On Sunday, June 29th, a small group of activists gathered at Baltimore’s McKeldin Square. With buttons, flyers, signs, props, and cameras in tow, the group was ready for a planned direct action. The activists were with Hollaback! Baltimore, the local branch of the international Hollaback! movement that aims to end street harassment.

The Movement

In a nutshell, street harassment is a public mode of sexual harassment. Hollaback!’s website states:

*We define public sexual harassment and assault as any sexual harassment or assault that occurs in a public space when one or more individuals (male or female) accost another individual—based on the victim’s gender—as they go about their daily life. This can include vulgar remarks, heckling, insults, innuendo, stalking, leering, fondling, indecent exposure and other forms of public*
humiliation. Public sexual harassment occurs on a continuum starting with words, stalking and unwanted touching, which can lead to more violent crimes like rape, assault and murder.

Street harassment is the harasser’s practice of domination over their victim/survivor. For many women and LGBTQ individuals, it is a perpetual reminder that their bodies are ever objectified\footnote{1} and controlled. In street harassment, when one catcalls, honks, makes indecent comments, etc., it is a means to take away personhood, oppress, and regulate. It is a gateway that easily makes other forms of gender-based violence acceptable. It is a pervasive and often silent epidemic. Most women and LGBTQ folks accept street harassment as routine part of their existence, with very little recourse.

Hollaback! has been aiming to change this ubiquitous form of gender-based violence since its origination in 2005. (It became a full nonprofit in May 2010.) Originating in NYC, the project came to Baltimore in January 2011. Hollaback! has since spread to 50 cities and 17 countries.

Providing an online blog-style platform, Hollaback! believes that \cite{4} “movements start with people telling their stories – and they succeed with people taking action.”

People are encouraged to share their stories of street harassment on the Hollaback! website. This grants women/LGBTQ community the opportunity to acknowledge this commonly hidden abuse, take their autonomy back from the harasser, and to find solidarity rather than solitude. Through growing mobile phone technology, the harassed are also given the option of taking photos of their aggressors. This serves as a means to hold oppressors accountable for their actions, when normally they are allowed invisibility via cultural acceptability. It also, along with forming branches of this movement, works to “flip the power” dynamic -- a term Hollaback! has united around to illustrate the empowerment they strive for in such often disempowering situations. People are also encouraged to upload the location of the harassment for the movement’s geo-tracking endeavours that collect data for local mobilizations.

Outspoken feminist and frontwoman for the popular hardcore band War on Women \cite{5}, Shawna Potter, has been the Director of Hollaback! Baltimore since January 2011. She has been working to grow the movement through organizing a variety of actions, educations, and engagements -- including, but not limited to, organizing Baltimore’s Slutwalk 2011. Hollaback! Baltimore recently received the Global Fair Award from Worldwide Visionaries in order to strengthen its capacity and further its work. Potter states that the movement has merely begun.

### Outreach and Costumes

The gathered feminist activists had an anticipated direct action. (Which we won’t tell you about in case they do it in the future!) Yet, staring around at the crowded harbor - they immediately became aware that a change of tactics was in order. Otakon was in town. For those who don’t know, Otakon is a fan convention for East Asian popular culture....think = “anime”. Otakon descends on Baltimore’s Inner Harbor every summer. As one of the largest anime conventions, the city fills with costumed attendees --each one personifying their favorite anime (or other East Asian icon) character. For many, it is a delightful and fantastic sight and experience to behold.

Wanting to make the most of this highly populated opportunity, the activists trekked over to the Convention Center for some direct feminist outreach. The group set-up shop on the corner by the front doors. Stuffing their pockets with “Hollaback! Bmore” buttons, for an hour the predominantly
female organizers confidently approached the hundreds of Otakon attendees streaming in-and-out of the Center.

Potter began the outreach. Grabbing a stack of papers, where people could share their harassment stories, she walked up to a costumed group of presumably female-bodied individuals and said, “We’re documenting women’s and LGBTQ folks’ stories of street harassment. Has this ever happened to you?”

Soon the other activists were following her lead, passing out flyers, buttons, engaging in candid discussion on street harassment, and documenting written and video stories.

Brooks, the only male-bodied Hollaback! activist present, observed, “It’s interesting to do direct outreach at an event like this. When they see us, they think we’re part of the convention. Then when they start talking to us, you can see the realization that what we’re talking about is really very serious. And most of them, are expecting attention due to their costumes. So you can see the exact shift towards thinking about how attention can be incredibly unwanted.”

Many of the attendees were teenagers or of college age, experiencing street harassment in its first confusing waves. Some expressed the “behavior” as “annoying” but “harmless”; one young woman even stated the all-too-common conception that the “behavior” was complimentary. This is an idea that Hollaback! actively works to combat; aiming to expose women to the truth that they do not need to find their worth as sexual beings and people in this world from this form of the objectifying male conduct -- that when they allow objectification they allow the oppression of their identities. Others stated that they were from small towns and didn’t recognize what was being discussed. It should be noted that much street harassment research conveys that it is prevalent regardless of location, whether urban, suburban, or rural. However, more data is needed; hence the need for more Hollaback! geo-tracking.

This being stated, many also engaged excitedly about the topic. They discussed their street harassment stories, filled up our pads of paper, and went on camera to tell their tales.

Some didn’t want to share their stories but vocalized their support for the movement. One young woman became emotional when an activist approached her, stating that she had been “jumped” just the previous night. The activist strongly encouraged her to seek support through a variety of means.

Next Steps

As the flyer collection diminished and handfuls upon handfuls of buttons were dispersed, the activists excitedly gathered to discuss their work. Immediately palpable was the organizers thrill to have interacted so intimately with so many about street harassment.

“We’re definitely going to do this more often,” reflected Potter. “So much of this movement is about education. This is a simple yet obviously effective way to publicly discuss and bring awareness to such an often invisible issue.”

It is impossible to say how influenced the Otakon attendees were by these conversations. A very simple outreach tactic, it’s crucial that Hollaback! Baltimore utilizes this and other strategies in order to further its cause. However, much of this movement is in fact predicated on empowering women and the LGBTQ community to actively mobilize around the issue of street harassment. The
activists themselves were extremely moved by their efforts of taking space to educate and publicly discuss street harassment when often the epidemic persists through silent admission. Maybe only a small crack in the hegemony of gender violence, this was still an act of resistance against an often seemingly indestructible fortress. The activists left feeling powerful rather than powerless - the very opposite of what street harassment does.

Plus, it's quite an exciting experience to discuss feminism with slews of anime characters.

To learn more about the Hollaback! Baltimore movement please visit their website [2].

Note: Indyreader did a full interview with Shawna Potter and Brooks, an attending activist. Sadly, much of it was lost due to windy conditions. In the above segments you can find the short interview pieces that we were able to rescue.

1 The feminist concept of "objectification" is a tricky thing. Many of us hold it so closely to the idea of being seen as sexual or sexually desirable that we get upset when "objectify" is used with a negative connotation. However, this article is written by a feminist and therefore states that "objectification" is in fact a horrible thing. There is everything wonderful in the world with being sexual, owning your sexual appeal and desire (if you so choose to do these things). However, objectification doesn't necessarily have to do with sex at all (though it often does). Objectification means that a person has been reduced to a one-dimensional thing. The objectified person is seen as passive. They are an object receiving an action (the viewer's gaze/opinion/etc.) rather than doing an action. In objectification the objectified person has been denied their own humanity. In sexual objectification, which happens pervasively to women, the objectified subject is not seen as a full person with sexual appeal/desire as potentially one of their many sides, but rather it is seen as their sole function -- they are turned into an object for the objectifiers gratification and nothing more. This writer believes that objectification is one of the keys ways that women and LGBTQ folks are still steadfastedly controlled.

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