thinks that many women have the same fear.

And indeed, the fear of assault is so logical and normal for women, that not all of them even mention it as explicit as Xing. Gaby, 32, says there have been a lot of occasions where a man started to walk beside her on the street. This gave her, as she said, 'a feeling of unsafety'. When I ask her where she is afraid of she looks at me rather confused as if she does not understand why I ask that question and finally answers: 'Well… before you know it, it is just the two of us in a dark alley'. Instead of telling me that she is afraid to get physically assaulted, Gaby here paints a picture of a situation. Hereby automatically assuming that I have a certain connotation with this situation. That connotation is the idea of a strange man possibly raping a woman if they were in a deserted alley. The way she answers shows that she takes it to be common knowledge that women always have the risk to get assaulted.

Nathalie, 27, speaks about the fear of assault in the same way. When she tells me she felt afraid when a neighbor kept on catcalling her, I ask her what it is that she is afraid of. She answers: 'I don't know… Maybe that he would wait for me at night and forces me into my hallway or something… There would be nobody around to hear it'. Here Nathalie too, sketches a situation in which assault could take place, instead of literally telling me that she is afraid of being assaulted. She, too, assumes that I know what she is talking about. I continue asking until she answers: 'It is just my biggest fear. That this street harassment at a point gets so badly out of hand that somebody actually tries to rape me'. It are comments like these that make

clear that when a woman speaks about feeling safe or not, what she is actually saying is that she feels that there is little or more chance to get sexually assaulted. Because women are socialized to be afraid of rape (Kelly and Torres 2006) even forms of harassment to which there is no physical aspect, like staring or catcalling, triggers intrinsic fear. It shows how all kinds of street harassments and their potentiality are intertwined with woman's perceptions of safety.

(3)

Meanwhile I'm at a crossing, the light's red. Although I'm intentionally not looking his way, I feel his presence as he comes to stand next to me. Will he do something? Say something? I stand there in anticipation.

The light turns green. He starts to walk off in front of me and deliberately walks straight ahead, while I have to turn right. For just a millisecond I'm relieved. But right after that my mind already wonders off somewhere else. I hope my roommate's home so we can catch up.

On Being on Guard

The fear that women have is so deeply rooted that they have embodied this fear into how they relate to public spaces. As I shortly mentioned before, Ahmed argues 'fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement and expansion of others' (2014: 69). The fear that is inscribed onto female bodies by the narratives they hear and the sexist treatments in public spaces that they got used to, makes them feel like they have to be on guard. This guardedness can be seen in the way they 'restrict' their bodies. When I stood at the traffic light, I stood there 'in anticipation'. My mind and body were anticipating that the man was going to say or do something to me. I was on guard, and we could say that I was 'waiting' for the man to harass me. Hereby, I restricted myself, I made myself smaller. The man on the other hand, had expanded himself by staring at me and by blocking one of the exit doors from the bus.

After I found out that the man was not going to do something, my mind wondered off to thoughts about my roommate. Just seconds after I experienced fear, I went on with my day. This shows to what extent I am used to feeling on guard. This is because women do not only feel like they have to be on guard at moments of actual harass, they feel on guard *generally*. The restriction of female bodies becomes very apparent in the way that women's fears influence how they behave and feel when they move through public spaces in general (Koskela and Tani: 427).

The stories of women in Amsterdam show that this guardedness is typified by a general state of alertness, which manifests itself in their minds. An example is the story of how Nathalie parks her bike when she comes home at night:

I park my bike behind the Apple building. That's a place where anything could happen. (…) Before I park my bike I first switch off my music, in case somebody would come. Then if I hear footsteps, I always first

check if it is a man or a woman (…) If it's a woman I just go on. If it's a man, I'm just way more on guard. Then before I know it these thoughts run through my head. 'Where is he walking now?', 'Is he walking off?', 'Oh, he's just grabbing his bike, chill', 'Okay he's leaving now, chill'. Then I go on locking my bike and quickly leave.

Even though there are no signs of possible harassment, Nathalie still anticipates being harassed every evening when she parks her bike. Her description provides great insights into what can happen in a woman's mind when she feels on guard. As this description also shows, being on guard does not stop with having certain thoughts. It also involves taking certain measures to avoid or prepare for possible harassment, like Nathalie switching off her headphones.

Xing also tells me how she anticipates harassment by certain behavioral acts. She tells me how she, over time, started to look less around her when she is in public because she does not want to look very approachable. She explains: 'When I was younger I would be very carefree and I would just be thinking happy thoughts and cycling along (…) I think it's at these moments where you actually look happy and approachable, people are more likely to harass you (…) And that really caught me of guard'. Rosie also mentions the implications of looking approachable. She notices that she quite often has men coming up to her to strike up a conversation. Sometimes she does not mind, but other times it does feel like harassment. She wonders if the frequency in which this happens has anything to do with her Scottish background. As Scottish people, as she says, are very approachable. Although Rosie did not change her behavior like Xing did by trying to look less approachable, her story does make clear how a woman at the very least consciously thinks about and reflects on how her behavior might influence her chances of getting harassed.

Besides being conscious of their approachability or switching of their headphones, women mention multiple other behavioral acts that they undertake in public spaces which show that they are on guard. Examples are the avoidance of places that are deserted or not well lit (like parks or streets without proper lighting), the avoidance of busy touristic entertainment areas (like Leidseplein and Rembrandtplein in Amsterdam), the clenching of keys between the fingers as a possible weapon, or the changing of route when suspecting a man or a group of men to catcall. These precautionary measures and the thoughts that run through women's minds, show how the potentiality of harassment influences how women feel and behave in public spaces. Just the idea that a man might expand his body by harassing you, makes women restrict themselves by altering their general behaviors. This shows how women's guardedness is merely a 'response to the threat of violence' instead of a response to actual violence (Ahmed 2014: 69). It also confirms that fear is political, as it restricts women's mobility in order for men to maintain their dominant position in public spaces.

As I showed before, the politicized fear that causes women to be on guard firstly is the result of socialization which involves narratives about women's vulnerability in public spaces (Ahmed 2014: 70). That guardedness is indeed triggered by certain narratives becomes clear during Rosies interview. She asks herself: 'If I was walking alone at night and there was a man on his own walking towards me, how much of my fear is actually legitimate? And how much comes about from passed experiences and the way that this sort of scenarios are portrayed in movies and films?'. Although Rosie here mentions the influence that fictional narratives might have on her experiencing fear, she also mentions her own passed experiences. She

here, refers to stories that are not fictional. Corinne does the same. She mentions how she, for a couple of months, felt more on guard when she was biking home at night after Dutch media reported extensively on the death of Anne Faber, a young Dutch woman who was raped and killed biking through a nature reserve. Nathalie legitimatizes her fear by referring to a story as well, when she tells me that she knows a woman who has been raped. 'It could indeed really happen', she says. These testimonies make clear that the fear where women's restriction of mobility is based on, is not based on fiction. It is triggered by the real-life stories they hear and by their own experiences of stranger harassment. These stories and experiences confirm that there indeed is a threat. This legitimizes their fear. Women are actually being harassed and that makes it all the more complex to challenge women's guardedness.

A Note on Anger

By now it is clear that women experience emotions of discomfort and fear when they are harassed. From my conversations with women, I have learned that harassment also triggers anger. This anger often comes from the idea that the harasser tries to push them into a position of inferiority. The feelings of superiority the harasser, according to the participants, has, become visible in the way in which he not treats them as humans. When Una tells me about an incident where two boys on a scooter slapped her butt as they passed, she says: 'They did not even see who I was. They did not even look at me (…) and they also didn't look at me as they drove off. I was very, very angry and shocked'. With a lot of agitation in her voice she continues: 'They didn't even care who I was. And how I reacted or that I am a human at all, that was not important (…) They came driving into my life and just touched me and didn't even check if this was wanted'. A reoccurring argument comes up from this statement by Una. This argument has to do with the idea that a man seems to grant himself the right to do something to you. Hereby, influencing a woman's day (or life) without her consent. The informants argue that a man, by harassing, tries to reinforce the idea that women are inferior to men.

Women's anger is mostly due to the inequality between men and women which they see confirmed through harassments. That is why Una, the day after the scooter incident, started to draw a comic book on stranger harassment in an effort to get attention for the issue. 'I started it because I was very angry, I felt powerless and wanted to do something', she tells me. When she speaks about her powerlessness, she does not talk about being powerless in specific harassment incidents, like when the boy slapped her on her butt. Rather, by speaking about feeling powerless she connects the personal incident to the bigger issue of women's rights. Nathalie does the same when she is telling me about how being harassed ruins a part of her day. 'It just reminds me of all the other times it happened and how it happens to so many women. I just link it to the global problem and that makes me very annoyed. I just become way too angry now'. Even relatively small harassment incidents like being stared at or catcalled, where Nathalie refers to in this example, remind women of the social structures in society in which there is room for the reinforcement of gender inequality. This is the root of their anger.

The Collective Subjectivity of Harassment

By now we know that women experience emotions like discomfort, fear and anger when they are harassed in public spaces. We also know that these emotions are political, as they are collectively 'assigned' to people with female genders and have a negative impact on their mobility. But when do these emotions come up? What kind of situations are harassing?

In many cases, it is quite clear why a certain incident is labelled as harassment. When Una was slapped on her butt, one could hardly doubt that this involved harassment as there was a kind of physical element to the situation. But most street harassment is not physical (Fairchild and Rudman 2008, Farmer and Jordan 2017). As I mentioned before, one of my informants, Nathalie, told me that most of her experiences with street harassment involve men making sounds at her which make her feel like 'she is a cat'. In these kind of instances it is less clear when something precisely is harassment. This is because it is not only about what a man does but also about how a woman perceives or experiences what he is doing. It is only harassment when somebody feels harassed.

During my interview with Nathalie we speak about if she thinks she plays a part in labelling something as harassment. One day when I joined her outside in public, Nathalie often mentioned when she was having eye-contact with an attractive man. On the same day she also alerted me when a certain man was staring at her and she felt on guard. When I ask her about this duality she tells me: 'Lets say, I get on the tram. A hansom guy is sitting in the seat in front of me. He looks at me and I look at him. There is a kind of mutual appreciation there'. While thinking, she continues: 'But if it were a guy whom I personally find creepy looking, I might be scared he'd put his hands in his pants and starts masturbating right there in front of me'. The element of mutuality, which Nathalie mentions here, is important in experiencing something as harassing. When something is not mutual, when it is not a consensual situation, one might feel harassed. Rosies story confirms this: 'If somebody comes up to me, and wants to have an interaction with me, one that I don't want, then that in a way is harassing. (…) I don't want to interact with you and you're assuming that I want to'. Harassment is about the assumption of one person that the other person feels okay about a specific kind of contact between the two. That is why, in some scenarios one could say that harassment is subjective, as it is about how a person is not okay with having contact with another person.

I speak about the subjective element of harassment with Una while we discuss her comic book on stranger harassment. The book is called *Kijk niet zo boos, het was maar een grapje* ('Don't look so angry, it's only a joke'), and exists of drawings of her and her friends' harassment stories. The book title refers to harassers telling Una that what she finds harassing is 'just a compliment'. By saying she does not experience certain behavior the right way, they try to make her responsible for the harassment. I find out that Una is confronted with this view quite often. The main reason why she made the book is because she felt the need to talk to her male friends about the issue as she feels that they often question her experiences too. They do this by saying that a man harassing her 'probably doesn't mean it that way', in an effort to comfort her. These kind of comments suggest that it is up to women to decide whether or not they perceive something as unpleasant. As if a woman has the power to decide when something is harassment. This can be related to the widespread tendency of 'victim blaming', whereby women are held responsible for being harassed (Standing et. al 2017). Examples of victim blaming are telling girls or women who have been harassed that they are so because 'they were walking alone' or 'were wearing a short skirt'. These kind of narratives not

only blame the victim for the harass, they also individualize harassment (Standing et. al 2017: 52). But harassment incidents do not stand on their own. I want to argue that emotions, like fear or discomfort, which make women view a situation as harassing, are not individual. I will now explain how they are the result of how women are bound to relate to public spaces.

(4)

I'm just about to step on the bus to go home. When I enter, I notice that it's very crowded. I take a seat next to a man. As I sit down, the man looks at me in a way that triggers something for me. I don't know why and how, but I notice my brain taking a mental note of his look. I also notice that he has his legs widely spread. As I sit down, he does not alter his posture to make some more room for me. I think about those Tumblr pages with images of men 'menspreading' on New York subways. What to do? Either I make myself small and stay seated like this, or I take the space that I actually need. The second option would mean our legs would touch. I'm not sure if I would even really mind touching his leg.
Although I would mind him enjoying that.

The same man that walked right behind me after he and I got off the bus, had earlier done certain things on that bus that already made me feel harassed. The way he had looked at me and the fact that he did not make enough room for me to sit, triggered this feeling. I do not know if it were the man's intentions to harass me, but I did experience it that way because I thought that he did those things because I am a woman. Although this is my subjective reading of this situation, this does not mean that I can be 'blamed' for experiencing this as harassment. Because as we have seen before, emotions are not individual, they are social (Collins 1990: 27). How a person feels about situations, what emotions that person experiences, are the result of a relational process (Ahmed 2014). Ahmed argues how a subject perceives contact 'is shaped by past histories of contact' (2024: 7). This situation did not stand on its one, it was shaped by all the other times a man looked at me and all the other times a man did not make enough room for a woman. That is why I immediately thought about 'those Tumblr-pages showing men 'menspreading' '. The same goes for Nathalie who tells me that she found a certain man staring at her on the street 'annoying' because of 'other experiences' she has 'with those type of groups of men'. The frequency in which harassment takes place, plays a part in receiving a situation as harassing. How a woman reads a situation with a man is the result of all her other experiences, experiences that are socially bound to her gender.

But how come women are so often confronted with harassment in public spaces in the first place? The natural way in which the man expanded his body, by taking a lot of space, and the way in which I automatically restricted mine, by accepting that situation, reflects the normative idea that women may take up less space than men. This gives an insightful view into how social gender norms are maintained in and through public spaces. It reflects, like I quoted Muller Myrdahl before, 'whose bodies are welcome and whose are not' (2019: 2). Harassment is not an individual experience, it is a collective experience for all women, who move through public spaces which are gendered.

(5)

As I continue to walk home I wonder why I stayed small-seated on that bus. I could've just asked the men if he could scooch over a bit, right? I notice a feeling of discomfort coming over me just thinking about doing this. It would've had attracted attention. And I didn't want to put the men in the position that others might think he's a bad person while he probably isn't really… From the moment I would speak up I would doubt if what happened would indeed be 'bad' enough to speak up about. As I walk towards my door I wonder why I mind having little space on a five-minute bus ride. Maybe it has to do with being reminded of having to actively take in space, instead of just getting it. But don't we all have to work to get our space? I don't know. Either way, it felt good that I had just let it go.

Amsterdam Women Resisting Harassment

If women are frequently harassed and if these harassments trigger distinct emotions of discomfort, fear and anger, then what do they do with these emotions? How do they respond to and cope with harassment?

Non-assertive responses

I have discussed earlier how research on women's resistance shows how their responses often are 'non-assertive', meaning that they do not respond to the harasser directly (Farmer and Jordan 2017; Chubin 2014). I too, have found that women often do not speak up to the harasser when they are harassed. Instead they look away, 'zone-out' until the man is gone, walk away from the situation or sent a message to a friend about what is going. There are multiple reasons why the informants often respond in a non-assertive way.

The first reason why women do not respond directly to the harasser, is that there often is not enough time for that. As Xing explains: 'If you're on foot they're on bike, if you're on bike they're in a car (…) A lot of the times it happens so fast that they are already far away when you really register what happened'. Harassment often takes place quickly and by the time someone realizes what happened and has come up with a reaction, the person who, for instance, catcalled them, is already gone.

A reason why someone who is harassed cannot immediately give a reaction, often has to do with them wanting to estimate whether or not it will be safe for them to do so. Even Una, whom repeatedly told me that she is very angry about stranger harassment, says she does not always display this anger the way she wants to in order to make sure that the situation does not become unsafe for her. She says: 'I do respond, but only if I know that I am safe. Slapping my butt is so bad (…) but it's not the worse thing that could happen and for me it's just not worth it… No matter how angry I am'. Here Una again refers to the fear of getting physically harmed. Most women agree with her in not wanting a situation to escalate because of their response. This again makes clear how ideas of female physical vulnerability are incorporated into women's behaviors concerning harassment.

But even if a woman feels safe, at least in physical terms, to respond, she often does not do so. When I was on the bus that day I decided to not ask the man to make some more room for me. Although this was a safe situation (because the bus was filled with people) the idea of asking this still made me feel very uncomfortable. This had to do with the fact that I did not want to attract attention. Often women

decide to not speak up when someone makes them feel uncomfortable, because this would feel like breaking social conventions. When I asked Corinne why she did not tell the man, or the other people, on the tram that the man (who stroke up a conversation with her) was making her uncomfortable she explained: 'I don't know… just the thought of speaking up makes me anxious. What am I going to say? This man took the seat in front of me? He asks me what I'm going to do tonight? These things are too hard to explain to other people. I'd be afraid they'd find I was overreacting'. Corinnes discomfort was caused by subtle things which she found difficult to explain. Therefore, she would be afraid that people would think she was making a scene, hereby breaking social rules. This point reminds us of how women throughout history have been seen as 'hysterical', or mentally unstable, when they expressed their emotions strongly (Miquel Baldellou 2008). Nathalie even refers to the discourse of female hysteria by saying: 'If I would've said something to the other people at the platform [about the man that followed me at the train station], then I would be that hysterical woman again'. This shows how the reasons for a non-assertive response towards harassment often are gender related, as they are not only related to ideas of female vulnerability but also have their origin in sexist ideas on women's behavior.

Assertive responses

The women participating in this research all told me that they do so because the topic of stranger harassment is important to them. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that almost all participants sometimes do directly respond to harassment once they have established that this is a safe thing to do. These responses may very from 'giving the finger', calling the harasser names or verbally commenting on what the harasser is doing. Una for instance tells me a story about how she responded to a man looking under her skirt as she was cycling. Once she saw him doing that, she drove towards him and shouted 'Kan je het zien!?' (which in this context can best be translated as 'enjoying the view!?'). Una's story is just one of many examples of how women respond to harassment in ways that are assertive. My findings in that sense are contradictory to former research on the topic.

These same findings show that women sometimes also respond assertively in situations that they are socialized to be afraid of. Like situations at night when there are no other people around. Rosie, for instance, tells me how she responded to the man that came to cycle next to her when she was cycling home at night. A while after he stroke up a conversation he asked her what her name was. She felt like 'he did not have the right to that information' and told him that. She tells me how she felt like she was 'in control of the situation' and this gave her the confidence to speak up. The man responded in a way that Rosie found aggressive and this made her loose her sense of control. She told me that 'anything could happen, because it's dark and there's no one else around'. This reveals how the situation got her to feel psychically vulnerable once she responded directly. This shows how indeed a situation can get more uncomfortable if a woman speaks up.

An interesting exception when it comes to the way in which women respond to harassment is Xing. Xing says to have endured so much harassment in her life that now 'it is a mountain', which she 'cannot ignore anymore'. She is so angry about the harassments that women are confronted with that she decided to always address the harasser, to make clear that she finds harassment unacceptable. When a man yelled 'sexy' at her at night while she was cycling she responded as follows:

I turned my bike around, stopped him and asked him what he had just said. I asked him to repeat it. I had to ask him several times because he was kind of surprised that I've stopped him. Then he said 'sexy'. I got so angry when I heard that word again. I actually raised my fist… and this is a tall guy. He immediately shielded his head with his hands. He said: 'I'm sorry I see how that has affected you'. I was actually glad that he took the moment to apologize and realize that that was not cool.

By asking the man to say 'sexy' again, Xing tried to denaturalize his comment. This stands out from what other women told me about having the feeling that they break social conventions if they speak up about something which seems small. Furthermore, her story stands out because of how she expressed her anger by threatening the man to hit him. Although this was a 'tall guy' she did not feel psychically vulnerable. From several other stories in which she responded in an assertive, psychical way the same thing becomes evident. When I ask her about how she became to have this attitude she says: '(…) So my physical ability combined with my mental foracity. I'm going to be able to save myself. I've become more secure and confident over the years just because I think I've become physically stronger'. Xing is not afraid to confront a man because she thinks she is able to defend herself physically. This raises interesting questions of what the effect on the perceptions of safety of women would be, if they would feel less physically vulnerable.

Resistance through Resilience

Although the participants sometimes respond assertively, their response often does not correspond with the strength of the emotions that they experience when they are harassed. Despite their assertive responses, women still respond in a less direct manner more frequently. By speaking about how women often choose to respond non-assertively, I do not want to suggest that they endure harassments passively. It should not suggest that they do not resist harassment, as resistance does not have to be visible at the moment harassment takes place.

I want to start by saying that the participants often do not speak up to an harasser 'simply' because they do not want to. When I was walking home after I got off the bus, I did not feel bad because I did not speak up to the man. 'It felt good that I had just let it go'. Women often feel like a harasser has already claimed some of their time and energy, and they ignore him so that he is not getting even more. They make a conscious decision to not speak up in order to not let their day be influenced by the incident (more then it already is). In studying women's resistance to harassment in Tehran, Chubin (2014) debunks the popular notion that silence signifies acceptance. According to her, the silence of women who are harassed in public is not passive, it is an active act of resistance. And indeed, if we take a look at what is understood as resisting, being silent, or at least not having a direct response, can be considered resistance. As resistance, turning back to Wade's (1997) definition, is:

any *mental* or behavioral act through which a person attempts to expose, *withstand*, *repel*, stop, prevent, *abstain from*, strive against, impede, *refuse to comply with*, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible [emphases added]. (Wade 1997: 25)

As earlier research on women's resistance (Gordon 2017, Chubin 2014, Koskela and Tani 2005) showed, being resistant is not only about engaging in an interaction with a harasser by responding to that person. It is also about 'withstanding', 'repelling', 'abstaining from' and 'refusing to comply with' harassments. It is about not giving in to the harassments that you are confronted with.

Just as the discussed literature suggests, this form of resistance can be linked to women's mental state of resilience (Anderson and Danis 2006). The way in which women from Amsterdam are resilient, becomes clear when I use the method of mapping in order to map to what extent harassment influences their mobility. I asked Rosie, Xing and Nathalie to point out the locations where they sometimes feel uncomfortable or unsafe on a map of Amsterdam. Although all three women pointed out locations, like the touristic city centre and parks, all three concluded the exercise by saying that they feel very safe in Amsterdam. That this is indeed true, became clear during the times when I joined the women in public spaces in the city. They seemed to move through the city in a free and happy way. Through these behaviors, I see their power surfacing through their spatial confidence (Koskela and Tani 2005*:* 428). Although these women have certain perceptions of safety which are influenced by their fear of psychical assault and their experiences with harassment, they still say that they feel safe. When I ask Rosie if stranger harassment influences her daily life, she tells me that it does not. When I ask her to elaborate she says: 'It is just something you need to incorporate and absorb into how you are as a person (…) you can't live your life in fear'. Being confronted with harassment and being prepared for this harassment, is so much part of Rosies life that it is part of who she is. She shows how worrying about safety is an integral part of being a woman (Kelly and Torres 2006). She is so much adapted to it, that it does not influence her daily life. This is exemplary for how the women in this research are mentally armed against harassment by being resilient.

Before getting back to my methods, it is important to note that there is another way in which women resist harassment. They resist through speaking up about stranger harassment of women in general. An obvious example is their participation in this research. The dedication which they have displayed during their intensive participation, is a clear sign of their determination to fight harassment. An example is Una, who made her comic book because she wanted to feel 'less powerless' and 'raise awareness'. Speaking up about the structural inequality which surfaces through and is maintained by stranger harassment, plays an important part in women's resistance. Resisting harassment by trying to raise awareness for the issue is what I aim to do with this research as well. To be able to do so, it was essential for me to use audiovisual methods. That is why, before going into the conclusions, I want to elaborate shortly on why and how I used film to make a political and social intervention.

Resisting through Film

The output of this research partly exists of the ethnographic film *Hé Meisje* (*'What's Up, Girl'*). Making this film was my way of speaking up about harassment as I believe it is something we should take a close and serious look at. Stranger harassment and its implications are quite difficult to grasp because the harassments are so deeply rooted in our society and in the realities of the women living in them. To gain the anthropological knowledge that was needed for this research the usage of a camera was crucial.

I believe that the presence of a camera helps to gain knowledge on subject matters which are delicate and normalized, as is the case with this research' topic. By this I mean that I, inspired by

ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, used the camera as a catalyst tool. This means that I did not see the camera as a functional recording apparatus (Schauble 2017), but as an instrument which could reveal the very things that 'lay beneath the everyday surface of things' (Henley 2009: 340). How a camera can work as a catalyst to gain insights becomes especially clear in one of Rouch' most famous films called *Chronique d'un Ete* (1961). In this documentary Rouch looks at how the presence of a camera influences the way a group of Parisian people acts. He claims that the camera intervenes with these peoples realities, but that this intervention is not necessarily a bad thing as it actually triggers, or *catalyzes*, them to think about their lives and certain topics with greater attention. Rouche's camera intervenes in the everyday lives of people hereby revealing interesting aspects of these lives which otherwise might be left unnoticed.

In case of this research the catalyst attribute of the camera helped in gaining knowledge about the extent and the implications of the harassments that women in Amsterdam endure. By, for instance, filming women while they were doing 'mundane' activities, like running daily errands, these activities were denormalized. The very act of filming made women reflect on their daily movements through the city. The camera here makes an intervention because it 'says' that the way women relate to public spaces is something we should consciously look at and think about. As Peter Snowden noted, filming provides a chance for the filmed person to 'explore being a version (…) of themselves that they would not normally think to be (…) within the mundane texture and process of their everyday lives' (Snowden 2017: 16). The very act of recording was an intervention as it made the women who participated in this research focus more on the stranger harassment they endure and how these harassments influence how they act and feel in public spaces. The anthropological knowledge that emerged through this process of filmmaking is at root of everything I have discussed in this article as well as, of course, the accompanying film.

Not just a camera has the power to intervene in everyday reality, film in itself does too. *Hé Meisje* is produced to make an intervention. The high numbers on stranger harassment show how normal it nowadays still is for women to get harassed in public. I have shown that the potentiality of this harassment is even part of the socialization of women, who learn how to relate to public spaces in a certain way because of the threat to get harassed (Kelly and Torris 2006, Ahmed 2014). That this is a part of socialization shows just how much we, as a society, have adapted to harassment towards women. We are so used to how women relate to public spaces that the source of their behaviors and feelings is almost treated as something which is not there, as something invisible. By making harassment and its implications visible in *Hé Meisje*, I want to 'reveal the hidden' (Pink 2006; Pink et al. 2004). By pointing a camera 'on' stranger harassment and by creating a narrative on women's experiences through montage, I 'denaturalize' harassment. Suhr and Willersley (2016: 12), quoting Buck-Morss (1991: 71) say that 'denaturalization (…) may convey just how deeply questionable that which we tend to take as reality actually is'. According to these visual ethnographers creating a film is a way to 'denaturalize' things that seem to be normal. By researching stranger harassment and by creating an ethnographic film on the topic, I make a social and political intervention. Stranger harassment is not normal and it should not be ignored, as its implications are too big and too far reaching for too many people.

Conclusions

What if Alyssa Milano posted a tweet saying 'If all the women who have been harassed or assaulted in public wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem'? How many women would have responded to this tweet? Based on the dramatically high percentages of women who encounter harassments while being in public, my prediction is that an enormous amount of responses would come from all over the world. While this research focusses on Amsterdam, the results suggest that women's experience of harassment in public spaces is a collective experience.

Women, collectively, learn that 'the outside' is a place where they are vulnerable, a place where harm can be done to them. The discourse on women's vulnerability makes them relate to public spaces in a certain way, as they feel like they should be on guard when they are moving through these places. This guardedness shows just how political the emotion of fear is as it serves to maintain the idea that streets, parks, busses, trains, and so on, are less accessible to women than men. The tricky thing is that the narratives of vulnerability, which trigger this political emotion, are based on actual harassment stories. These are not just stories; women are actually being harassed in public spaces on a large scale. Stranger harassment then justifies the stories of vulnerability that make women behave in a certain way in public to begin with. This makes harassment not only the result of gender inequality (as it is a form of gender based violence), but also a reinforcement of it.

Even though women are often subjected to sexual harassments in public, I have found that this does not make women in Amsterdam feel unsafe. This shows how they resist harassment by being resilient. Although they resist harassment, it is undeniable that women have a historically and culturally rooted sense of physical vulnerability. The story of Xing, who seems to feel less afraid than other women because of her trust in her psychical strength, is interesting. Will women feel less on guard if they would get stronger or learn to trust more on their own strength? Seeing the positive effects Xing's confidence has on her experience of being in public, brings great trust in how psychical confidence could help in intervening in the politics of fear.

Although women's resistance might benefit from gaining psychical confidence, we should not only rely on women's individual resilience. What this study eventually shows is that stranger harassment, even in an emancipated society like the Netherlands, is everyday's business. The shared experience of harassment shows how gender norms manifest in public spaces. How different genders experience 'the streets' is part of the social and political structures we are living in. Although women's individual resilience is a sign of their power, to overly rely on this resilience could get in the way of what should really be done. Namely, de-normalizing the gender based violence that many people, and certainly not only women, are dealing with on a regular basis. It is only then, when harassment is not part of daily life anymore, that the public domain can be enjoyed equally by all genders.

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