



Pathways to Prevention: Ending Street Harassment in the Netherlands, Egypt and Belgium

Key Messages

- Everyone has the right to move through public spaces freely and safely, without interruption, discrimination or violence.
- When people are afraid to be themselves in public space, or feel unsafe because of unwanted attention or discriminating behaviour, it means their freedom of movement and bodily integrity are violated.
- Besides sex and gender, people experience harassment because of their sexual orientation, race, religion, and disability.
- Street harassment is a human rights issue which calls for a structural and effective response.
- Barriers to reporting have hindered the effectiveness of legislation to curb harassment.
- Legislation against street harassment remains weak if it is not supported with adequate resources to prevent it and a focus on behavioural and norm change.

BACKGROUND

On December 17th 2020, Share-Net Netherlands organised a virtual meeting seeking to unpack the concept of street harassment. This meeting was organised by the Share-Net Community of Practice working on gender-based violence (GBV). Speakers from the [Netherlands](#), [Egypt](#) and [Belgium](#) discussed the concept of street harassment, the implications of criminalising street harassment and best practices in preventing and ending this form of gender-based violence.

Ending harassment requires a complex set of solutions. This policy brief unpacks the concept of street harassment and provides recommendations for Share-Net members and the wider SRHR community on how to effectively respond to and prevent street harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has the right to move through public spaces freely and safely, without interruption, discrimination or violence. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many people across the world, especially women and girls. Street harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls in public spaces exist in every country.

When people are afraid to be themselves in public space, or feel unsafe because of unwanted attention or discriminating behaviour, it means their freedom of movement and bodily integrity are violated. This makes street harassment a human rights issue which calls for a structural and effective response.

While there is no globally standardized definition of street harassment, for this policy brief we will use the definition by Stop Street Harassment, a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting and addressing and ending gender-based street harassment worldwide:

“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”.

Besides sex and gender, people experience harassment because of their sexual orientation, race, religion, and disability. People can be harassed for multiple reasons within a single harassment incident. This is called the intersectionality of street harassment. Harassment is at its core, upholding a power dynamic - in the form of words, gestures or actions - that reminds certain groups or people of their vulnerable position, even if that was not the intention. The scope of this policy brief, guided by the panel discussion, focuses mainly on the harassment of women and girls while taking into consideration that the law should include the protection of all genders and also being aware that transforming the culture of street harassment aims to make public spaces safer for everyone.

The Netherlands

Street harassment is a persistent problem in the Netherlands. Research in Amsterdam in 2018 showed that 81% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 34 have experienced street harassment at least once in their lives or more. In Rotterdam, research from 2017 showed that 94% of women between the ages of 18 and 45 have experienced at least one form of harassment.

Egypt

Sexual harassment in Egypt is an extremely widespread phenomenon. A study by UN women reported that 99.3% of women in Egypt have experienced sexual harassment. This statistic has been contested by those who define sexual harassment as mainly physical, dismissing verbal harassment which constitutes a large proportion of the overall statistic. Organizations such

as HarassMap and Nazra for Feminist Studies have been actively advocating for more accurate definitions of sexual harassment, amendments to the law and raising awareness about the roots of the issue.

Belgium

In 2019, a survey by Plan International Belgium revealed that 91% of girls and young women and 28% of boys and young men (15-24 years old) have experienced gender-based harassment in public space. The survey also showed that women and girls are more likely to be exposed to catcalling, staring, persistent flirtations and unsolicited or unwanted touching.

PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION

Prevention through legislation

Despite the initial focus of policymakers in larger cities in the Netherlands on criminalising street harassment, the local legislation was never made use of in Amsterdam. This inactivity could have been due to several reasons, including: fear of reporting, lack of enforcement, and lack of awareness that this legislation existed. In Rotterdam, women explained that they thought reporting wouldn’t make a difference, that they felt the incidents were not severe enough, and that reporting would take too much time. One case made it into court but the verdict was rescinded. The judge ruled that a verdict for street harassment on the basis of local legislation could only be implemented when sanctioned by Dutch national law. For this reason, in May 2020, the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security published a new draft law against sexual crimes with suggestions to modernise and update Dutch Criminal Law concerning sexual crimes. One of the main changes brought by the new law is the criminalisation of verbal and non-verbal harassment in public space, including online harassment, punishable with a maximum of 6 months of imprisonment.

In Egypt, the first law to specifically address and criminalize harassment was issued in 2014 and was an amendment to article 306 of the Penal Code. The law criminalizes verbal, behavioural, phone and online sexual harassment. Now, under article 306 (a) and 306 (b), offenders can face sentences between 6 months up to 5 years in prison and pay fines between 3000 EGP up to 50,000 EGP. Despite being a big step

forward, the law is still limited by its narrow definition of the key concepts which, for example, restricts the definition of sexual harassment to one that involves stalking a woman. This is problematic as stalking is not always the case, in addition to the fact that the harassment of men is clearly neglected by the law.

In Belgium, the anti-harassment law states that, “anyone who performs a behaviour or act in public or in the presence of witnesses with the intent to consider or despise someone as inferior because of their gender or to reduce them to their gender dimension can be punished.” Since this law has been put into effect in 2014 there have been approximately 25 complaints per year with the first conviction taking place in 2018. Although the law creates a framework for victims to file a complaint, the survey from [Plan International Belgium](#) shows that only 6% of the victims of sexual harassment go to the police after experiencing harassment.

It is worth highlighting here that in these three countries, the law specifically refers to harassment as sexual harassment or motivated by gender discrimination. This fails to acknowledge the intersectionality of harassment. Street harassment based on racial discrimination should especially be accounted for in these countries which all have a considerable number of migrants and people from diverse backgrounds. Organizations in the Netherlands have already expressed concerns that the draft law did not clearly specify what actions are considered harassment and therefore punishable. The Minister of Justice and Security has stated that he will come back with a more-detailed description of the punishable acts.

The criminalization approach is also limited in its capacity to ensure that all crimes are reported. In both the Netherlands and Egypt barriers to reporting have hindered the effectiveness of the law to curb harassment. In the Netherlands, [FairSpace](#) and other Dutch organisations have shared concerns over the law’s capacity to take the existing barriers for reporting away, as mentioned in the cases of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Meanwhile in Egypt the effectiveness of criminalization is also in question as it was found to be common for survivors of sexual harassment to be pressured, through guilt or fear, into dropping charges or not filing charges altogether, either by bystanders or officials. There have also been numerous incidents of women being harassed by the family or friends of their harasser after pressing charges. In August of 2020, a

new law to protect the anonymity of women who are reporting sexual harassment or assault was approved. While this goes a long way to encourage women who fear reporting because of the social stigma, the impact it will have on the reporting of street harassment is yet to be seen.

Prevention through education

The different cases demonstrate that legislation against street harassment remains weak if it is not supported with adequate resources to prevent it and a focus on behavioural and norm change. In the case of Egypt this weakness is especially apparent as misconceptions about the root causes of the issue reinforce the social acceptability of sexual harassment, placing the blame on women and justifying the crime.

Awareness of street harassment and the law Awareness raising initiatives played an important role in paving the way for the law to acknowledge and respond to street harassment in the Netherlands. Grassroots organizations such as FairSpace and [Stichting Stop Straatintimidatie](#), rose up to tackle the issue. FairSpace focuses on prevention of street harassment, finding that education is necessary to support any legal solutions. Many of the reasons that victims do not report harassment crimes, including thinking that street harassment is normal and not knowing that they can report, are due to lack of awareness.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Since December 2012, it is mandatory for schools in the Netherlands, in primary, secondary and special education, to teach about sexuality, diversity, including sexual diversity, and respectful behaviour. Schools are free to choose how they address these topics with their students and can make use of sex education interventions and materials developed for youth by organisations focusing on SRHR, health, and diversity, such as the ‘Flag System’ that is also used in schools in Flanders, Belgium. The Flag System methodology ranks sexual behaviour and offers guidance on how to respond appropriately.

An important tool for choosing the organisation of sex education and teaching methods is the [Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe](#), by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Federal Centre for Health Education. This framework describes the goals and principles of sex education, with a clear matrix showing what students need to know, think and be able to do in their phase of schooling in the field of

relationships and sexuality. Important is a positive and holistic approach which is not prevention-oriented with a focus on problems and risks, but in line with curiosities, interests, needs and experiences of young people. A [report from 2019](#), by Rutgers and SOA Aids Nederland, showed that youth in the Netherlands want a stronger focus on how to interact with each other, both offline and online. The topic of harassment should be included in the sex education that goes beyond sex.

In sharp contrast, all content relating to sex education and reproductive health has been removed from Egyptian secondary school curricula since 2010. The burden of this gap in education has been largely placed on non-governmental and civil society organizations. Organizations like HarassMap have been working independently to provide trainings for students and faculty at schools and universities while providing technical support for the adoption of anti-sexual harassment policies and support services. Most recently, doctors and educators have begun using digital platforms and social media to communicate and share critical information about sexual health and rights, including topics that are considered taboo such as pleasure, masturbation and the concept of “virginity”. Accounts such as [The Sex Talk in Arabic](#) and [This is Mother Being](#) have been active in their efforts to engage not only youth but also adults through easy and accessible Arabic content. What is notable about such initiatives is how they encourage open dialogue and asking questions which is very much needed in this context. Still, academics, doctors and policy makers continue to call for the implementation of comprehensive sexual education in Egyptian schools.

The role of social media and digital education
In Egypt, a wave of online activism against sexual harassment and rape was sparked in 2020 by two cases that went viral. The case of Ahmed Bassam Zaki was the beginning of “Assault Police” an Instagram account dedicated to sharing the stories of survivors of harassment and assault who usually wish to remain anonymous, fearing their safety. With the help of social media, the case got the attention of international news outlets, the National Council for Women and the Public Prosecutor who ordered the arrest of the perpetrator. It also opened very important discussions about consent, coercion, manipulation and the limits of the law. This case seemed to have a domino effect as more accounts began to appear, exposing rapists and harassers. While the second case, the Fairmont Incident, was much more complicated, it demonstrated

the capacity of youth to mobilize on social media, raise awareness and push for change. Conversations about consent, reporting and dealing with threats sparked by these cases went a long way to support anti-sexual harassment efforts in Egypt. Power assertion is at the root of both sexual harassment and rape and this message is being increasingly echoed on social media platforms in an effort to cancel the idea that any form of violence against women is justifiable.

Within the context of the Netherlands, diverse social and online platforms are used to share experiences of harassment, ploy bystander intervention and inspire people into action. On Fairspace’s website, hundreds of people throughout the Netherlands have shared their stories and experiences of harassment. The goal of such a tool is twofold; to offer support and solidarity to people and to show that they are not alone and; to offer a snapshot to communities, civil society and policymakers of the problem in their jurisdictions. Worldwide, platforms such as Chalk Back and Hollaback! use a similar approach to encourage story-sharing and awareness-raising.

Influencers such as Catcalls of Amsterdam leverage huge followings on social media to bring attention to street harassment and to de-normalize such harmful behaviours and attitudes through a medium that engages young people in the topic. Beyond the platforms themselves, popular hashtags such as #MeToo, #endSH and #ReclaimTheseStreets are globally relevant and are used in response to worldwide movements to end street harassment that are often triggered by local incidents. These platforms and tools are just a microcosm of a blossoming online and digital movement that seeks to use universally-recognized experiences and language to raise awareness about this global phenomenon and spark activism and policy change locally.

Bystander Intervention

An effective methodology in sexual violence prevention is bystander intervention. Bystander intervention essentially involves equipping people with the skills to intervene when they witness a potentially harmful situation, such as bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia or any kind of unacceptable or negative behaviour, and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome. Bystander intervention is a relatively new concept but studies from college campuses and the military in the US have seen success, particularly when it comes to tackling sexual harassment and assault. The use of bystander

training can make positive changes in attitudes and behaviours by increasing awareness of a problem and responsibility to solve it. In the Netherlands, bystander intervention is advocated for by Fairspace through their [Stand Up Against Street Harassment](#) programme and Rutgers through their [Ben je oké? campaign](#) to prevent sexual violence at festivals. In Belgium, bystander intervention is an important pillar of the Flanders Action plan against harassment 2020-2024.

Prevention through community-driven solutions
Approaches against street harassment are more effective when they are tailor-made to specific locations and co-created with those most impacted by it. Using a community approach means that the target group has a direct influence upon the ways we interact in public space. Ultimately, they have the potential to contribute in meaningful ways, combating street harassment, that they are negatively affected by. Therefore, participants can directly influence their own environment and daily reality.

In Egypt, [HarassMap](#) worked with community outreach volunteers and partners to change the atmosphere in their own neighbourhoods to a safe and positive environment. In the Netherlands, Fairspace is piloting a community-based approach for ending

street harassment in the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In Rotterdam, young people and young LGBTQ+ people will be co-designing local solutions to street harassment. In Amsterdam, Black women and women of colour will be identifying and designing interventions to understand how gender and race intersect and impact street harassment, and to prevent it.

Plan International Belgium has increasingly involved youth in the development of and advocacy for solutions to street harassment, exploring solutions involving education, urban design and policy reforms. In 2018, the organisation collected input from youth activists and, together with [Brussels parliament](#) members, created a [resolution on sexual harassment](#), with a specific focus on public transport. This resulted in a city-wide campaign against sexual harassment in public transport with the Brussels public transport provider the following year. In early 2021, Plan International Belgium convened [500 youth](#) aged between 15 and 24 online to find solutions to sexual harassment. Together, 25 policy recommendations were formulated, a top 5 was chosen and shared with policymakers present at the event.



CONCLUSION

Sexual or gender-based street harassment is a complex issue that is rooted in the assertion and reinforcement of unequal power dynamics. The cases of Egypt and the Netherlands show that comprehensive definitions are necessary for more effective and inclusive legislation. Moreover in all cases, in order for criminalization to become an effective prevention tool, additional measures must be enforced to remove the barriers to reporting and guarantee the privacy and safety of those who report harassment.

The experiences and concerns of organizations in the three countries highlight the importance of education and awareness for prevention of street harassment. Legislation needs to be complemented with changes in societal perceptions. Comprehensive sexuality education can help reduce misperceptions about harassment and build a culture of consent and respect for boundaries. Education can also help in cultivating healthy relationships with sex and more open conversations which can help reduce the barriers to reporting that are often rooted in shame, taboo or stigma. Additionally, policy makers must be aware of the increasing importance of educating bystanders. Bystander intervention is a constructive approach that not only raises awareness but provides tools for action which, in the long run, can help minimize the conditions that motivate offenders to carry out harassment crimes.

Finally, there is a lot of potential in involving communities in decision-making and planning for more effective prevention measures. The growing use of social media for online activism and advocacy surrounding gender-based violence shows that people, especially youth, are ready and willing to participate in social change. Efforts are needed to support, amplify and accommodate this kind of participation into policymaking.

Key Recommendations

Prevention through legislation: tackling its barriers

- Guarantee the privacy and safety of those who report street harassment
- Apply an intersectional approach to street harassment
- Clearly specify what actions are considered harassment and therefore punishable

Prevention through education: legislation against street harassment remains weak if it is not supported with adequate resources to prevent it and a focus on behavioural and norm change

- Include the topic of street harassment and healthy interactions in public space in comprehensive sexuality education
- Recognize and support the power of social media and digital education to bring attention to street harassment and to de-normalize such harmful behaviours and attitudes to engage young people in the topic
- Use bystander intervention training to positively change attitudes and behaviours by increasing awareness of street harassment and responsibility to solve it

Prevention through community-driven solutions

- Tailor interventions to specific locations and co-create them with those most impacted by street harassment in those areas

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