



YOU BOMBAY  
GIRLS DON'T  
KNOW HOW GOOD  
YOU HAVE IT

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Mumbai is a safe city for women. So they tell us time and again. Yet in this same city, a pregnant woman is raped, murdered and her body stuffed into a suitcase that is abandoned at a local Mumbai railway station. Another young woman is gang-raped in Malad East and the MMS clip of the rape is circulated in her neighbourhood. A 25-year-old is molested in an early morning Nerul local. A 19-year old is stalked everyday on her way to college in a Mumbai suburb.

Yes, relatively speaking, Mumbai is a safe city for women, or, as any Delhi girl will tell you, "You Bombay girls don't know how good you have it." Still every day, women walking, commuting, standing, sitting, studying, working in this vast megalopolis are harassed, stalked, pinched, grabbed, verbally abused, molested and raped. Sometimes it is strangers who harass, and often it is neighbours, people in the community, circle of friends and family.

Whether there are more crimes against women happening now in Mumbai or more women feel emboldened to report them or the media is faster on the uptake and is increasingly writing about them (though more obsessively about crimes against middle-class women) can all be debated. But the point is that women in Mumbai do put

up with street harassment and sexual assaults in a multitude of forms every single day. And as much as we would like to pretend that much of this is not as vile or violent as the 'stuff happening in Delhi, UP etc', it is often terrifying and tremendously discomfoting for the women survivors.

Anyone who has worked with or researched young women in Mumbai will tell you about the horror stories they recount of everyday street harassment. Some so loathsome that the women had to drop a tuition class, change a walking path, a bus route or a work-place, avoid a particular neighbourhood or report it to an elder. When street harassment and the fear of assault forces women to make choices that they would otherwise not make, that is indeed acknowledgement of a serious problem at hand. As a first step, let's shed this 'It doesn't happen so much in Mumbai' façade and admit that Mumbai has a problem at hand that needs to be addressed rather urgently.

For sexual harassment on the street cannot be taken lightly. As Hollaback! Mumbai, a new online forum for Mumbai women to share their stories of street harassment, says "(it) is a gateway crime that creates a cultural environment which makes gender-based violence OK."

So it is gratifying to note that the state government is considering amendments to the concerned sections of the Indian Penal Code – sections 354 and 509 – to enhance punishment for molestation and that terribly archaic worded ‘outraging a woman’s modesty’ by one year and that the High Court has suggested making molestation a non-bailable offence. Perhaps, that will make people realise that the harassment faced by women in public is indeed a big deal.

But changes in law are not enough unless we change the way we police. Law enforcement officials have to take a serious view of crimes against women including everyday street harassment. Instead of focussing their energies on rounding up youngsters dancing at a lounge bar, the police need to focus on real crimes affecting women. Largely the attitude of the police to sexual assault that falls short of rape is dismissive. So when the woman molested in the Nerul train tried to register a complaint, she was deterred by the railway police at Thane station who told her that she had “only been molested.” The police and all law enforcement agencies need to be sensitised about gender-based crimes. Not only how to handle survivors of rape, sexual assault and harassment but also how to investigate such cases in a vigorous and urgent manner.

No doubt sexual assault in any form is distressing but what happens after to the survivor and her family is often even more so. Often the survivor of an assault is treated like a perpetrator (with all the cross-questioning coming their way) and there is a great delay in registering a complaint or not taking it seriously, or investigating it in a lackadaisical manner.

Sexual harassment/assault on the street must be seen as a critical issue that affects a woman’s everyday negotiations in public space. It affects everybody and everybody must feel a sense of responsibility in ending it.

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