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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DECEMBER 12, 2015

UN Women uncovers the “hidden” issue of street harassment against women

QUEZON CITY – The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) just concluded a workshop series to highlight women’s experiences of sexual harassment and violence in public places. In the recently concluded Safe Cities Scoping Study of UN Women, all women interviewed reported either being sexually harassed or knowing someone who has been harassed while walking in the city streets.

Whether due to shame or fear, women traditionally ignore and keep silent about catcalls, stalking, repeated harassment for their numbers, male public exposure, rubbing or groping (panghihipo) inside the MRT/ jeepneys, even bearing indecent language being yelled at them by men as they walk by. Women experience all these forms of sexual harassment as they move about in the city, using public transport, terminals, markets/malls, and even just walking home in their own neighborhoods.

This is why the Quezon City government has partnered with UN Women to implement the Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative. QC is the first city in Metro Manila to join over 24 cities around the world in the programme to stop street harassment and sexual violence against women in public spaces with funding from Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID).

The three workshops, held from 3-10 December 2015, are in line with the public awareness campaign “Safe Cities: Women #FreeFromFear” of the Quezon City government and the UN Women Safe Cities Programme in support of the 18-Day Campaign to End Violence Against Women (VAW). The series addressed:

- Improving safety of women with disabilities in urban public spaces
- Engaging men as change agents in stopping street harassment of women
- Addressing vulnerabilities to street harassment and sexual violence of LGBT women in the cities

Contours of sexual harassment in Quezon City streets

Sexual harassment is often about power and control and is often a manifestation of gender inequality. In the Philippines, it is often under-recognized as an issue, and the forms it takes in streets and other public spaces has

been 'invisible'. A review of the country's laws -- the law against violence against women and children (Republic Act 9262 of 2004) and the anti-sexual harassment law (Republic Act 7877 of 1995) -- reveals little to no protection and redress for acts done in public spaces. In particular, Republic Act 9262 does not cover parties outside of intimate or sexual relationships.

From the workshops, it was identified that a culture of tolerance for street harassment exists, with Filipino men usually asserting that these gestures are "compliments" and "appreciation" to the beauty of women, and with Filipino women often left with no option but to shrug off these unwelcome and offensive sexual gestures.

Krista (not her real name), a PWD participant to the workshop shares her experience of sexual harassment, as she broke into tears:

"Hoy, pilay -- tuwad! Masabaw din yan!" (Hey crippled woman -- bend over! Let's see some soup!), shouts a group of men one afternoon as she heads home.

Krista remembers how offended and helpless she felt at that time, and she cries remembering the incident.

Women Barangay Payatas and Bagong Silangan, Quezon City have reported feeling irritated and fearful to acts such as catcalling, leering, and other severe forms of street harassment such as "pa-kambyo-kambyo" (up and down hand motion as if holding a gear stick / changing car gears), a mimicry of masturbation or is the actual act of masturbation. "Pa-kambyo-kambyo" usually occurs in public transport vehicles such as jeepneys, buses and trains.

Other local examples surfaced were malicious handshakes (ie finger motion when extending hand to give or get fares/change in jeepneys and sari-sari [variety] stores), unwelcome invites to male group drinking sessions ("shot ka muna"), suggestive offers of cellphone credits or cigarettes ("libre kitang load/yosi!"), and purposeful and forceful blocking of women walking down the street ("panghaharang").

An invisible and challenging issue

These various forms of sexual harassment encountered by students, mothers, and leaders of their communities occur not just in Quezon City but also throughout the country. Aside from limitations in laws and policies, Filipino women are often not aware of gender and rights-based concepts related to VAW. There is also that stigma of blame, where women victims are themselves ridiculed and faulted, and the incidents, trivialized. Common retorts range from "She deserves it, she is out so late in the night,"; "It's not the guy's fault that she wears indecent clothing,"; "She is too sensitive, the man mean no harm," to plain and simple "She brought it on to herself".

One woman participant of the workshop even asks the group, "Baka naman po kaya siya nababastos ay dahil mapang-akit po ang kanyang suot?" ("Isn't the cause of the harassment the way certain women dress provocatively?").

Another reason why women tend not to report sexual harassment in public spaces is fear of putting oneself in danger -- "Baka may patalim," (He may have a knife.) says one participant.

Fear, deep-seated perceptions, and cultural norms contribute to the silence from all sectors -- from the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander. They keep sexual harassment in public spaces under-recognized as a human rights and violence against women issue.

This “invisibility” and underreporting is glaring in the lack of systemized data on sexual harassment and sexual violence in public spaces. At most, available data is only on domestic and spousal violence from the country’s 2008 National Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the National Statistics Office.

Without data, laws and policies, and awareness from all sectors, Filipino women, meanwhile, are gripped by fear, with little to no choice but to dismiss these street harassment as part of everyday, urban realities.

Katherine Belen, the National Programme Manager for the Safe Cities Metro Manila Programme cited another challenging area: infrastructure.

“We did a scoping study in two barangays of Quezon City (Payatas and Bagong Silangan), and while there is improvement in infrastructure and addressing the residents’ basic needs, there remains some problem areas. For one, there are streets that remain dimly-lit or do not have lamp posts at all. These streets are highly vulnerable to occurrence of sexual harassment to women.”

Quezon City acts to end street harassment

Quezon City is home to one of the biggest urban poor communities and informal settler families, presenting both opportunities and challenges for safe city programming. As it becomes the 24th city around the world to join UN Women’s Safe Cities Global Initiative, it becomes the first city in the Philippines to commit to be in the frontline in the campaign to end violence against women, specifically sexual harassment in public spaces.

Together with UN Women’s Safe Cities Metro Manila Programme, the Quezon City government has finished a scoping study and a safety audit in Barangays Payatas and Bagong Silangan. In the pipeline are quantitative research, review of local laws on gender and public safety, and trainings with public safety officers regarding implementation of new laws that will ensure women’s safety in public spaces.

18-days of speaking out against street harassment

Every day, from November 25 until December 12, the Safe Cities Metro Manila Programme stood one with the nation in the call to end VAW now. During this period, UN Women also launched the hashtag #FreeFromFear as part of the social media campaign to raise awareness that all women have the right to be free from violence AND to be free from fear of violence as they go to work, school, participate in recreation and community life, and enjoy public spaces.

Their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/UNWomenSafeCitiesFreeFromFearCampaign/> features a photo blog and testimonies of women in Metro Manila who have experienced street harassment, a celebrity ‘fan sign’ collage, a community poll, and many more resources on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and violence against women in public spaces.

Visit the page and join the Quezon City government and UN Women in their call – **We want Safe Cities where Women are #FreeFromFear!**