

Action Sunday

Eleven women turned action heroes on a Sunday afternoon, defying unwritten societal norms and breaking their own inhibitions to experience new-found confidence and freedom. This action was part of Step-by-Step: street action against sexual harassment, a joint event by Blank Noise Chennai and The Prajnya Trust as part of the Prajnya 16 days Campaign Against Gender Violence.

Gathering at Spencer Plaza for a quick briefing, the women set out in different directions walking from the Phase 3 Atrium to the Phase 1 atrium, interrupted by periods of freezes, where one just stood and gazed. The innovative 'action' consisted of a bunch of women walking very slowly, walking in the middle of the passage, walking alone, walking smiling, walking looking at passersby, walking swinging your arms, walking humming a song or walking without your arms folded... and doing all the seemingly simple things that you wouldn't normally do while alone in a public place, just because you were a woman. In short, the action urged women to reclaim their space in the public space and walk unapologetically.

As expected, the action did draw the attention of curious onlookers as well as the security staff at the Spencer Plaza, who initially objected. But who can stop a bunch of women from walking around and simply claiming the freedom that is rightfully their own? The action continued and culminated in the women reading out the Step by Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking and urging other women to do the same.

Other than the variety of responses it evoked from the onlookers and passersby, the participant women shared that they found this to be *"a very liberating experience"*. The comfort with the divide between personal and public spaces for women was broken deliberately. As one of them said, *"For the first time, I was okay with attracting attention rather than forever trying to avoid it."* Another added, *"This was the first time that I actually looked into people's eyes and consciously observed how men and women behave differently in the same space. Otherwise, we are so tuned in to it that we often involuntarily retract into our regular defences."* The group also shared other disturbing and liberating experiences and made a collective decision not to take it lying down anymore.



Chennai action heroes – volunteers from Prajnaya team, Blank Noise team and other young ladies walking unapologetically at Spencer Plaza on 30.12.08



Two men tying 'Because I care' ribbons at Sri Lanka shopping mall of Spencer Plaza



Chennai action heroes reading out the step-by-step guide to unapologetic walking at Spencer Plaza