

PAINT LIKE A GIRL!

Street Interventions Fighting Against Sexual Harassment in Greece And Spain

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Public spaces represent cities' ability to enhance the quality of urban life, which includes access and use for all citizens, free from discrimination, spatial exclusion, or fear. However, various studies have shown that up to 55% of women have been sexually harassed in public spaces in the EU, and in the cases of Greece and Spain, over 60% of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment since the age of 15 (Kosyfologou, 2018; Picierno, 2018; Salas Oraá, 2018). One of the most common places where women experience verbal, visual, and physical sexual harassment – which ranges from name-calling and flashing to sexual assault and rape – is out on the streets. Therefore, it is not surprising that some artists, like Spanish Sara Batuecas, have chosen to fight sexual harassment with street interventions:

I really wanted to place my posters in the streets because most of the cases of sexual harassment, assaults, and violations happen in the streets. There, the works are also accessible to everyone, regardless of age or social status. I was hoping that people who would see these posters wouldn't feel indifferent,

would question things, and would be touched by them. And that they would feel uncomfortable with all those women in the posters being groped, looking straight back at them. Let's put them for a moment in someone else's shoes, to feel what women feel... Most of the posters didn't last 24 hours. They were ripped off or covered by advertising posters. I didn't expect this and I was disappointed and angry. I didn't understand why people got upset about claiming our freedom and criticising them for violating us.¹ (Batuecas, 2019; see the image top left)

In this photo essay, I analyse the ways in which art interventions on the streets raise awareness of the sexual harassment that women experience on a daily basis, and how these interventions are utilised as part of women's anti-sexual harassment activism. The images presented here show how wall writings, posters, and stencils I encountered in cities in Spain and Greece² express unity, strength, and defiance among women, and by what means these artworks seek to redefine femininity.



Sara Batuecas began her project by photographing three of her friends and uploading their pictures to the internet. The pictures made such an impact that soon she had a lot of women volunteering to pose for this poster series. One night, the same group of women spread the posters in different locations around the neighbourhood of Lavapiés in Madrid. Sara Batuecas. Madrid, Spain, September 29, 2018.

'NO MEANS NO' is a worldwide slogan used by anti-rape activists. Pink, purple, and red are popular colours among women's rights activists. A4-sized stencils are used most frequently as they enable easy and quick multiplication onto the walls. (Tolonen, 2016) Femstoria. Athens, Greece, November 8, 2019.



The text in this stencil is a quote from Pink's song 'I'm not here for your entertainment' (2006). Here, women are framed contrary to intergenerational problematic ideologies that equate femininity with objectification, vulnerability, and passivity (Hoppstadius, 2019). As the stencil states, 'you don't really want to mess' with this woman, who is not afraid and can, if needed, defend herself too. This work also raises questions of eliminating the constant fear that has generated a self-sustaining cycle of violence perpetuated against women daring to go out after dark (Smith Madan, 2019). Women's Collective 619. Athens, Greece, November 2, 2019.



In many countries, forming the thumb and index finger into a circle is known as the OK gesture. When making this gesture with both hands below the waistline, it refers to ovaries – a common symbol among women's rights activists. In this stencil, the female organ is combined with the conventionally more male-affiliated 'tough' word *gang*. Artist unknown. Las Palmas, Spain, December 23, 2017.

This piece challenges the stereotype behind the saying 'like a girl', and the traditional generalisation of framing women and girls homogeneously as an inferior group. Artist unknown. Athens, Greece, May 30, 2018.



Stencil 'ELLA NO ESTÁ SOLA' [SHE IS NOT ALONE]. In Spain, this phrase is harnessed to raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. It also emphasises women's group support for every woman, and invites each woman to take care of other women. Artist unknown. Madrid, Spain, September 26, 2017.



The picture beside the text is intentionally evocative to get the attention of as many passers-by as possible. This piece makes a statement about 'bodily autonomy': all women should have the right to self-govern over their bodies without any external influence, pressure, or coercion. Bodily autonomy is a human right that relates not only to abortion, but also to ending human rights violations such as sex trafficking, sexual assault, and genital mutilation (Amnesty International, 2019). Unknown artist. Athens, Greece, November 23, 2019.



This message seeks to make men who walk the streets feel threatened. By purposefully using words such as 'one' and 'we all', solidarity among women is underlined while men are excluded from the narrative. Unknown artist. Athens, Greece, June 4, 2018.



Burning at the stake used to be a form of execution for women found guilty of witchcraft especially in the 17th and 18th century. Nevertheless, the last known victim, Ama Hemmah, was burnt to death for being a 'witch' in Ghana in 2010 (BBC, 2010). This stencil reverses the situation by suggesting that this gruesome way of dying should be a punishment for rapists instead. (The stencil on the left calls for the release of a prisoner and is unrelated to the struggle of women's rights activists.) Unknown artist. Athens, Greece, November 8, 2019.





'MUJERES EN LUCHA' [WOMEN TAKING UP THE FIGHT]. Street interventions like these offer women a powerful image of being strong and in charge of their own life and body – including their ovaries. Artist unknown. Madrid, Spain, October 2, 2017.

'If you really want to understand a specific phenomenon in a certain place, you have to go and see and feel it for yourself. The *Ninja* piece I spotted today is an example of the visuals I'm trying to find in order to understand the atmosphere of this area. The photograph I took of the work is part of that understanding. But there is more. I could see so many other pieces painted that were about resistance. I could see people passing by these works and giving me the thumbs up. I could smell the paint. I could feel the spirit – it was telling me: *let's fight!*' (Tolonen, 2019). Luigi. Valencia, Spain, April 1, 2019.



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