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# Staring Down Street Harassment: Women's perspectives of street harassment in Tunisia

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Staring Down Street Harassment:  
Women's perspectives of street harassment in Tunisia

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## Abstract

Women are the targets of street harassment perpetrated by men every day, particularly in communal spaces such as streets and public transportation. In Tunis, young women must alter their dress and behavior in order to comfortably and navigate public spaces; however, despite these measures, their access to space is still far more limited than men's access to public space. I interviewed four women in their 20s from the greater Tunis area on their experiences of public street harassment. The women indicated that street harassment is merely one manifestation of a greater gender issue in the country. Although street harassment may seem miniscule in the broader scope of sexism in Tunisia, these women indicated that it takes up significant mental capacity just to travel in public spaces, and that their freedom and equality in not only the public, but ultimately everywhere, is compromised. Furthermore, these women proposed many possible reasons for the perpetration of street harassment, including a man's upbringing, his education, class, and region, as well as broader cultural inequities between men and women. Lastly, the findings of this research also showed that while there are few effective reactive solutions to street harassment, these young women have hope that future generations will inherit a culture of respecting women and treating them as equals in all realms of life.

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## **Introduction**

Public spaces are something that in theory should be just that: public, and available to everyone, no matter their genders, race, age, or other factors. Public spaces are designed to be used by every person who passes through them, whether these spaces are streets, parks, or trains. Not only are they designed to be used by everyone, but they must be: people must use public spaces not only to transit between work or school and home, but also to hang out with friends, smoke a cigarette, or walk a dog.

Since so many people are able to use public spaces, they can be important sites for the reproduction of hegemonic gender ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Often, interactions between men and women that occur in public spaces illuminate and duplicate the sexism that is entrenched in a culture. In public spaces where men control the setting, “women’s location...becomes a critical site of signification of the social order,” such that men reinforce gendered ideologies when they harass women in the street.<sup>2</sup>

Because women “exercise agency in appropriating, negotiating, and using public space,” when men restrict women’s use of space through fear and harm tactics, they are controlling their behavior.<sup>3</sup> If women do not have full freedom in public spaces, they cannot “access the economic, social, and cultural life of a

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<sup>1</sup>Ranade, Shilpa. “The Way She Moves: Mapping the Everyday Production of Gender-Space.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42, no. 17 (2007): 1519.

<sup>2</sup> Ranade, Shilpa. “The Way She Moves,” 1526.

<sup>3</sup> Mazumdar, Shampa, and Sanjoy Mazumdar. “Rethinking Public and Private Space: Religion and Women in Muslim Society.” *Journal of Architectural Planning Research* 18, no. 4 (2001): 303; Bastomski, Sara, and Philip Smith. “Gender, Fear, and Public Places: How Negative Encounters with Strangers Harm Women.” *Sex Roles* 76 (2016): 73-88.

city,” either.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while men occupy public spaces as modes of leisure and work, women only “occupy public space essentially as a transit between one private space and another,” and women’s use of public space “is compromised by a sense of unease.”<sup>5</sup> Because of the numerous harms that can befall women in public, they “are socialized into a restricted use of public space.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, although public spaces are theoretically communal, women experience barriers to its use because of their gender.

This form of social control - excluding women from public spaces and therefore full equal integration into society – is sometimes referred to as “sexual terrorism.”<sup>7</sup> Not only does street harassment frighten women from fully exercising the right to public spaces and public transport, it also teaches women that they are objects to be dehumanized and sexualized, and it teaches men that they have complete power over women and no penalties for exercising this power.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, street harassment “deters the majority of women from being independent” because they must always be out during the day or with a man in order to feel safe.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, not only does street harassment limit women’s

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<sup>4</sup> Tara, Shelly. “Private Space in Public Transport: Locating Gender in the Delhi Metro.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 51 (2011): 71.

<sup>5</sup> Ranade, Shilpa. “The Way She Moves,” 1521; Bastomski, Sara, and Philip Smith. “Gender, Fear, and Public Places.”

<sup>6</sup> Valentine, Gill. “The Geography of Women’s Fear.” *Area* 21 no. 4 (1989): 386.

<sup>7</sup> Meza-de-Luna, Maria Elena, and Sulima Garcia-Falconi. “Adolescent Street Harassment in Queretaro, Mexico.” *Journal of Women and Social Work* 30, no. 2 (2015): 158-69.

<sup>8</sup> Meza-de-Luna, Maria Elena, et al. “Adolescent Street Harassment.”

<sup>9</sup> Valentine, Gill. “The Geography of Women’s Fear,” 389.

mobility, it also creates an overall sense of poor community safety and social cohesion.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, street harassment is a currently a contentious issue in Tunisia, given the recent violence against women law that promises to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, economic violence, and street harassment, and includes both monetary fines as well as jail time.<sup>11</sup>The law received immediate backlash from Tunisians claiming the law is pointless and impossible to implement. A plethora of Facebook posts following published after the law was passed call it ridiculous and accuse it of exaggerating crimes against women.<sup>12</sup>Accompanying this law is the campaign launched by TRANSTU in conjunction with the Tunisian center for women's studies: #mayerkebch (he does not ride with us).<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this campaign is to reduce harassment in public transport by encouraging civilians to react and report incidents of this behavior immediately. Therefore, street harassment is now more on the minds of both Tunisians men and women than ever, and it is followed by very polarizing discourse.

Because street harassment has the possibility of making a woman's everyday life filled with terror and discomfort, the purpose of this paper is to shed

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<sup>10</sup> Campos, Paola A., Kathryn L. Falb, Sara Hernandez, et al. "Experiences of Street Harassment and Associations with Perceptions of Social Cohesion Among Women in Mexico City." *Salud Publica Mex* 59 (2017): 102-105.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Nadhif, "Can new Tunisian bill help counter violence against women?" *Al-Monitor*, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rihab Boukhayatia, "Tunisia: Are you sexually harassed on public transport? This video calls you to react." *HuffPost Tunisia*, 2017.

light on some of the ways in which women perform additional emotional and mental labor to make their lives safer. Therefore, my research questions are:

- What strategies do women employ to manage street harassment, and how effective are they?
- What reasons do women offer for men perpetrating street harassment?
- What modes of change do women think will achieve the elimination of street harassment and greater gender parity overall?

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the experiences of street harassment of young Tunisian women in their 20s, primarily the strategies they employ to avoid it. Although achieving gender equality is claimed to be important to many Tunisian citizens and politicians, often the focus lies on more seemingly ‘important’ topics such as inheritance law, reproductive health, and economic equality.

I must acknowledge that this phenomenon is by no means unique to Tunisia, and that this research was not conducted to make Tunisia appear sexist. Tunisia certainly is a model for women’s rights in the MENA region, and sexism, patriarchy, and street harassment are universal. The purpose of this paper, rather than to make Tunisia ‘look bad,’ is to give a voice to women who are rarely heard on this issue. Often, women’s voices and opinions of the apparently trivial injustices they face every day are lost among the broader discourse of women’s rights. Therefore, I intend to share a perspective that women rarely are allowed to offer, and give voice to the ways women are subjected to normalized sexism in seemingly benign ways.

## **Methodology**

The population I wish to generalize to is young Tunisian women in their 20s who live in the greater Tunis area, and the sample was a convenience sample of four such women. My participants ranged in age from 21 to 26 years; three of them live outside Tunis in populated and popular areas such as La Marsa Corniche, La Marsa Ville, and Sidi Bou Said and one lived in a more suburban area close to Tunis called Berges du Lac. All of my participants attended school somewhere in Tunis and thus had to commute back and forth from Tunis and their homes using trains or taxis. I conducted interviews with each of these four women; interviews ranged from half an hour to 50 minutes long and I alone created the interview questions (see Appendix I). Interviews were conducted between November 27 and December 4, 2017. The interviews took place at a quiet location of the woman's choice: locations ranged from cafes to offices. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form. While the interview protocol served as a fairly strict guideline, I often veered away from interview questions to probe the women on subjects they introduced to gain more information about their perspectives.

To protect the participants, interviews included a statement of intent and ethics before each interview commenced (see Appendix I). This included a statement that participants may choose to remain anonymous and a statement that participants were free to skip questions, end the recording at any time, end the interview at any time, and remove sections of the recording after the interview was complete. Only one participant requested to remain anonymous, and for that reason in my discussion I give her a fake name: Zeineb. Only one participant requested that I remove a section of the recording from my records, and I

removed a section of my interview when I included a personal anecdote to my interviewee (see Appendix II).

It is notable that these women ranged greatly in their relationship to me, the researcher, and this may have affected their responses to my questions. Although I do not know any of the participants intimately, two participants were friends that I have known for three months, and two I had never met before the time of the interview. It is possible that the participants I knew may have been affected by a bias to help my work; it is also possible that this afflicted the women who did not know me, as well. Furthermore, my position as an American student may have impacted my participants' responses. It is possible that either they could have been trying to help my research by giving me the answers they thought I wanted, or on the other hand it is possible that my subjects were attempting to downplay the injustices they suffer in order to present a positive image of Tunisia to a foreign researcher.

A primary limitation of my methodology is the lack of representation. With a limited number of subjects, it is very difficult to generalize to an entire population of women from Tunis. Therefore, my commentary is generally limited to generalizing the lives of these women I interviewed. Many women's perspectives are left out of this study because of the number of participants. Additionally, the sample was a convenience sample of women who I knew or who knew one of my friends, which can introduce bias in the types of women I interviewed because many of them come from similar backgrounds and live in similar neighborhoods. Of the participants, only one rarely experienced street harassment, and this could either be a representation of a real minority or a false minority because of my limited sample.

Furthermore, the nature of the interviews may have introduced bias to my questions. While I attempted to remove as much bias from my question wording as possible in the interview protocol, times when I went off-script in order to probe participants deeper may have included unintentionally leading or biased questions. Moreover, I did not test my interview questions with pilot interviews so my interview protocol and questions were constantly changing, affecting the nature of each interview. I assumed the questions had validity because of the research I conducted prior to constructing them, but I have no way of verifying their validity. Moreover, I have no way of ensuring that my questions were both broad and specific enough to address the topic and allow respondents to answer truthfully and accurately. I can assume that my questions had some reliability because of the similarity of responses, but this may also be due to the aforementioned bias in selecting research participants.

Finally, I must address my own personal bias. As a woman who has experienced abundant street harassment in Tunisia – and as a woman who despises it deeply – I am biased to hear and record negative accounts of street harassment because this is what I experience. Furthermore, as a woman who also employs strategies to avoid harassment, and who has her own thoughts about why it occurs and what could stop it, I may be biased to hear accounts that confirm my own ideologies. Although I have taken steps to create unbiased questions and find unbiased patterns in my analysis, my bias as a woman has the possibility of influencing the results of my research.

## **Research Findings and Analysis**

### *Street harassment*

According to the UN commission on the status of women in 2013, street harassment can include “any act or comment perpetrated in a public space that is unwanted and threatening, and motivated by gender; it may include sexually suggestive comments, unwanted touching, invasion of space, and rape.”<sup>14</sup>The women I interviewed outlined almost all of these as behaviors they must ward off every day in Tunis.

The women I interviewed detail incidents of men staring at them, following them, yelling at them, and touching them. These incidents occur on the street, but particularly on the train, bus, and in collective taxis. Not only does street harassment make these women feel uncomfortable - and in the worst instances it terrifies them – but also, it limits these women’s use of public spaces that are meant to be utilized by all Tunisian citizens, male or female. Furthermore, many of these women feel there are no social or legal ramifications for these actions and that they have no methods for recourse. The fear of street harassment takes up significant thought in these women’s minds, as it informs how they act in public every single day of their lives.

The following outlines the major themes that were discussed in my interviews with these women, including how they proactively and reactively manage street harassment, why they think it occurs, and how they think it may change in the future.

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<sup>14</sup> Campos, Paola A., et al. “Experiences of Street Harassment.”

### *Harassment management strategies*

One topic that repeatedly arose in interviews was the concept of management. All of these women, no matter the frequency of street harassment, employ similar strategies to avoid and mitigate the effects of harassment. Many women stated that although harassment can occur under any circumstances, it is often exacerbated by their clothing choice, the time of day, who there are with, and their own attitude. Furthermore, many women discussed how the aforementioned factors may either promote or inhibit responses to street harassment, such as verbal rebukes or engaging law enforcement. Many women also made it clear that direct responses to harassment are often accompanied by unpleasant and even dangerous consequences.

### *Clothing choices*

One of the most important choices these women make before leaving the house every morning is what they wear. Many of the women I interviewed discussed how harassment can occur no matter what they are wearing, but that it can be aggravated by their clothes. For instance, Faten describes how even though she has witnessed harassment occur to both veiled and non-veiled women, she still “[doesn’t] dare to be dressed up,” in Tunis, and her female cousins “wouldn’t dare to wearing [sic] shorts,” in the summer. Soumaya explains a similar thought process: when she is getting ready to go to school or to go out with her friends, she says, “I know that I can’t wear some sort of clothes...Like I can’t wear a short skirt...I have to be more careful about how I look.” Moreover, Nawres explains how she has to be especially careful about getting ready before she takes the train to work. She avoids wearing dresses and revealing or dressed up clothes in order to avoid harassment.

While harassment does not occur very often to Zeineb, she does acknowledge that other women consider clothing choice to be an issue on the street. While she does “wear whatever I want, whenever I want,” she also acknowledges that her mother sometimes tells her to cover up when she is going to school in Tunis because of her increased vulnerability to harassment when she is wearing certain clothes. Furthermore, she states that wearing whatever you want in public is not always an easy task: “you just have to be brave,” to wear whatever you want. Faten compounds this notion of bravery, stating that although she often dresses more conservatively, she thinks “it’s important to sometimes just dare to do it.”

The women express that clothing can be a way of managing harassment, but also acknowledge that dress is often employed to place blame on the victims of street harassment. Faten describes how it is common for police officers to tell women, “It was your fault...look at how you are dressed.” All the other women discuss how blame is often attributed to the women, especially if they were wearing revealing clothes at the time of the incident.

For these young women, clothing choice is a contentious topic, and can have many meanings. On the one hand, harassment happens to them no matter their dress; but on the other hand, harassment and its consequences can be worsened if they dress however they want. These women battle between two desires: the desire to dress the way they like and push cultural boundaries, and the desire to stay safe and avoid unwanted attention on the street.

#### *Time of day*

Another critical factor in street harassment for these women is the time of day. It would make sense that many women are uncomfortable or afraid to be out

at night for fear not only of street harassment, but also of crime. What is most notable, however, is how greatly nighttime restricts women's movement and use of public spaces. Nawres and Soumaya most emphasize that dangers of being out late; Nawres explains that street harassment is "worse at night, so it's better to stay safe," by staying home. Soumaya states that she must return home before sunset. During the winter months, the sun sets as early as 5PM, meaning that Soumaya does not feel safe being outside for a huge portion of the day. According to Nawres, the fear of street harassment is "one of the main factors why women avoid going out late at night." Many of the women's anecdotes about the worst cases of street harassment are in the context of nighttime.

These statements together seem to suggest that streets are dominated by men at night, as many women feel too unsafe to travel, especially alone, after dark. This is a huge limitation on women's use of public spaces, as they feel unsafe to use supposedly universal spaces for many hours in the day.

#### *Groups of people*

Many of the women indicate that harassment can be mitigated if they are with a group of people, particularly men. Many of the women I interviewed articulate that many actions that are usually restricted for them can be accessible if they are in the presence of male friends. Although it is not clear why women are left alone when they are in the presence of a man, I can speculate that either the harassers are afraid of the men responding negatively, or see that the girl is 'taken' by another man so they feel little need to harass her.

If and when women do go out with men in their group, sexual harassment drastically decreases. Nawres explains that "it [harassment] almost does not happen when I have men with me," and that when men are present, "the

probability is really low of sexual harassment to happen.” Faten describes how when she is with a man her rules about conservative clothing are withdrawn: “You can even wear shorts and it’s okay. It will pass, as long as you are with a guy.”

For these women, the worst part about nighttime is that they must rely on men to be able to go out. Nawres states that many women simply stay home if they do not have a man to go with them or drive them home. Faten explains that she often “miss[es] some...event or some interesting stuff or activity just because [I] couldn’t find a guy to go with [me].” Furthermore, Faten explains that when she goes out, she has to think about three things: “the time, the context, and try[ing] to find guys,” to go with her. The women agree that you can be free in your choice of dress and location – but only if you have a man with you to stop potential harassers.

#### *Attitude*

Many of the women describe how street harassment can sometimes depend on how they present themselves on the street. Faten says that sometimes harassment “depends on the attitude. Like sometimes when I’m...walking really quickly...and I have a certain point in front of me...guys wouldn’t dare and come and speak to me.” Zeineb concurs, stating that harassment can often “depend on the girl’s personality.” She states that if girls are quiet and ignore harassment, they are often inflicting more of it upon themselves. As support for this, Nawres states that when she presents an angry, abrasive personality, it can lead to awkward consequences for her harasser, such as being yelled at on the train: “better not sexually harass me if I’m angry.” Zeineb states that sometimes girls’ docile personalities invite girls to harass them: “They are doing these

things because we are letting them.” The concept of ‘letting’ abusers harass women because of women’s silence is discussed further in the following section.

### *Verbal responses*

Other than proactive forms of harassment management, there are also reactive ones; the form these women most often discussed was verbal reactions. Verbal reactions are a contentious subject, with some women firmly in favor, some firmly against, and some women somewhere in between.

On one side, Zeineb is firmly in favor of calling out and embarrassing harassers. She states that the continuing abuse partly the fault of the victims – their choice to be quiet and ignore harassment is what encourages abusers to perpetuate it. She states that this female mentality is “leading us to very bad things,” such as continued street harassment.

On the other side, Soumaya states that she would not call out a harasser unless she was being extremely violated, in which case she would call for the police rather than attack the abuser directly. She says she does not react to abuse because she is worried “he will be aggressive to me,” or that, “he might say bad words to me.”

Both Faten and Nawres acknowledge that there are benefits and limitations to verbal reactions to street harassment. Faten brings up Zeineb’s point of view, stating that some people might say that by ignoring harassment “you’re just, like, obeying and making it worse,” but she concludes that talking back to an abuser can be extremely difficult: “women can choose to be brave...but it’s really challenging...you need to be...strong enough to deal with the consequences.” She says that most of the time she feels like she “should just shut my mouth,” because either it would not make a difference to say anything,

or she could be verbally or physically hurt if she did. Nawres concurs, stating that there are consequences to speaking up and defending yourself. She states that most of the time, she has “the power to say something if you’re in a group,” but that she “need[s] guarantees that nothing would happen...I need to know what kind of consequences could happen if I do react.” These two women conclude that verbal responses can be performed under certain circumstances, and only if the woman is feeling particularly brave and is sure she will not be hurt in response.

While these women’s attitudes towards verbal responses vary quite a bit, their general sentiment is that responding to street harassment can be dangerous for the woman involved, and that it should only be undertaken in a certain context as a tool to stop harassment and prevent future harassment.

#### *Police and legal systems*

All the women I interviewed agree that policemen are extremely sexist when it comes to reporting street harassment. As a reactive strategy to prevent future harassment, many agree that because of this sexism, it is completely ineffective. Faten explains that policemen often offer many excuses to the women who report to them, including, “you deserve it,” for going out late or wearing certain clothes, “it was your fault,” and “forgive him, it happens.” These responses are not uncommon; women all around the world underreport street harassment because of “the possibility of being blamed for provoking it.”<sup>15</sup> All the women mention that police frequently downplay the significance of street

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<sup>15</sup>Meza-de-Luna, Maria Elena et al. “Adolescent Street Harassment,” 159.

harassment, discouraging women from reporting it; Soumaya “[doesn’t] trust them [police] a lot,” because of their biased responses to the issue.

Of the women my interviewees know who have attempted to go to the police, none of the stories ended very favorably for the women. One woman Nawres knows went to the police because a man was touching himself on the train, and the police ignored her. Another woman Faten knows attempted to prosecute her abuser, but “at some point it led to nowhere.” As such, the women agree that going to the police is “not something easy to do,” says Nawres, because street harassment “has been something normalized” and accepted not only by average citizens, but also by the police officers and lawyers who are supposed to defend these women.

Zeineb acknowledges all of these difficulties and biases in the police system, and admits that the process of reporting can be very difficult, but takes a firm stance on the necessity of engaging law enforcement in street harassment incidents. She says that women might be scared to be blamed for what happened to them, but that “if more women go...it will reduce this [street harassment] in a big way.” She states that since “the law is against these things, and there [are] punishments,” that women should take advantage of the laws by reporting, despite a potentially corrupt and sexist police and legal system. This way, men will be too scared of the legal ramifications to harass women. Soumaya concurs that many men simply do not believe that women will report them because collecting evidence and identifying the abuser is so difficult in such a setting.

Reporting to the police is yet another contentious reaction to street harassment, as, like verbal responses, it can yield both extremely positive and negative consequences for the women involved.

Nawres put it very aptly when she said that street harassment:

happens every day, to every girl. It's not related about how beautiful you are or what you are wearing sometimes. It's just the fact that you're a girl makes you harassed.

No matter the management strategies these women employ, whether proactive or reactive, street harassment continues to plague their everyday lives simply because they are women. Even if they were to dress conservatively, only go out during the day in groups of men, and put on an unapproachable attitude – even if they continue to respond verbally and engage the legal system, despite the consequences – street harassment continues because it is so permeated into the culture.

#### *Reasons for street harassment*

Each of the women bring up many potential reasons that men perpetuate street harassment, but their responses often reflect wider societal and cultural issues regarding sexism in Tunisia and in the Arab world. As Faten describes it, “street harassment, it's just one manifestation of the bad mentalities we need to work on.”

One of the most frequent reasons the women report for street harassment is upbringing. Many suggest that family values contribute heavily to men's behavior in public. The women also associate upbringing with class, education, and region. The women purport that men and women are often not raised the same way within families. From birth, Zeineb says, men and women are separated: “It all starts in the family...since childhood.” Men are told they can do anything, and women are told their brothers are “stronger” and more competent than they are. It happens, as Zeineb says, “generation after generation,” that “girls are taught to be careful of men,” says Nawres. As such, women “grow up with

the idea of fearing the other, and being careful of the other,” only perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes about men and women. For the women I interviewed, sexism and street harassment is “all a matter of education and mentality [and] the way we have been raised,” as Faten describes.

Not only does raising men and women this way create sexism and street harassment, it also affects how victims of harassment are viewed and treated. Firstly, the onus is always on the woman to prevent harassment: “she has to cover herself, she has to try not to arouse the guy. And the guy, it’s a natural thing, it’s not his fault,” says Faten. Thus, this effects how people perceive victims: “It’s always the case of blaming women,” says Nawres; “parents always blame the girls,” says Soumaya. Because women “have been socialized as upholders of modesty, propriety, and morality” not only of society, but specifically of their families, their actions are under tight scrutiny.<sup>16</sup> This responsibility can take a huge emotional toll on women. Nawres describes, jokingly but realistically, how society has told her to act because she is a woman:

Bit by bit, I just found myself in the context of being careful and thinking about each step you make, because you’re a woman and you’ll be judged, and judgement will reflect a bad image of your family, and you’ll end up disgraced.

Girls that engage in typically male behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and having sex “are going to be judged,” and shamed, says Faten. Thus, traditional gendered ideologies are still being taught in some families, reinforcing boys’ notions of self-importance and power, and diminishing girls’ conceptions of their own capacities and rights.

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<sup>16</sup> Bastomski, Sara, et al. “Gender, Fear, and Public Places.”

Education is also labelled as a factor for harassment. Soumaya states that she hardly ever faces street harassment in Lac because “the people...they are more educated, they are more...with other class,” and that educated and open-minded people are less likely to perpetuate harassment. Zeineb concurs, stating that people who harass women are “not well cultivated,” and that they live in “poor places” and are “people that don’t have jobs.” Many of the women do not necessarily offer a reason why poorer or lower-class people might be more prone to harass women, but Faten offers a possible answer. She states that, “to have normal sexual activity, you need to have money,” and that because wealthier people can afford hotel rooms, cars, or houses to expend their sexual energy, they are less likely to harass women. “It’s not easy,” she says, for many people, “to have normal sexual activity,” which she argues may be a factor in street harassment.

The women also discuss region as a factor of sexism, suggesting that people raised in rural and southern areas of Tunisia are less exposed to Western ideas, including television and the internet depicting images of liberal women. The women suggest that it is partly this lack of exposure that causes men to harass women, because seeing them in tight-fitting, revealing clothes is so unusual. The women state that more and more Tunisians are moving from interior and southern regions to the coastal areas, and bringing their conservative values with them – “imposing their culture [in Tunis],” as Faten describes it. Zeineb concurs, stating that in her neighborhood, La Marsa Corniche, she faces little harassment because many of the people who live there aren’t Tunisian, they are European and they “are used to different kind[s] of people.” Faten states that “regions next to beaches are more open,” to women wearing what they want and

doing what they want because “they are used to seeing tourists in shorts.” Soumaya agrees, stating that men who come from other regions “don’t usually see beautiful girls...so this is unusual for them.” The women assert that many southern women are raised with so much sexism that “they don’t even realize how much freedom they can reach,” as Nawres describes, so they behave in ways that reinforces the sexism they were raised with. The women state that harassment and sexism is far less in Tunisia and bigger cities, but that sexism nevertheless runs through many men’s ideologies. This concept of familiarity is a connecting line through the women’s commentary on harassment: if men were only more accustomed to seeing women with equal rights, they would not find it so noteworthy – and worthy of harassment.

The women often also address other cultural inequalities between men and women, the ideologies of which can perpetuate the normalization of street harassment. For example, Faten states that “women are still not free to...drink alcohol in front of people,” and that “women smoking is still a bad sin.” Nawres states that women are “double judged,” and “blamed for anything that men normally do,” such as drinking, smoking, clubbing, having sex, and divorcing. Soumaya agrees, stating that despite people’s perceptions of full gender equality in Tunisia, women “are not totally free to do whatever we want.”

### *Modes of change*

The first method of change that these women suggest is the law. Nawres states that changing laws will “help make some change...if you pass a law that really punishes people for sexually harassing women, it can start changing the behavior of people.” These women state that the violence against women law that recently passed and will soon come into effect is extremely important. Zeineb

purports that men will stop harassing women “because they will get arrested,” and that if more women are able to report harassment to the police, “it will reduce this in a big way.” Furthermore, both women suggest that laws will set precedents for generations, as younger people “will inherit that it’s forbidden to sexually harass people,” says Nawres.

Soumaya disagrees with the other two women, stating that “this [law] won’t stop them...you have to change them first.” She suggests changing the culture of sexism in Tunisia – in fact, all the women do suggest many cultural transformations that need to take place to reduce harassment and sexism.

Because many of the women report that upbringing is an important factor in street harassment and sexism overall, they accordingly state that one method of changing this behavior is to change parents’ ideologies in order to change their children. As Soumaya states, “We should change the mentality of the parents.” Many of the women, like Faten, suggest that “there should be school,” or, as Zeineb says, education for “people who are less cultivated,” “especially in the rural areas,” says Nawres. One important factor reiterated by many of the women is stated by Zeineb: families “need to raise them both [men and women] in the same way.”

The women further assert that men’s mentalities can change with exposure to television, the internet, and other cultures. Zeineb states that many younger people are less sexist and less likely to perpetuate street harassment because they are “going to school,” abroad and are “far away from their families” and the negative ideologies that are sometimes be taught at home. Faten and Soumaya both suggest that men who use the internet, watch “interesting movies,” says Faten, and have exposure to women of all types, are less likely to harass

women on the street. A few of the women, including Zeineb, suggest that the new generation is changing in their gendered conceptions because they “are more open to TV, films, everything.” If a lack of exposure is one of the reasons why street harassment occurs, Soumaya states that with the internet and TV, men will “get used to it,” ‘it’ being women’s equality.

Many of the women I interviewed assert hope for the future. While they disagree on whether change will come in the form of a top-down legislative to cultural change, or a bottom-up cultural to legislative change, they can concur that Tunisian society is transforming positively.

### **Conclusion**

Street harassment is so normalized in Tunisian society that it happens to almost every woman almost every day of her adult life. It is so insidious that many women do not recognize the habitual steps they take to avoid it, such as dressing conservatively, only going out during the day, only going out with men, and walking with an attitude. Furthermore, women do not possess many methods of taking back power from their abusers because verbal rebukes and legal recourse are often either dangerous or unavailable to them.

While this project began as a way to amplify women’s voices and experiences of street harassment, it has become much more than that. What these four women truly expressed to me is that street harassment, while frightening, dangerous, and exhausting, is merely a product of wider and broader and more threatening attitudes about women. Because Tunisia is such an egalitarian country and a model for the MENA region, it can sometimes be difficult to parse apart the modernity and equality from actual sexism and patriarchal forces at work here. That does not mean these forces do not exist, or that they are not at

work to ultimately reinforce misogynistic gender ideologies. It is impossible to fully convey the multitude of subtle, insidious sexism these women have to battle not only in the street, but also in their homes and in the workplace. This insidious sexism is ultimately no better than overt sexism because it still negatively impacts these women's lives, and it is still systematic and institutional, despite some - arguably futile - laws meant to protect them.

The next extension for this project is twofold. Firstly, I want to explore the other hidden inequalities that plague women; the inequalities that many people – men – would consider inconsequential, but that indeed take up considerable mental and physical efforts. For example, I want to examine inequities in the home: many Tunisian women work a full-time job and are additionally responsible for household duties such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. Secondly, I want to explore men's perspectives not only on street harassment, but also on sexism in general. When preparing for this project, many of the women I spoke to were just as interested in men's perspectives on sexism as they were in women's perspectives.

Ultimately, the women I spoke to artfully articulated that while street harassment certainly bothers them, there are many other cultural inequities and double-standards that must be altered before street harassment can stop. Taking ownership of their desires, their bodies, and their rights, is constantly a challenge for these women as they battle against society, their families, men, and their own internalized misogyny. However, they make this emotional effort with the hope that one day, their children or their grand-children will not only be able to use the train and walk the streets without fear, but also that they will be completely equal to men in all aspects of life.

## **Appendix I: Interview Protocol**

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. I am conducting a study for my sociology class. It will focus on how women navigate public spaces, specifically how women manage street harassment. I would like you to be as honest as possible. Your responses will be completely anonymous in my report. The interview should take about an hour. You may skip a question you do not wish to answer and end the interview at any time. Can I record this interview so that I can remember what we have talked about? You may end the recording at any time.

### Section 1: General Info

1. Please state your occupation and the neighborhood where you live
2. I want to ask you about your commute to school or work every day. How do you get to school or work – for example, do you walk, or take the bus, or drive?
3. Now I want to ask you about your free time. When you hang out with your girl friends, where do you guys hang out? Is it in a house, or in a café, or in a park...? In what neighborhoods do you typically hang out in?
4. Why do you think you hang out in this area? Is it most convenient, is it most comfortable?
5. From your observations, where do boys hang out? Do they hang out in a house, or in a café or park?
6. Why do you think boys hang out where they do?

### Section 2: Street Harassment

1. Now I want to ask you about how you feel when you are in public spaces like the street, the bus, or the train. When you are in these places, can you describe how the men around you behave? For example, do they sit quietly at a café, do they look at you, do they try to talk to you, do they ever touch you or follow you?
2. If men do try to watch you or talk to you, how do these interactions make you feel? Do you feel safe or unsafe when you are walking on the street?
3. Do you take any precautions to try to avoid these interactions, such as walking in groups, or not walking at night?
4. Do you ever change your clothes or behavior depending on where you are going? Would you wear something different if you are going to Tunis versus La Marsa?
5. Have you or anyone you know ever considered talking to the police about an uncomfortable encounter with a man on the street? Why or why not?

### Section 3: Men and Women

1. Can you think of anything your mother or father has told you about walking in the street? For example, has she told you to be careful, or walk in groups?

2. Have you every heard parents give this same advice to your brothers or male cousins?
3. Have you ever noticed this behavior being reversed? Have you ever noticed women staring at or trying to talk to men as they are walking on the street? Why do you think you have seen/have never seen this?
4. What do you think are some differences between how men and women act in public spaces? Do you think one gender has more freedom to move and do what they want in streets, or do you think it is equal?

## **Appendix II: Interview Transcripts**

See other attached file.

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- Bouderbala, Faten. Interview with the author. Sidi Bou Said, November 27, 2017.
- Harbaoui, Soumaya. Interview with the author. Berges du Lac (I), December 4, 2017.