

Women's eNews

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Women Strike Back Online Against Street Harassment

By Rachel Corbett, WeNews Correspondent

NEW YORK (WOMENSENEWS) – On a cold day in February, Emily May, a 25-year-old employee for a low-income housing and employment nonprofit in New York, bundled up and left work.

As she turned onto Broadway, the main north-south thoroughfare in Manhattan, two men heading toward her interrupted her thoughts. One tapped his friend and gave May a long look up and down.

“Yo baby, you’re gorgeous!” the man said to her. – “I wanna hit that!”

May whipped out her camera phone.

“Sir, can I take your picture?”

“Why do you want to take my picture?”

“Because I’m taking pictures of everyone who thinks I’m pretty today.”

What the men did not know was that May is part of a growing movement of women around the country and the globe turning the table on harassers.

May works with a group of women who take pictures of their harassers and post them online in a forum called Holla Back NYC. Tech-savvy women around the world send posts to Holla Back, which averages 1,000 hits per day, including women from Spain, Italy and India. Last week, European women established their own forum as the United Kingdom was the first country to sign on to the official European branch of Holla Back; Switzerland and Germany are expected to follow soon.

The Web site encourages women to post photos and write about men who comment or leer at them on the streets. It was prompted by the 2005 arrest of Dan Hoyt, a subway masturbator who was caught by a passenger who took his photo and had it printed in the New York Daily News. Hoyt was convicted of public lewdness in February.

Latest Street-Safety Effort

Holla Back NYC is the latest permutation of an ongoing effort across the country to make the streets safer for women.

In New York this includes the Street Harassment Coalition and the Brooklyn-based Right Rides, a group that offers free nighttime rides home for women.

“It is seen as a micro-inequity, not a big deal,” said Maggie Hadleigh-West whose 1998 documentary “War Zone” detailed her personal encounters with street harassers.

But street harassment, because it induces a kind of anxiety in women akin to the fear of rape, is not just an annoyance for Hadleigh-West but a real threat.

“You have to allow yourself to feel what you’re feeling,” she said. “It is the intent behind words, behavior, gestures that we are responding to.”

The impetus behind Hadleigh-West’s film and much anti-harassment activism is performance artist Laurie Anderson’s 1973 photography project, “Fully Automated Nikon,” during which she realized the vengeful joys of taking pictures of street harassers. She also found that it renewed her confidence and sense of safety: “As I walked along Houston Street with my fully automated Nikon, I felt armed, ready.”

The advent of online blogs – sites that regularly post updates on specific topics – along with camera phones and the Internet have given the movement a huge boost.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do this even a year earlier,” said May, a Holla Back co-founder, which has about 100 photos on its Web site and started up in September 2005. May said the Web site and blog have become powerful organizing tools. “They give a sense of being able to create a worldwide community beyond our social networks.”

‘Eve-Teasing’ in India

In India, the movement to raise awareness around street harassment is also occurring electronically. Blank Noise, an India-based blog run by three women in three different cities, encourages reader participation in documenting accounts of “eve teasing,” the Indian equivalent of street harassment. It is also a resource for coordinating protests and meetings.

The blog has helped muster support for projects such as the “Did You Ask for It” art installation in which readers donate articles of clothing worn on days they were harassed, ranging anywhere from baggy flannel button-ups to floor-length skirts to pairs of jeans. The work is an attempt to challenge the misconception that harassment is the result of revealing clothing.

Beyond its networking capacities, the blogosphere serves the movement against street harassment with a certain eye-for-an-eye type of vigilantism. Here, the anonymous gaze is female and women become private perpetrators who publicly objectify harassers.

The New York-based Street Harassment Coalition recently began a blog of its own devoted to showing the effects of what they see as an abundant problem that is widely treated as mundane. One poster writes that the problem permeates “the cultural and social landscape . . . which impacts our choices, our moods, our participation within and relationship to our communities.”

The group also conducts awareness workshops in high schools and disseminates flyers around the city with images of harassers and slogans that bring attention to the issue.

Hot Weather Tactics

As spring turns to summer and warm weather enlivens New York City streets, Holla Back, Right Rides and other activists are also gearing up fresh tactics to promote women's safety during what Holla Back calls the "street harassment season."

In New York, activities include the third annual Sexual Assault Yearly Speakout, which took place April 21-22, featuring 24 hours of open-air testimonial from sexual-abuse survivors. Right Rides, who had to cease service this winter due to a lack of volunteer drivers, expects to re-emerge from its hibernation in July.

Focusing on their consciousness-raising activities this summer, Holla Back will continue organizing informational bar crawls in order to chat with women informally about their experiences with street harassment and let them know about the Web site. They also have panel discussions and protests planned for the coming months.

"The goal is not to create a catalog or database of harassers, but to raise awareness and empower women," said May. While encouraging women to find ways to "holla back" at harassers it discourages women from snapping back at night or when they are alone.

Remembering the man who harassed her in February, May recalls how she could sense that he wasn't a kidnapper or rapist. "He was just a confused guy with absolutely no lady skills. Still, if I hadn't turned around for the 'holla back', I would have walked on feeling a little shaken and self-conscious. How am I supposed to know which are the nice guys and which just don't get it?"

Rachel Corbett is a WeNews contributor and freelance writer in New York.

For more information:

Holla Back New York City: <http://www.hollabacknyc.blogspot.com/>

Holla Back Europe: <http://www.hollaback.eu/>

Street Harassment Coalition: <http://www.streetharassmentproject.org/>

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