

The Reality of the Lives of Women and Girls

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“Hey Baby, where are you going?” “Aw why you running away, can I get your number?” “Why don’t you just give me a smile?” All things that are said to women without prompting, going about their day, living their lives. Ask any woman in your life and she will more than likely have a story to tell about catcalling or sexual harassment. It seems to be a universal experience for women, and yet is one that is often ignored. In the NPR podcast *The Sunday Story: This is What it feels like to be catcalled*, Ayesha Roscoe and Terra Lopez (2023) share some of their experiences with catcalling and sexual harassment. Lopez speaks about an exhibit she created in 2017 that highlighted real experiences of women being catcalled. She shared how many men didn’t realize the extent of things being said to women or how they can make people feel. They share how sometimes catcalling is treated on television and in the media like a joke or just men being playful. Both women share some experiences that may seem harmless, but also shared how they felt and how some situations became violent and frightening situations. While not all catcallers have malicious intent, catcalling can be extremely dehumanizing and may lead to violent encounters. Along with catcalling, women face many inappropriate comments and situations no matter where they are, what they are wearing, or what they’re doing.

Women face these encounters relatively frequently and often feel unsafe in day-to-day situations. No person should have to feel less than others because of the way they are born, including their gender or how they express themselves. Even the words we use can denote the differences in how men and women are treated. In the Oxford dictionary the word manly is described as having the virtues of courage and strength. Conversely the term womanly denotes softness, having a womanly figure. The slang term ‘thicc’, meaning to have a full-figured body,

is even listed as a synonym. Such a difference in how we view men and women has obviously made a difference in how women and girls are treated. From an early age many women and girls are confronted with the reality that some men view them as sexualized objects rather than fellow human beings. Women and female presenting individuals should have a right to live their lives not fearing the words or actions of others throughout their normal everyday lives.

Terra Lopez is an artist who uses her art to bring attention to different social issues. In the podcast, Lopez speaks about the art exhibit she put on in 2017. For this exhibit, she interviewed a group of women and recorded inappropriate catcalls that had been said to them. These recordings were then played in a long dark hallway with a mirror at the end of the hallway. Lopez was driven by the idea of “if men could experience what female-presenting folks experience on a daily basis, would that change their behavior?” In a survey done by Stop Street Harassment in 2008, 808 women out of 811 said that they had experienced some form of catcalling and verbal harassment. In 2014, Stop Street Harassment conducted a 2,000-person nationwide survey where 65% of women reported experiencing street harassment. In a survey completed in 2019, they found that 81% of women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment or assault at some point in their lifetime. According to a YouGov study done in the UK, by UN Women UK, an astonishing 97% of women between the ages of 18-24 report experiencing some form of sexual harassment. I along with countless other women have been subjected to dehumanizing comments, just going about my day-to-day life. Often the men we are closest to and care about the most do not even realize the kinds of comments and situations we face.

Later in the podcast, Lopez and Roscoe share their first memories of catcalling and harassment. Lopez shares how she was around only six years old when she first realized that she

was different from her brothers, not as safe as they were, and couldn't do some of the things they could. She witnessed her mother being catcalled and realized that being a girl, being a woman, was not safe. "I remember watching my mother be constantly harassed when I was a kid at my basketball games, at school, at the bus stop. I mean, it seemed like everywhere we went, there was always a comment or an attempt to get her attention" (Lopez 2023).

For me, I was a bit older than Lopez. I grew up in a small town where catcalling and harassment on the street isn't so prevalent. One summer, when I was fifteen, we took a family trip to Chicago. I vividly remember my mom telling me to keep my eyes forward and to never engage with these men or their comments. At fifteen, I received many sexually lewd comments, along with my mother and sister on our family vacation. Crude things were said, and I immediately felt dirty, almost violated in some way. They were only words being called in my direction, and yet that day I came to the realization that some people on this planet viewed me and other women and girls as merely sexual objects. My brother, father, and grandfather were able to walk the streets feeling safe, without even realizing the impending threat of sexual violence my female family members and I seemed to face at every corner.

Lopez goes on to explain more about her exhibit. She shares how many men would partake in the exhibit and come out in tears, regretting their past actions. "A lot of the men were astonished. Some came out crying. They wanted to apologize for their past actions. They wanted to admit that they needed to make a change. Some men acknowledged that they didn't even know what a catcall was before experiencing this, which I thought was very jarring." (Lopez 2023). This quote made me think a lot about how many men do not even realize how often women have these types of interactions. A few weeks ago, my dad came to me to ask for advice. He works at

a pool where many teens have their first job. It's also where I had my first job. A teen girl who works for him mentioned that another employee (an older man) was making inappropriate comments about boyfriends, whether she had kissed any boys, making her uncomfortable. My dad spoke with the teen girl's mother, who wasn't surprised or shocked about the situation. Later he mentioned to me how he was surprised that she was not surprised, shocked that she was not immediately furious, demanding this man be fired and threatening a lawsuit. He spoke about how if something similar had happened to me, he would have been extremely angry. I shared with him all the times I had been in similar situations, how things like this had happened to me, and how this mother had likely been in similar situations.

Working as a lifeguard when I was sixteen, as a waitress and bartender in my late teens and early twenties, and now as a flight attendant, inappropriate sexual comments are not surprising anymore. I've had numerous inappropriate experiences with men that have made me extremely uncomfortable. From the man at the bar joking about his pet snake "white mamba" after I had excitedly shared about my pet snake Pepper, to the man at bar (speaking to my own father) saying that he would owe me a lot of money if I charged him for looking at me. A man once became obsessed with me just because I was doing my job, thinking my kindness was something more than just customer service. He found my social media profiles, stalked me both online and in the bar. He knew what my car looked like and would only come to the bar when he saw that I was working. He would be waiting for hours for the bar to close, hoping he could convince me to come on a date with him. Even when I mentioned how uncomfortable this man made me to my managers, nothing would be done. I have experienced a nice older gentleman waiting for his wife to leave the plane before telling me "All the things I would've done to you 20 years ago", or a man continuously trying to find out what hotel I was staying at, insisting I

stop by his hotel if I get lonely. Some people may wonder what I was wearing, think maybe I was encouraging these men, or think that I should even feel flattered that they were interested in me. In all these cases, these men were at least 15 years my senior, I was working in a professional setting, I was wearing my completely appropriate work uniform, and I certainly did not feel comfortable or flattered. Every time something like this happens, I immediately feel embarrassed, dirty, and almost used. It's disgusting to be speaking to someone my grandfather's age, who I at first think is exceedingly kind, only for them to make an inappropriate comment.

These experiences are in no way reserved for just me. Many women have experienced similar things. Alice Lundy shared on *The Good Men Project* "You're not the first. I've been navigating men like you since I was 14, and a late bloomer. Your sly smile, wicked laughter, and cunning words are one of the first languages a girl learns. The driver's ed teacher put his fingers in the slots in the sleeves of my shirt and said, "I like your holes," as I wanted to crawl in one. But I could not because I was driving, he was my instructor, and I was 14." Once again, I am reminded how many men can view me and other women simply as sexual objects, and how sometimes these situations can lead to violent encounters. Surviving through these situations, deflecting these comments and attentions, seems to be a skill many young girls and women have to learn. Brittany Soto eloquently wrote in *Catcalling is not a Compliment, It's Harassment* for the UMKC World Press that "What men need to understand is that catcalling is not cute, funny, or complimenting. It's degrading, demeaning, and disgusting. It lets women know they are being objectified and looked at as nothing more than a piece of meat. It makes women feel as though they have no rights or values. Women are not dogs to be whistled at and they are not sexual objects. Women are more than their looks. Women have the right to be treated with as much respect and dignity when walking down the street as any man. Women deserve to feel safe."

Lopez shared a violent experience her mother had: “And one night, the catcalling turned into something violent. My mother told me a story of one situation where she was grabbing dinner at a Taco Bell drive thru, and a car full of men started yelling at her, trying to get her attention. And she rolled her window down. She told them to stop. I mean, she was just trying to order dinner. And the next thing she knew, they were bashing her windows, attacking her and her friend with baseball bats. And all of this escalated because she didn't respond to them in the way that they wanted her to.” (Lopez 2023). I am lucky enough to say I have not had an extremely violent situation like this, and I have had many men come to my defense in horrible situations. Many men are not the problem and are completely kind and polite, but they are blind to the many uncomfortable and sometimes violent situations women face. While men may not realize how prevalent these situations are, when they do, they are usually very kind and helpful. I’ve had an extremely kind bar regular named Jerry who gifted me self-defense weapons and would walk me to my car if necessary. One time a captain scolded a first officer for making inappropriate comments while we were at work and had him removed from our plane for making us Flight Attendants uncomfortable. Often a simple “Excuse me?” from a man will shut down some of these bad comments.

Women from an early age are hyper aware that some men view them simply as sexual objects. We are aware that it is just unsafe to be a woman, and it just is a part of womanhood to be catcalled and harassed. Often times many of the amazing men in our lives do not even realize the comments and abuse we’ve lived through. Through this podcast and this paper, I have realized truly how universal an experience this is for women. I thought all men must know what goes on, but they just ignore it. I’ve realized that that isn’t the case. Some men just might not realize how terrifying it can be to be in these situations, how harmful catcalling can be, or they

may not realize how truly common and frequent it is. After reading this I hope if you are a woman, you know that you are not alone in these experiences. If you are a man, I ask that you ask some women that you know about their experiences of catcalling and sexual harassment. Catcalling is not victimless or harmless. Catcalling and sexual harassment seem to be simple facts of everyday life for many women in this world, while many men don't even realize the prevalence or how harmful these comments can be. I, and I am sure many other women, cannot wait for the day we can feel safe walking alone, can feel respected, and can feel like we are worth more than just our sexuality to all our male peers.

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