

Poland has the power to end street harassment

Research on harassment in public spaces in Poland
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Agnieszka was buying a ticket, when the seller leaned out and tried to grab her breast. Julka was walking with her mother in the city center, when a strange man approached and grabbed her buttocks. Anna was sitting in a crowded tram, when a man standing next to her pulled out his penis from the pants, right across from her face. She got up and left the tram immediately.

These and similar stories were shared by the respondents in the first Polish study on harassment in public spaces prepared and conducted by Joanna Roszak and Greta Gober, leaders of Hollaback! Poland. The on-line survey was conducted over a period of two months (July and August 2012). The survey lasted around 20 minutes and contained 27 questions. **818 people participated in our research, out of which women constituted 86%.** So women were clearly over-represented. Statistical Pole is less than 35 years old. In our sample statistical Pole was 29 year old.

- 85% of women and 44% of men in Poland have experienced harassment in public spaces;
- On average men and women are 12 years old when they first experience harassment;
- 78% of all harassers are men.

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Is this really happening?

As many as 85% of female respondents in the study were victims of harassment in public spaces in Poland (94% of them more than once in their life), compared to 44% of men. The average age of when women and men first experience this type of aggression is 12 years. As far as female victims are concerned, the majority of perpetrators are men (98%). In the case of male victims, perpetrators are both men (44%) and women (41%). Harassment in public space usually happens in the street, in public transportations and during mass events (such as concerts, in pubs, etc.). It pertains to as many as 60% of all cases of street harassment. The time of the day does not play any role, as it happens equally at all times throughout the day.

The results of our study are terrifying, as they clearly demonstrate that harassment in public spaces is a common place phenomenon in Poland. At the same time this phenomenon is largely overlooked by the Polish legislation and virtually non-existent in public debate. One of the reasons why harassment in public spaces is not dealt with at the legislative level may be that these behaviors fall under the category of “good vs. bad manners” and are perceived as a cultural issue.

Good manners, bad manners

Our research shows that men are far more likely to behave towards women in ways that transcend the boundaries of good manners. While 85% of women and only 44% of men experienced harassment in public spaces (Figure 2 in the next slide), they experience very similar types of harassment (Figure 1 below). That is, most often men and women experience non-verbal harassment (54% of cases of harassment of women and 53% of men), less often it's verbal harassment (29% of cases of harassment of women and 35% of men). The least common experience is physical harassment (17% of cases of harassment of women, 12% men).

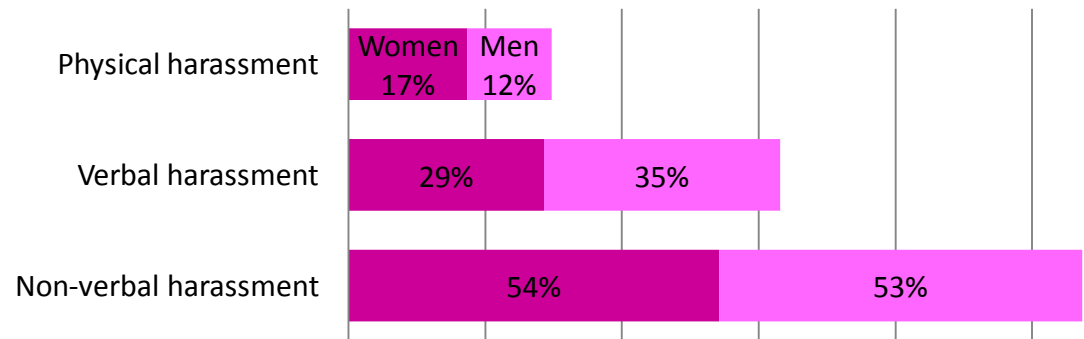


Fig. 1. Men and women's street harassment experiences grouped by type. *Note:* All figures are based off of data from our study.

Women are far more likely to experience harassment in public spaces than men.

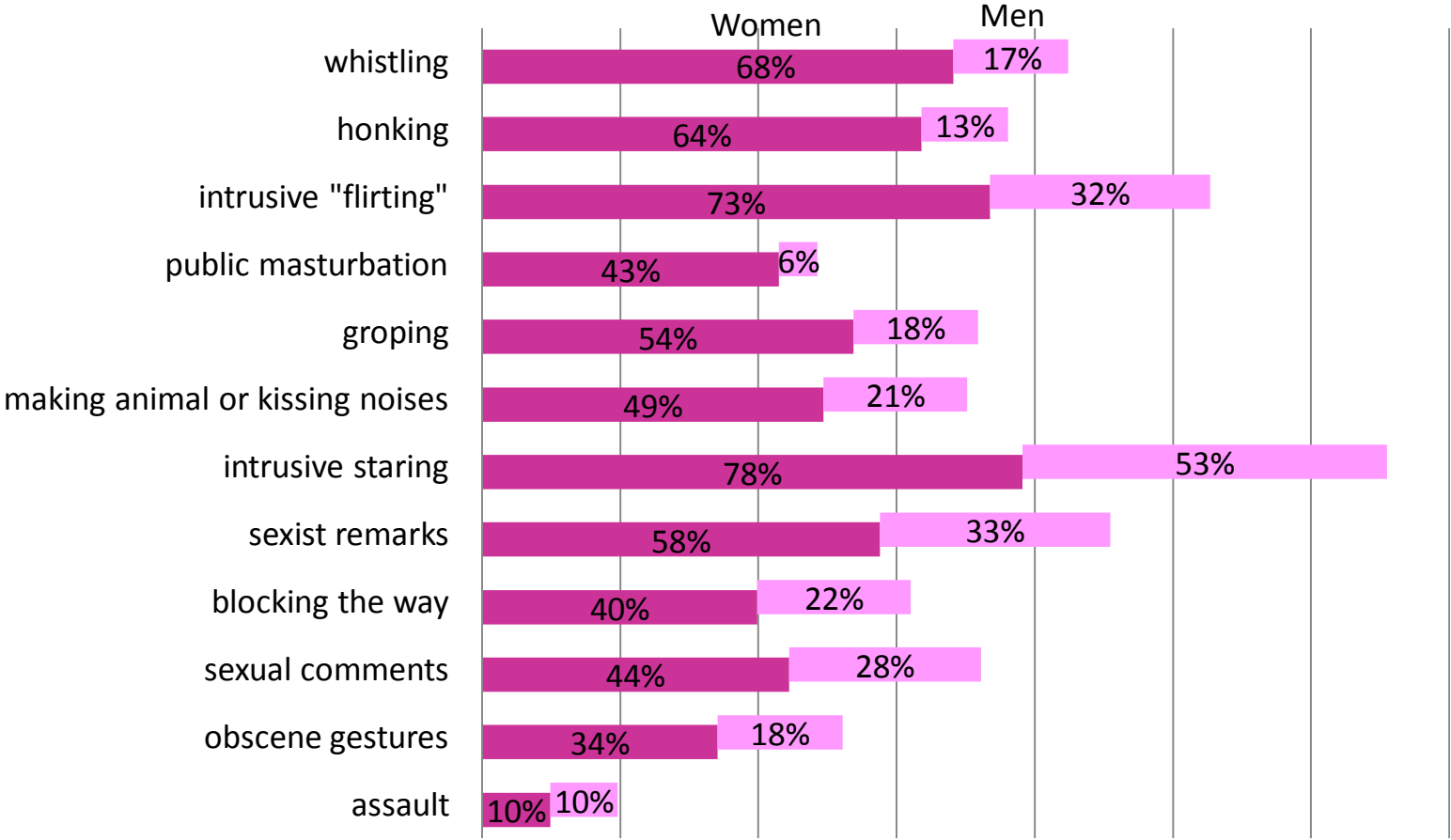


Fig. 2. Men and women 's experiences of harassment in public spaces in Poland.

What constitutes harassment?

Despite the fact that women experience harassment much more often than men, and despite the fact that women were over-represented in the study, both genders largely agree as to what behaviors they consider to be harassment (Figure 3 in the next slide). For example, although only 6% of men declared to have seen a person masturbating in public, as many as 92% of them perceive this behavior to be harassment. Conversely, behaviors most often encountered by women are least often classified by them as harassment. Such non-verbal behaviors as whistling or intrusive staring seem to be most commonly accepted by our culture as relatively harmless.

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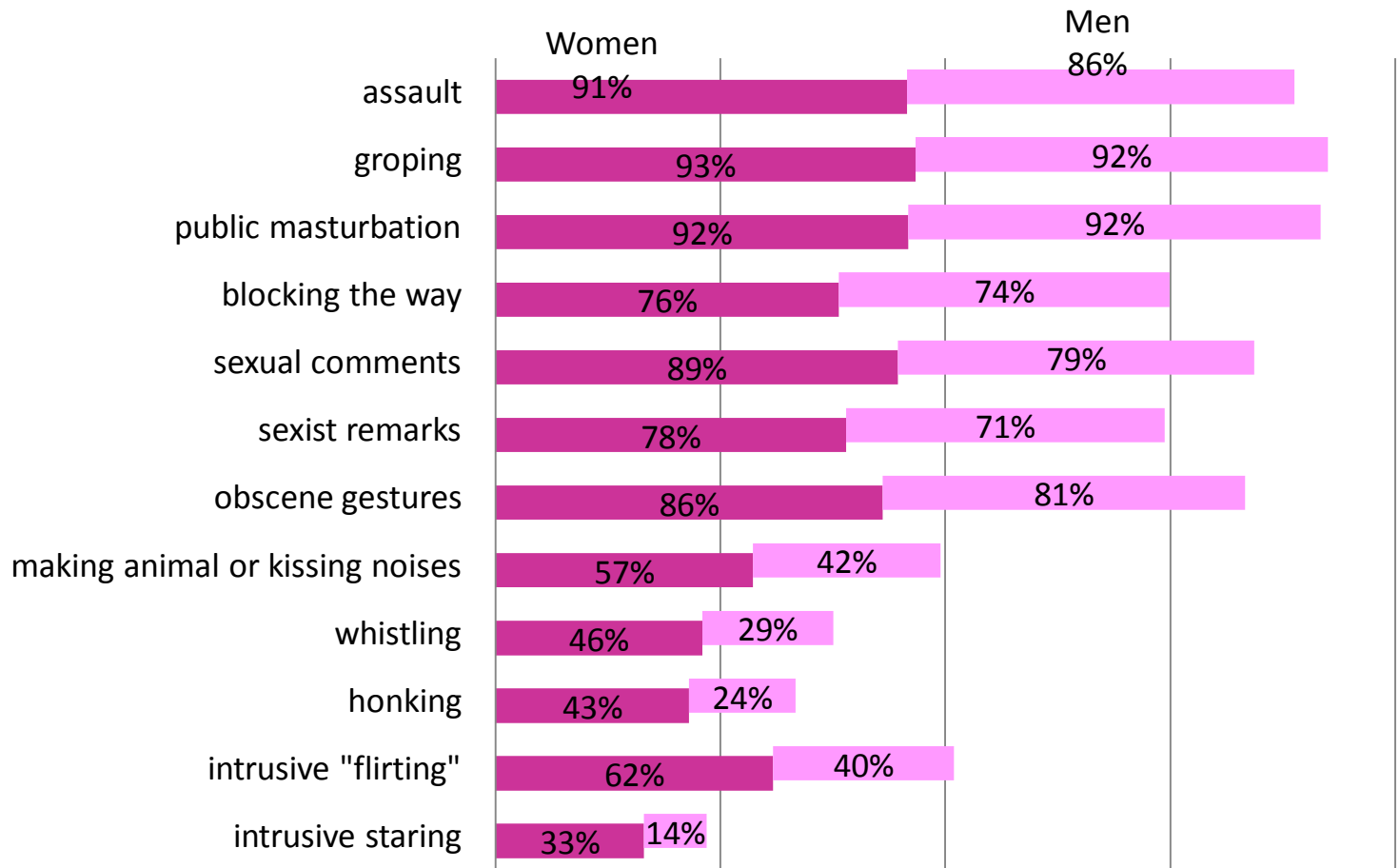


Fig. 3. Men and women's opinions on what they classify as harassment in public spaces.

Harassment does (not?) hurt

Regardless of the fact that not all non-verbal behaviors with an implied sexual meaning are considered by women to be harassment (Figure 4 in the next slide), our study clearly shows that many other behaviors that both genders (women much more often than men) encounter in public spaces are seen as such. And certainly these are not pleasant experiences. Victims of harassment, regardless of their gender, usually feel disgust, humiliation, or nervousness. Often they experience feelings of helplessness, confusion, fear, guilt, or shame. Whether it is “just” an objectifying gaze or humiliating whistles that “don’t hurt”, harassment has a very negative impact on our well-being. Emotions that could be classified as positive or neutral (feelings of satisfaction, being flattered, or indifferent) were declared as associated with harassment by 16% of men and only 5% of women.

Not all behaviors with an implied sexual meaning are considered by women to be harassment.

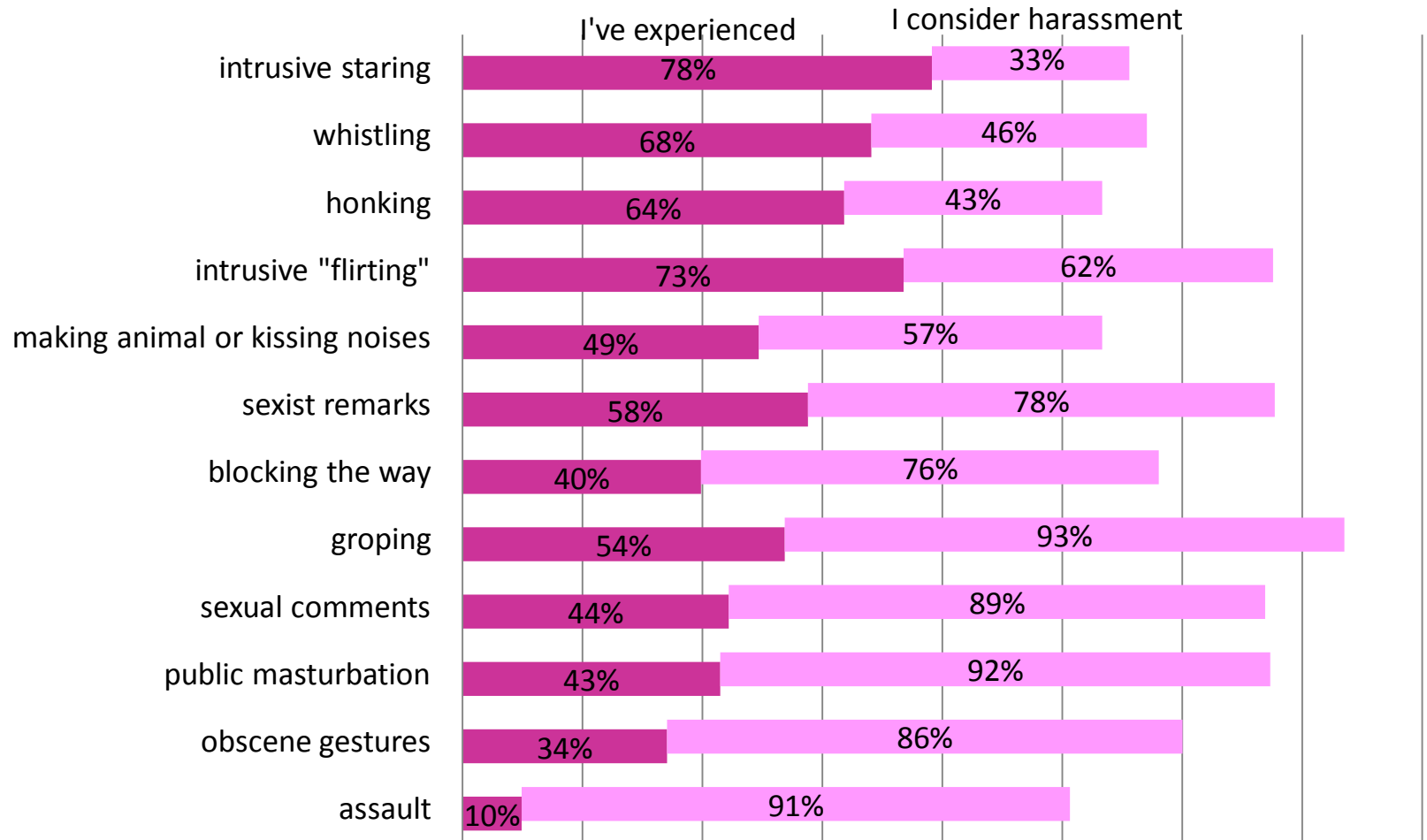


Fig. 4. Behaviors women have encountered in the public spaces and those they consider to be harassment.

How We, the Victims, (Don't) React

In the Polish law sexual harassment is defined in the Antidiscrimination Act and in the Work Code. Both Acts stipulate that lack of consent and objection to harassment are necessary for the legal acts to be effective. In other words, in order to be able to file a harassment complaint against a co-worker we would have to be able to prove that we objected to their behavior. Thus objection must be expressed firmly, to make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable. Meanwhile, our survey shows that as many as 60% of victims ignore harassments or behaves passively when it happens (Figure 5 in the next slide). Only 15% of respondents reacted in an active way, for example trying to tell the harasser to stop. Even more rare are our attempts to ask the bystanders for help (2%), or reporting the incident to the Police (2%).

Out of all reactions to harassment in public spaces
60% are passive.

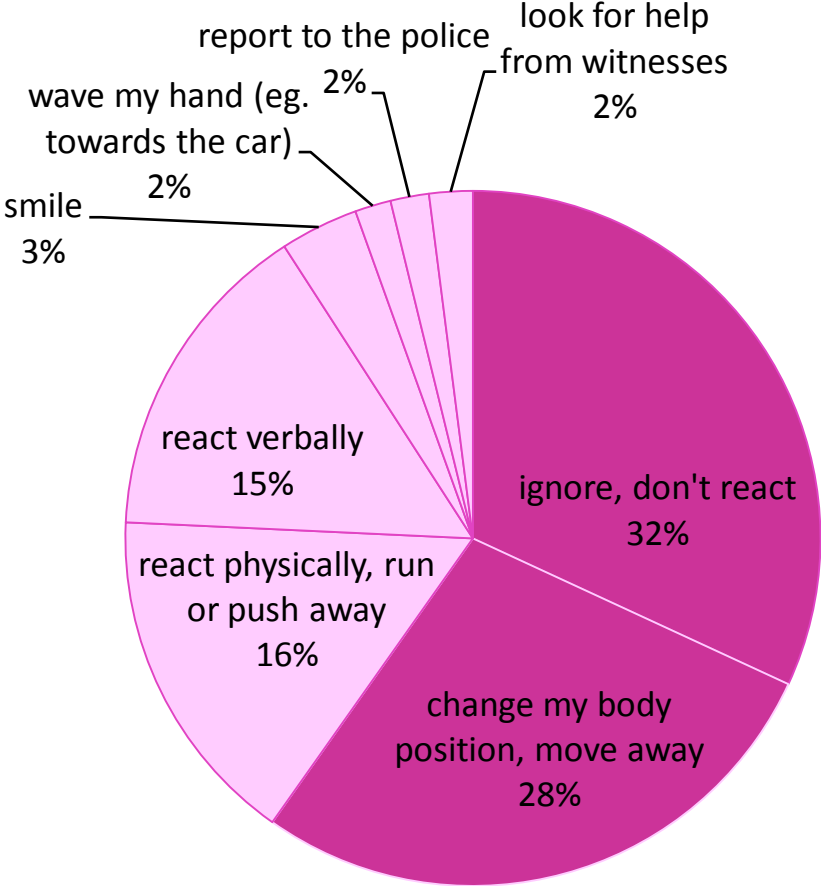


Fig. 5. How do men and women react to harassment in public spaces.

How We, the Witnesses, (Don't) React

The fact that most victims of harassment in public spaces remain relatively passive may partially account for the lack of reactions from bystanders. In as many as 65% of cases where harassment happened among witnesses (Figure 6 in the next slide), their response was NO response. In many cases, however, a clear protest of the victim met with an equally clear response from bystanders. Thus, protesting appears not only as a necessary condition in order to be able to claim legal protection but also to be able to count on the help of bystanders. Unfortunately, which is often the case, women often have to count on themselves, while others passively observe and acknowledge their humiliation.

As many as 63% of women have experienced harassment among witnesses who have not reacted.

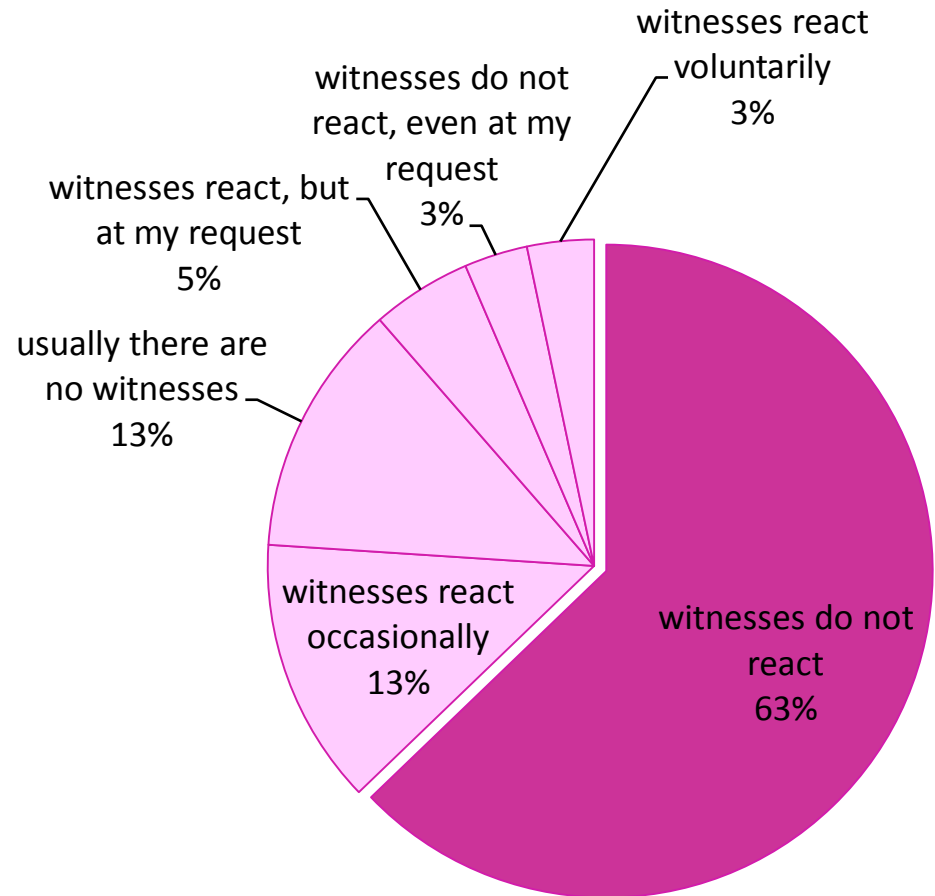


Fig. 6. How do bystanders react when a woman experiences harassment.

(Un)deserved harassment

As compared with men, women are more likely to give up their plans, for example to go out for a party, in fear of being harassed (25% of women versus 18% of men). Interestingly, as many as 65% of men (and only 28% of women) believe that a person can control whether harassment would happen to them (Figure 7 in the next slide). These results reflect the prevailing gender stereotype that a woman is usually the one who provokes male violence and the one who should be blamed for it.

Unfortunately, women also internalize these harmful beliefs and often blame themselves for their abuse. Those respondents who believed that harassment can be controlled and prevented were also asked to point to the “security measures” they thought were the most effective. About 52% of female and 49% of male responses related directly to the dress, the behavior and the way of moving of the victim. These results are depressing, but not very surprising, as many researchers and scholars of violence against women find evidence of rationalizing and justification of the behavior of the perpetrator, and blaming of the victim.

Women (28%) and men (65%) think they can reduce the risk of being harassed in public spaces by:

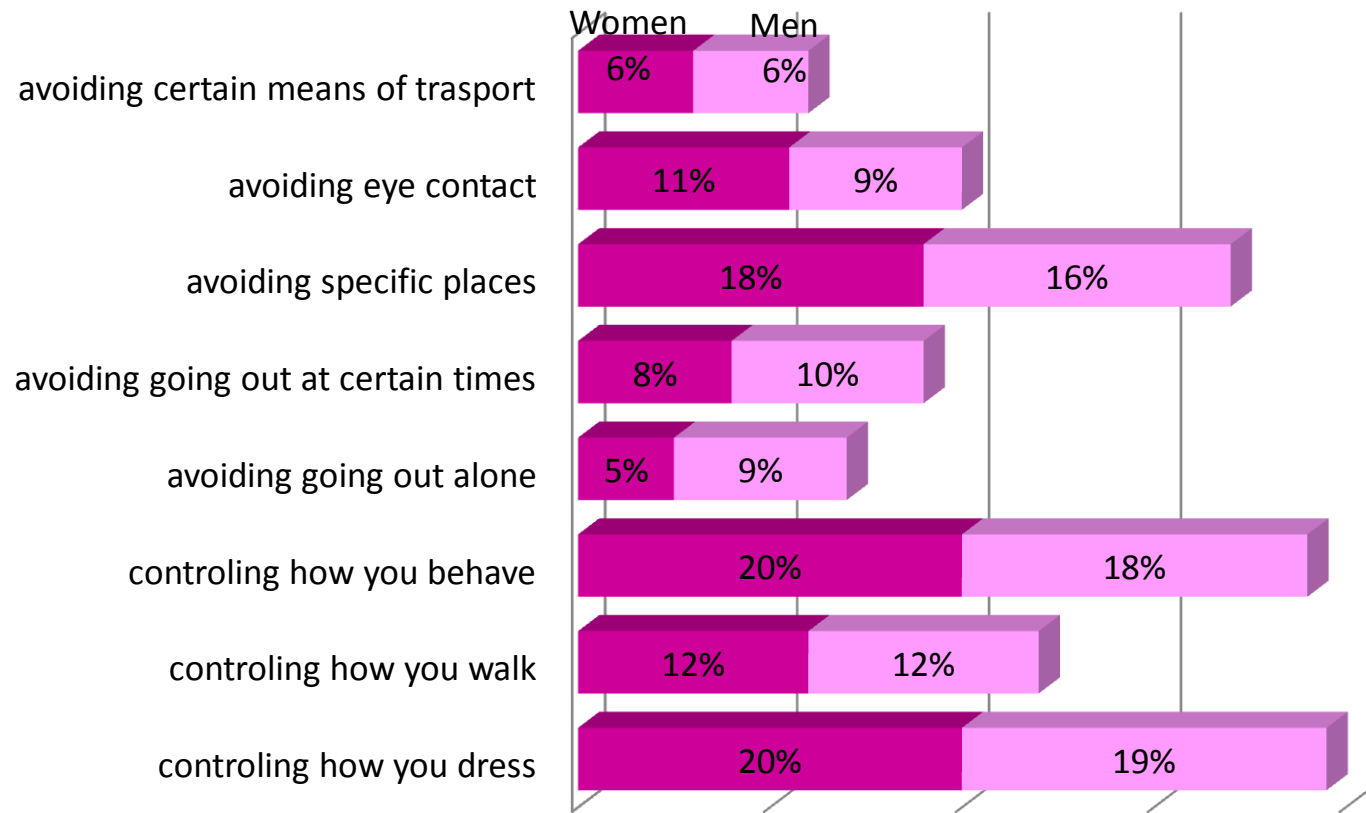


Fig. 7. „Security measures” men and women believe can help one avoid harassment in public spaces.

As many as 80% of women and 54% of men in Poland believe that harassment in public spaces is a very or quite important issue, but the majority (81%) of the victims have never reported incident of harassment to the police or other law enforcement officials. These results leave no illusions. Without a major shift in our attitudes towards violence, we cannot really count on its eradication from our public spaces. Hollaback! Poland helps to break the silence around harassment. We believe we do have the power to end harassment and live in a better world!

Hollaback! Poland team leaders,

Greta Gober and Joanna Roszak

