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## Review

# Men's stranger intrusions: Rethinking street harassment



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### ABSTRACT

Women's experiences of intrusive men in public space, popularly termed 'street harassment', are the most understudied yet commonly experienced forms of violence against women. Despite acknowledgement of its importance, an explicit debate on naming – with an exploration of how language creates both openings and restrictions of what can be said – is yet to be had in the literature. This paper begins this conversation, detailing the benefits and challenges in current terminology, and exploring the possibilities of reframing the most common dynamic in street harassment as men's stranger intrusions on women in public space.

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### Introduction

During the 1970s, key feminist texts began to raise the issue of men's violence against women and girls in its criminal and mundane manifestations. [Brownmiller \(1975\)](#) theorised rape as a tool of social control and [Greer \(1971\)](#) used the concept of 'petty rapes' to describe the ways in which the everyday and the presumed rare 'sledgehammer' ([Stanko, 1985](#)) experiences of men's intrusion were connected. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist research and activism combined to substantially build the knowledge base and theoretical frameworks available for understanding men's violence against women ([Kelly, 2012](#)). Key contributors highlighted the danger in relegating such practices to a set of aberrant behaviours of a deviant minority of

men, pointing to the importance of recognising the ordinary forms of men's violence ([Hanmer & Saunders, 1984](#); [Kelly, 1988](#); [Stanko, 1985, 1990](#); [Wise & Stanley, 1987](#)). Yet despite this early acknowledgment, women's experiences of intrusive men in public space remain an understudied area.

Empirical studies of what is commonly known as 'street harassment', its prevalence, manifestations, harms, and the meanings it holds for both the men who practice it and the women who experience it, are few. Reasons for the sparse academic treatment across disciplines include: trivialisation ([Tuerkheimer, 1997](#); [West, 1987](#)); normalisation ([Bowman, 1993](#); [Larkin, 1997](#)); and the ways in which rules of conduct in public and semi-public places do not receive the same scrutiny as practices in private places ([Gardner, 1995](#); [Goffman, 1990](#); [Lenton, Smith, Fox, & Morra, 1999](#)). Terminologic difficulties also explain the relative silence, given the expansion in the knowledge base on other

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forms of men's violence against women. The lack of agreement on what constitutes the phenomenon, how to name it, and how to conceptualise the harm, presents problems for survey methodologies and complicates comparison between studies. Despite acknowledging its importance, an explicit debate on naming – with an exploration of how language creates both openings and restrictions of what can be said – is yet to take place.

This paper seeks to carve a space for such a discussion. I first review the disparities in how the phenomenon is named and defined, identifying the relative silence on the limitations and benefits of existing terminology, even within studies recognising the problem of bringing women's experience into language. This problem was met in earlier campaigns to recognise sexual harassment, and the second section explores how this earlier work has framed street harassment, as well as the limitations in doing so. I then outline what is lost in mapping our terminology onto the framings necessary for a legalistic project, exploring the benefits and limitations when contrasted with a phenomenological frame. This leads to another definitional obstacle: the lack of agreement as to what practices actually constitute the phenomenon. The fourth section addresses this, exploring what practices are incorporated into different definitions in order to illuminate the gaps in what is recorded and researched. These gaps are pronounced when we turn to an examination of harms. Here I look first at how useful it is to conceptualise the harm as particularly gendered, having a specific impact when directed from male to female strangers, before exploring how connecting experiences across the continuum of sexual violence can help us understand the harm in relation to existing literature on women's fear of crime, and particularly the 'crime paradox'. I conclude with the suggestion of reframing street harassment as men's stranger intrusion. The term is introduced with an acknowledgement of its limitations, whilst pointing to how it may help fill some of the gaps in the existing literature, and assist in a wider project of building a phenomenology of violence against women and girls.

### The problem of naming

Engaging with the difficulties of naming forms of men's violence is critical in attempts to combat historical silencing. Such a project may be incompatible with the provision of a workable framework for policy and legal reform, but this should not deter us from seeking ways of articulating women's experiential realities. Davis (1993) describes the relationship between African-American women's experiences of embodiment and street harassment as "the harm that has no name". Whilst the harm may be difficult to bring into language, attempts at naming the phenomenon itself meet the counter obstacle of a multiplicity of names.

There is no consistent term used in the literature to capture the range of women's encounters with men's stranger intrusion in public space, highlighting the need for an explicit debate on naming, similar to the debates on other forms of violence against women and girls (see the discussion of 'violence' in Dobash & Dobash, 1998; or of 'paedophile' in Kelly, 1996). Though necessary to build both the knowledge and theoretical base, this debate must carefully acknowledge both the powers of and barriers to developing a shared definition, as well as questions about the limitations of criminalising behaviours or marking out as distinct practices that are extensions of commonly accepted gender relations. It is thus a more complex endeavour than a simple evaluative review of the literature, though even attempting to find a baseline here reveals the extent of the problem.

Reviewing the literature solely through terminology reveals multiple namings within the same work or across different studies by the same writer. For many, the location of the experience in public space is important, thus it is variously described as: 'public harassment' (Gardner, 1995; Guano, 2007; Kearl, 2010; Lenton et al., 1999; Lord, 2009; Rosewarne, 2005), 'public sexual harassment' (Thompson, 1994) or 'sexual harassment in public places', used in global advocacy

including ActionAid's Safer Cities program (Kelly, 2014) and UN Women's Global Safe Cities Initiative (see Kearl, 2015), as well as by Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2012), Laniya (2005) and Lenton et al. (1999). Some terms are not shared by other authors. Lord (2009) uses 'gender based public harassment', West (1987) uses the term 'street hassling', and Gardner (1980) uses the similar 'street remarks'. Laura Beth Nielsen (2004) uses the term 'offensive public speech', explicitly including racialised speech.

For several authors, the frequency and/or mundanity are definitionally important, often at the exclusion of the location. Kelly (1988) uses 'commonplace intrusions' and Esacove (1998) names encounters as 'everyday unwanted sexual attention', though the problems of limiting the phenomenon to being 'unwanted' will be discussed later. Kimberly Fairchild notes frequency in her use of 'everyday stranger harassment' (Fairchild, 2007; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), but focuses solely on identifying the perpetrator by using 'stranger harassment' (2010). The degendered term of 'stranger harassment' is also used by Wesselmann and Kelly (2010) and Macmillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh (2000). By far, the most common terminology is that of 'street harassment' (Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1993; Fileborn, 2013; Fogg-Davis, 2006; Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Larkin, 1997; Lenton et al., 1999; Macmillan et al., 2000; Nielsen, 2000; Oshynko, 2002; Rosewarne, 2005; Thompson, 1994; Tuerkheimer, 1997; Walkowitz, 1998), with some studies simply placing these practices under the umbrella of 'sexual harassment' (FRA, 2014; Quinn, 2002; Rosewarne, 2007; Wise & Stanley, 1987).

I am not the first to note variations in terminology. Elizabeth Arveda Kissling (1991) argues that there is no agreed label for 'street harassment', a claim remade by Holly Kearl (2010), who recognises that some researchers reject the term 'street harassment' though does not explicitly explore how her use of this framing impacts on her commendable project of developing a name for the phenomenon from the women who experience it. In fact, many researchers acknowledge that the lack of a unified term for the range of behaviours and practices that are studied arises from the difficulties women encounter in attempts to identify and label their experience (Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Larkin, 1997; Lenton et al., 1999; Long, 2012; Tuerkheimer, 1997; West, 1987). This gap is evident in Lenton et al. (1999), which acknowledges that comparisons between surveys are complicated by different definitions, without explicitly discussing its own terminology. This is a particularly confusing omission in a paper where 'sexual harassment in public places', 'public harassment of women' and 'street harassment' are all used interchangeably. These variations are important in recognising that, for example, men can experience 'sexual harassment in public places', but not 'public harassment of women.' Similarly, whereas racist harassment can be covered by both 'street harassment' and 'public harassment of women', many of these practices would not qualify for inclusion in the category of 'sexual harassment in public places'.

Thus, conversation is needed on what connections particular framings encourage, and how to manage the tensions between the articulation of lived experience and the boundaries necessary for legal and policy interventions. Here, my focus is on articulating the experiential connections between 'street harassment' and other forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls from known and unknown men. As evidenced, the most common framing across the literature is as a form of harassment, be it stranger, street or public, but Kelly (1988) stands out for adopting the term 'commonplace intrusion', alongside Stanko (1985, 1990) who conceptualises the phenomenon as both an intimate intrusion and everyday violence. In addressing naming conventions then, it may be useful to briefly revisit the sexual harassment framework first, to investigate the problems and benefits of using it as a conceptual apparatus through which to talk about women's experiences in public space.

### Sexual harassment: a name for our suffering

Sexual harassment is a term feminists brought into language (Spender, 1985). Prior to its naming it existed as what Miranda Fricker

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