

Men catcall, women are being catcalled

The problematic dichotomy at play

Denise Gorissen

“I see 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 vaginas - which one shall I take?” I was walking with my Dutch friends through Barcelona when I had my umpteenth experience with catcalling. Catcalling is the public, verbal harassment of someone and often includes sexually suggestive, threatening, or derisive comments. This recent event made me realise that catcalling happens everywhere: from the streets in Spain, to the supermarket in the Netherlands. Luckily, this global problem has received increasing media attention. Most articles and studies stress that this form of street harassment is mostly – though not exclusively – performed by men. While this is not untrue, I argue that this way of portraying the problem adds to its origination. There are many factors at play in catcalling, but it all starts with the prevalence of the man-woman dichotomy in society.

‘The dangerous impact of catcalling on women’ and ‘Catcalling: Why men do it and what women should do about it’ are just a few of the many web articles you encounter when doing a Google Search for catcalling. The titles of these articles already reveal the message they convey: men catcall, women are being catcalled. This directly reflects the single most established dichotomy in everyday life: the socially imposed division of women versus men. This division remains prevalent in mainstream ideas on sex and gender in all layers of Western society. Women and other gender identities are socialised to be subordinated to male dominance, and these gendered norms are manifested in

the social, political, legal and economic organisation of society. On a private level, the gendered norms accompanying the strong division between men and women influence how we perceive ourselves and others – and thereby also the type of behaviour we regard as appropriate. Yet, the pervasiveness of this man-woman dichotomy is far from obvious.

It already starts at birth. Given that a baby's genitals can be classified in one of the two dominant categories, a nurse will tell the parents: "Congratulations, it is a boy/girl!". While no genitals will look exactly the same, we have created two dominant groups of sexes based on biological characteristics. Subsequently, men and women are presented not only as different groups, but are socially and culturally presented as opposites of one another. Superheroes are meant for boys, Barbie dolls for girls. Our society is spatially segregated: there is a men's toilet, and a women's toilet. And also language is gendered: a man who acts for a living is called an actor, while a woman with the exact same profession is called an actress. The man-woman dichotomy is omnipresent in our society. Consequently, we do not simply see people: we see men or women, boys or girls.

Catcalling is grounded on – though not exclusively explained by – this dichotomous perception. Men who catcall appear to see women as something distinctively other than themselves. This 'us versus them' construction alone does not lead to catcalling; it is mediated by various structures and processes of patriarchy, aggression, and sexualization before it results in actual harassment. All of these need to be addressed. Still, in the case of men catcalling women, it all starts with the harsh differentiation between the two sexes and genders in society and the expectation of appropriate stereotypical behaviours.

I will be the last to claim that there is a simple solution to the problem of catcalling or that we can abandon the dichotomous thinking overnight. However, we can start by posing the problem of catcalling differently. Take the first title of the web article for example, if we

remove the last two words ('The dangerous impact of catcalling on women'), catcalling will be problematized as an issue of people, rather than an issue of two opposing groups. In this way, at least we will break the vicious circle between the problematization and origination of catcalling. It may be the first step towards altering the perception of the guy who harassed us in Barcelona – so that the next time he will see five people walking by, instead of five vaginas.

About the author

Denise Gorissen obtained her bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Politics and Society at Radboud University *cum laude*, with a minor in Anthropology. She will follow the master Anthropology and Development Studies as of September 2022, again at Radboud University.

References

- Di Meglio, Catherine. 2019. "Catcalling: Why men do it and what women should do about it." Accessed April 4, 2022.
<https://www.silive.com/news/2019/04/catcalling-why-men-do-it-and-what-women-should-do-about-it.html>
- Wilkes, Emma. 2021. "The dangerous impact of catcalling on women." Accessed April 4, 2022.
<https://theboar.org/2021/02/catcalling-experiences/>