

TRENDS STYLE // WELLBEING // CELEBRITY

'The harassment is about power'



Disturbing: Gemma and Maya Tutton set up an Our Streets Now Instagram page, right and below

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a law in August 2018 which made sexual harassment of women in the street illegal. The law means on-the-spot fines can be issued to anyone found harassing women in the street. 'I burst into Gemma's room having seen the French law [had passed] and, after so many conversations about how street harassment made her feel degraded and unsafe, I just said, "Gem, we've got to do this,"' recalls Maya, 21, a second-year university student. Gemma, 15, a secondary school student in year ten, had her first experience of PSH at the age of only 11, when she was wearing her school uniform. Men shouted sexual abuse at her from out of the window of their van, leaving her terrified - and with the feeling that perhaps she had done something to deserve it.

Maya has also endured harassment, although the uncomfortable truth is that it's been less frequent the older she has become. 'The rate of harassment I have had has reduced since I've started to look older and that's a really scary fact,' she says, adding that this experience is one she hears about again and again from other women. 'The reason is it's about power. Perpetrators who know [their victims] are schoolgirls are encouraged by the fact they are young girls. They don't want them to speak back.' What the sisters ultimately hope to achieve with Our Streets Now is a reduction in the rates of street harassment. They hope to do this via education and awareness campaigns on their social media platforms, as well as through legislative change and seeking help from parliamentarians.

Since starting work on Our Streets Now, the sisters have received so many disturbing testimonies from women and girls recounting personal incidents of harassment. These are often used, alongside illustrations and statistics, on the Our Streets Now Instagram page, which paints a bleak portrait of our times. 'I was 16 when I was walking back home from school and two guys in a car honked their horn at me and shouted, "How much for a b*** job?"' And that's just one account of PSH. Others tell how quickly sexual advances turn aggressive following rejection, while women of colour speak of being fetishised - as do members of the LGBTQ community. Many testimonials detail how women feel their behaviour, plans and clothing have to be adjusted to minimise the potential for harassment.

But the young age of recipients of PSH is perhaps the common factor. 'The most shocking thing is how young they are - we get testimonies from girls as young as eight,' says Maya. 'What we're talking about here is an endemic problem that starts disturbingly early.' Maya believes there are a number of things that prevent women and girls from speaking up about being the victim of harassment - and they are seeking to change this. 'There's a culture of shame and

stigma,' she says. 'I think women are scared of being told it's "a compliment" or that they are overreacting.' Maya also touches on an overlooked element of street harassment - the perception of who receives it. 'There's a feeling that street harassment only happens to people who fit our society's beauty standards, which is completely incorrect,' she says. 'Fat women tend to

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receive more vitriolic street harassment and in that case it really is never a compliment, it is always very graphic, sexually violent content.' Given how intimidating cat-calling and unwanted attention can be, it is hard to know how to best respond to it. 'Our line is always do whatever you do is the right thing to do,' says Maya. Hollaback!, an organisation that seeks to end harassment in all its forms, conducted research which found that if victims speak back their mental health is less impacted, partly because it is empowering to speak. 'Of course, there is the huge caveat of safety,' warns Maya. 'If you do want to speak make sure you feel safe to do so. And when you do, be incredibly firm but not aggressive. Attack the behaviour and not the person. You can say "that's harassing" and "please don't do that". This reduces the chance of escalation.' A change in the law would dissuade those who harass and would encourage those who are harassed to report incidents. 'It would make women and girls in this country feel like the day-to-day violence and harassment they face is not OK,' says Maya. 'It would be a victory for #MeToo and it would make Britain a better country.' A country where street harassment, as well as litter, legally belongs in the bin.



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