

London, we need to talk about sexual harassment

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/11/05/dear-london-we-need-to-talk-about-sexual-harassment/

2015-11-5

Monica Ibrahim, originally from Egypt, questions her previous assumptions that living in 'the west' would mean enjoying a hassle-free environment of gender equality.

Having worked in the field of countering sexual harassment and assault in Egypt, I thought I had heard every story, every gruesome detail of harassment incidents in the streets, at work or even at home. Such stories became mundane in a country where more than 99% of women have admitted to be subject to sexual harassment according to a recent UN study.



This was part of my daily routine in Cairo, experiencing sexual harassment on my way to work, working with stories of sexual harassment as part of my job then casually talking about street harassment with my friends over lunch. Not exactly a great routine for maintaining mental health and well-being. The only thing that made it worthwhile was when you could see small changes happening in the local community. Those baby steps promising a wider societal change, be it women speaking out against sexual harassment, bystanders' intervention or a harasser taken to court.

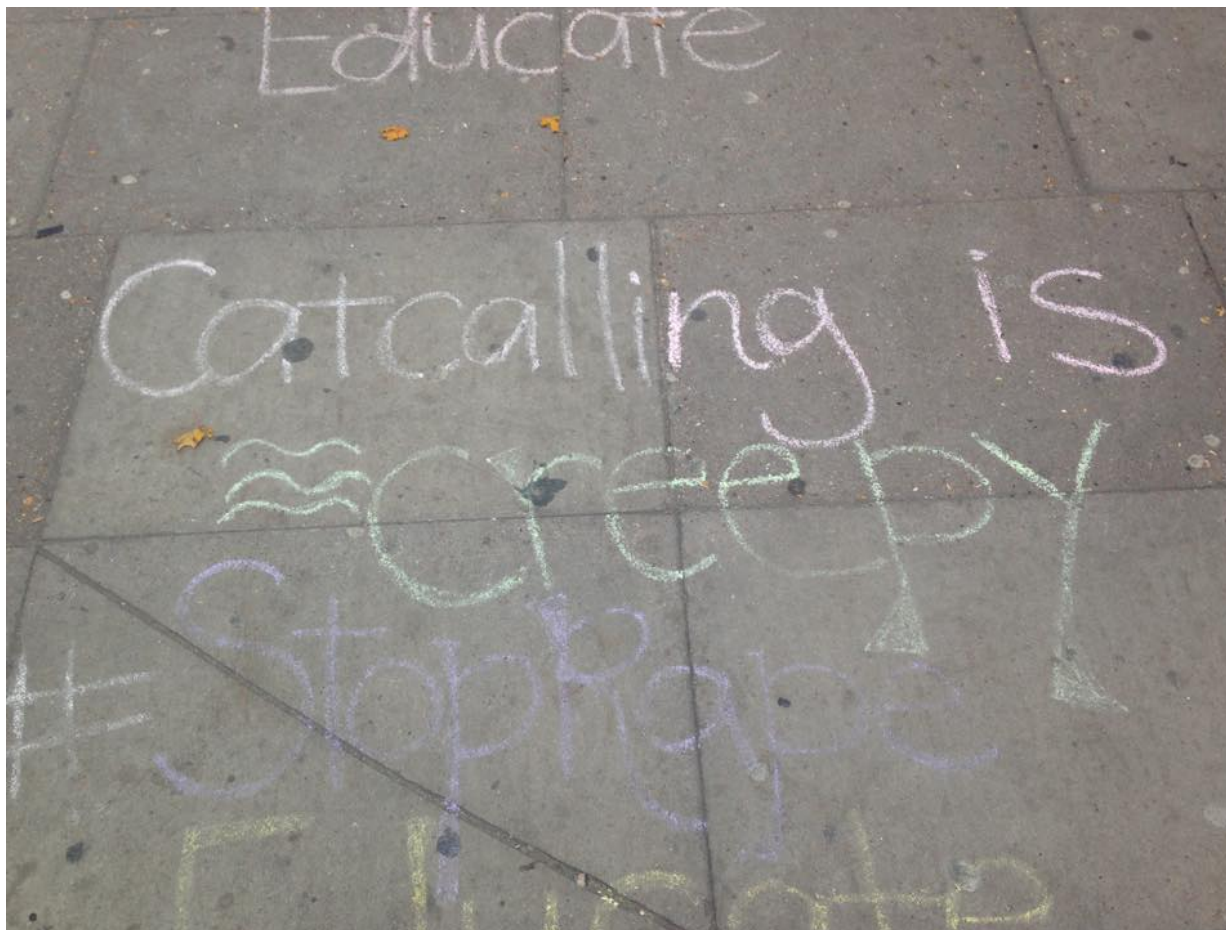
It is true, change is incremental, and you don't realize how far you have gone until you take a step back. That's what happened to me when I came here to London. In less than a month, I began to realize the contrast between the sexual harassment that exists in both Cairo and London. The following situations helped me paint a different picture than the one I previously had about London being "the ideal" city for women to live in.



I recently saw Laura Bates [talk at LSE](#) about her 'Everyday Sexism' project that began in the UK and became a worldwide online phenomenon. Bates explained that the idea behind her project came from a series of sexual harassment incidents experienced by herself and friends and the realization of how little sexism is talked about publicly. Bates' talk drew my attention to the fact that the "West" or at least the UK thinks that gender equality has been established or fulfilled and that other related problems such as sexual harassment have miraculously

disappeared so there is no need to talk about them anymore. That had been my personal belief as well; that I would come to the sexual harassment free-streets of London and that I would enjoy the feminist paradise at the UK, but I was mistaken.

What made it even clearer to me was when a 'European' friend who was sexually harassed on her way home in of London's busiest streets, told me she should have asked a male friend to walk her back because it was "late at night". Remind me again why one's gender determines what time you should be walking down the streets? I was astonished that some women living in the West –where gender equality is allegedly accomplished- still think they must have done something wrong to bring harassment upon themselves.



Another friend of mine had a similar story. This (male) friend told me he never took sexual harassment seriously until he was walking among a group of female friends on a Friday night, he was overwhelmed with all the attention, catcalling and ogling he was surrounded with. He made an interesting observation about how he

walks the streets "unnoticed" as a man and how uncomfortable it is to feel watched.

I am sorry London, I can't take it when a random man stops me in the street to tell me "smile for me baby" or when four guys stand in my way to tell me "Hola.. Como estas?" or most notably, when I get followed and catcalled for 10 minutes in the middle of the day. We need to recognize that there is a sexual harassment problem in this city, and we need to take it seriously. Gender equality is not a matter of being but a matter of becoming. It is a process and progress that needs to be nurtured and sustained.

Women need to speak up against sexual harassment when it happens to them and bystanders witnessing sexual harassment should intervene when they can. We need to create a feeling that sexual harassment is neither acceptable nor tolerated and society needs to take sexual harassment seriously by opening up spaces for women to share their stories where they can seek support and empowerment.

Monica Ibrahim is an MSc student at LSE and has worked previously at HarassMap, an Egyptian initiative working on ending social acceptability of sexual harassment and assault in Egypt as well as being a

journalist for GlobalPost and CBC TV Channel in Cairo. @monica_ibrahime

[Laura Bates – Everyday Sexism](#) from [Polis Video](#) on [Vimeo](#).

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science