

# *For Female Climbers, Dangers Go Beyond Avalanches and Storms*

Women are increasingly reporting sexual harassment and abuse in the sport, including accusations against the renowned climber Nirmal Purja.

**By Anna Callaghan and Jenny Vrentas**

Anna Callaghan and Jenny Vrentas report on issues in climbing and welcome tips at [nytimes.com/tips](https://nytimes.com/tips).

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In a memoir published in December, the professional mountaineer and former Miss Finland Lotta Hintsu briefly described an upsetting incident with a “very famous male climber” whom she didn’t name.

During a March 2023 business discussion in the man’s hotel suite in Kathmandu, Nepal, he “kissed Lotta completely without warning,” Ms. Hintsu and her co-author wrote in the Finnish-language book, “The Mountains of My Life 2.” “The situation was absurd, unreal and unpleasant.”

But in interviews with The New York Times, Ms. Hintsu said her experience was more disturbing than she had described in the book. And her story highlights a concern that women in the climbing world are starting to talk about more openly.

Ms. Hintsu said the man was Nirmal Purja, whose successful 2019 quest to climb all 14 of the world’s 8,000-meter peaks in record time was chronicled in a popular Netflix documentary. She said he led her to the bedroom, pulled off her shirt, trekking shorts and underwear and tried to remove her bra. She said she repeatedly told him no and offered excuses to get him to stop without agitating him. The episode ended with him masturbating next to her, she said.

“I just need to get out of this and pretend that it never happened,” Ms. Hintska, 35, recalled thinking at the time.



Lotta Hintska, a Finnish mountaineer, described a troubling experience with the renowned climber and guide Nirmal Purja. Saara Mansikkamaki for The New York Times

Through his lawyer, Mr. Purja declined requests for an interview. The lawyer, Philip M. Kelly, said in a written statement that Mr. Purja “unequivocally denies the allegations of wrongdoing. These allegations are false and defamatory.”

As high-altitude mountaineering has gained popularity, women have become increasingly visible and formidable in a sport still largely dominated by men. Statistics from Mount Everest speak to the trend: Last year, 65 women reached the summit — about 10 percent of the climbers who summited — up from 45 in 2013 and just 10 in 2003, according to the Himalayan Database.

But in recent years, members of the broader climbing community have acknowledged that the sport comes with unseen risks, especially for women. More and more women in the sport, which includes everything from indoor rock climbing to ascending snowy peaks, are coming forward to talk about moments they've described as unsettling or worse.

In 2019, a group of professional female rock climbers started an Instagram account "about the ridiculous and inappropriate messages, photos, and solicitations we receive in our DMs," one of the women said in a social media post. The account, whose creators said it was later shut down by Instagram, shared screenshots of harassing messages sent to women in the sport.

In February, a 39-year-old climber named Charles Barrett was convicted of three counts of sexual abuse for repeatedly assaulting a woman who was visiting Yosemite National Park for a weekend hiking trip in 2016. The U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of California said in a statement that Mr. Barrett had "used his renown and physical presence as a rock climber to lure and intimidate victims who were part of the rock-climbing community."

And in interviews with The Times, Ms. Hintsa and another woman, a former client of Mr. Purja's high-altitude guiding company, described experiences in recent years in which he kissed them without consent, made aggressive advances or touched them sexually against their wishes. They said they felt powerless and wary of angering Mr. Purja.



Dr. April Leonardo described Mr. Purja coming into her tent uninvited during an expedition to K2. Rachel Bujalski for The New York Times

“I didn’t know what to do,” recalled Dr. April Leonardo, a family physician from Quincy, Calif. She said Mr. Purja repeatedly grabbed, kissed and propositioned her during an expedition to K2, the world’s second-tallest mountain. “I’m on this crazy climb. He’s my guide. I don’t want to do anything to put myself in jeopardy.”

The statement from Mr. Purja’s lawyer also unequivocally denied Dr. Leonardo’s allegations.

Soon after the encounters the women described having with Mr. Purja, they shared their stories with friends and relatives and sent them text messages about their experiences. The Times reviewed the text messages and confirmed the conversations with the other people.

The outdoor recreation world has started to address sexual abuse and harassment, though haltingly. In response to the #MeToo movement, members of the United States climbing community created an initiative in 2018 called #SafeOutside to study the scope of the problem in the sport. The organizers surveyed more than 5,000 climbers from over 60 countries and found that 47 percent of women and 16 percent of men said they had been subjected to unwanted sexual behavior while climbing. And a few months ago, The Mountaineers, an outdoor recreation group in the Pacific Northwest, created a sexual harassment and assault prevention advisory committee to address the risk among its 15,000 members.

But it's nothing new for women to feel mistreated in the sport.

"It's the most vulnerable position I can imagine being in," said Alison Levine, the captain of the first American women's Everest expedition in 2002, who said she experienced verbal abuse and threatening behavior from a guide during that trip. The climbers turned back short of the summit as weather conditions deteriorated.

Ms. Levine continued, "The thing that was most challenging, the scariest, and produced the most anxiety and fear on that mountain came from a human, not the environment." She didn't return to the big mountains for another five years, then went back to Everest in 2010 and reached the summit.

"There is so much inherent risk in the environment itself," she said. "When you add in risk from interpersonal relationships, that makes it even more frightening."

## **'Where a "No" Means Nothing'**

This month, hundreds of climbers scaled Everest and other Himalayan peaks. Above 8,000 meters (about 26,000 feet), they enter what is known as the Death Zone, where there is not enough oxygen to sustain human life for long and they expose themselves to hazards like frostbite, icefall, crevasses and high-altitude pulmonary or cerebral edema. Eighteen climbers died on Everest during the spring 2023 season, and this year five have died and three have been reported missing.

Clients pay tens of thousands of dollars to attempt these ascents — Everest expeditions start at around \$40,000 and can cost six figures for a more luxurious experience — and entrust their guides with their lives.

Mr. Purja, 40, is one of mountaineering's most recognizable and influential figures, with more than two million followers on Instagram. Known as Nims, he's a naturalized citizen of Britain, where he lives with his wife and young daughter. But in his native Nepal he is revered as the kind of climbing superstar the country hasn't seen since Tenzing Norgay completed the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 alongside Sir Edmund Hillary.



Mr. Purja, a former soldier and a star of mountaineering, is a national hero in his native Nepal. Aamir Qureshi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Through his guiding company, Elite Exped, Mr. Purja has helped usher in a new era of commercial climbing on the world's tallest peaks and has encouraged women on social media to take part.

He has guided high-profile female clients like Asma Al Thani, a member of the Qatari royal family, and the Russian model Victoria Bonya. "Thanks for inspiring me to push my limits. I'm grateful for everything you taught me," a Swiss climber named Christine Vogondy posted on social media last fall, with a photo of her and Mr. Purja atop Gasherbrum I in Pakistan.

Ms. Hintska, who became a professional climber in 2018, crossed paths with Mr. Purja at base camps in Nepal and Pakistan while on the climbing circuit. They corresponded intermittently about expeditions they were taking, and Mr. Purja invited her to guide for his company.

Mr. Purja was often flirtatious in those text messages and in exchanges with Dr. Leonardo, according to a review of the messages by The Times. The women sometimes bantered back, and Ms. Hintska, a former Sports Illustrated swimsuit model, once sent a photo of herself from the magazine. Often, though, the women changed the subject or didn't respond.

Ms. Hintska and Mr. Purja agreed to meet in Kathmandu in March 2023 to discuss working together on an expedition Ms. Hintska was organizing. Mr. Purja suggested having coffee in his hotel suite to avoid the attention he would get in the lobby, Ms. Hintska recalled.

Given the tenor of some of their earlier text messages, Ms. Hintska said, she sought to draw clear boundaries. She said she texted Mr. Purja on WhatsApp that this was "not a booty call," and that he replied agreeing that it was not. Ms. Hintska no longer has this text exchange because Mr. Purja's app was set to make messages in their chat disappear after seven days.



Ms. Hints met Mr. Purja at a hotel in Kathmandu, Nepal, for what she said was intended to be a business meeting, “not a booty call.” Saumya Khandelwal for The New York Times

In Mr. Purja’s suite at the Marriott on March 30, Ms. Hints recalled, she was “frozen” and “confused” as he led her to the bed. She said she felt like she was having an out-of-body experience as he removed her clothes even as she continued to say no. She told him she had her period, she said, but he didn’t stop. At one point he touched her vagina, she said.

“I can’t get through to him. He’s in this extremely aroused state where a ‘No’ means nothing,” Ms. Hints recalled. She said she was afraid to agitate him because of his strength and the training he’d received in Britain’s military, including its special forces.

She said that Mr. Purja appeared to grow frustrated as she continued to refuse him and that he seemed to lose interest after she physically resisted his removing her bra. She described feeling relieved when he began to masturbate, hopeful that the



episode would soon be over.

Mr. Purja then showered, she said, which gave her time to compose herself and get dressed. They left the room and he showed her the store he operates at the Marriott, then asked a driver to take her to her hotel, she said. Mr. Purja behaved as if nothing had happened, she said.

That day, Ms. Hintsä texted a friend describing her experience. The Times reviewed the message. Later, she recounted it in person to the friend, Heidi Paananen, who confirmed their conversation.

A driver for Mr. Purja, Krishna Bahadur Tamang, said in a written statement provided by Mr. Purja's lawyer that he took Mr. Purja to the Marriott that morning. He said Mr. Purja returned to the car "within 20 minutes." Ms. Hintsä recalled being at the hotel with Mr. Purja for close to an hour, and she provided time-stamped photos she took that day on her way to meet Mr. Purja and at his store. They corroborated her timeline.

Ms. Hintsä did not end up doing business with Mr. Purja's company.

## **Widespread Problem, Little Action**

Outdoor sports have unique risk factors for sexual harassment and misconduct, said Gina McClard, an Oregon lawyer specializing in gender-based violence prevention. In 2019, she co-founded a consultancy called Respect Outside that works with outdoor recreation groups such as mountaineering clubs and guide services on policies, procedures and trainings to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination.

These activities can entail weekslong expeditions to remote settings, where participants live and sleep in close quarters. The culture surrounding outdoor sports, which celebrates pushing boundaries and glorifies people who pull off rare feats, may also create situations where inappropriate behavior goes unchecked, she said.

“Much of the outdoor industry is still an ‘old boys’ network,” Ms. McClard said in an email. “If you do not conform to how things are done, you may find yourself marginalized and iced out of the club.”



In February, a climber named Charles Barrett was convicted of three counts of sexual abuse for assaulting a woman on a hiking trip to Yosemite National Park. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Mr. Barrett, the climber who was convicted of sexual abuse this year, is set to be sentenced on Tuesday. He was prosecuted in part because of the 2018 #SafeOutside survey, according to court filings earlier reported by Outside Magazine. The woman he assaulted answered the survey saying she had been raped by a “well-known, professional California climber” on a trip to Yosemite. Another respondent said she had been sexually assaulted by the houseguest of a professional climber

she was visiting. Survey organizers followed up with the women and connected them after they both identified Mr. Barrett as the person who had assaulted them. The Yosemite hiker reported Mr. Barrett to the authorities in 2020.

Mr. Barrett's was a familiar name in California rock climbing. He wrote guidebooks on bouldering in popular areas like Mammoth and Bishop, and he ascended difficult routes with the famous American rock climber Alex Honnold. A 2016 profile in Climbing Magazine, later taken down from the website, described Mr. Barrett as "a master of the California climbing game."

He was living and working in Yosemite at the time of the assault of the female hiker. Mr. Barrett "violently raped" her after inviting her into the woods to watch a meteor shower, prosecutors said, and also assaulted her during a hike and in the employee housing area. Three other women, including the other survey respondent, testified at his trial that he had sexually assaulted them. Those incidents happened outside federal jurisdiction, and state prosecutors did not bring charges.

Based on her work with groups throughout the outdoor industry, Ms. McClard said that company policies rarely extend beyond physical safety to include psychological or emotional safety of clients and employees. Most smaller outdoor companies don't have in-house human resources departments, she said, and bigger players in the industry have not invested the time or money that she believes this issue requires.

"There's no industrywide movement," she said. "I feel like we are alone in what we're doing on sexual harassment in the outdoor industry."

## **Making Advances at 17,000 Feet**

Dr. Leonardo, 41, the California physician, met Mr. Purja at a teahouse in Nepal in 2021 before she summited Mount Everest with a different company. She later learned that he was organizing a guided ascent of K2 the following summer. Drawn

in part by the danger of the climb, she signed up, paying \$55,000 for the two-month trip, which began in June 2022.

After arriving at K2 base camp, at about 17,000 feet, the team held a puja, a ceremony to pay respect to the mountain and ask for safe passage. She recalled that during the celebration afterward, she was looking for a trash bag and ran into Mr. Purja, who took her to a storage tent to get one. As she turned to leave, she said, Mr. Purja grabbed her arm, pulled her close and kissed her. She recalled Mr. Purja then saying, “I will have you.” Stunned and unsure of what to do, she said, she walked out.

“I just feel like I need to avoid him and keep anything from happening, but I’m afraid to do or say anything about it,” Dr. Leonardo recalled thinking. Another climber on the mountain at the time said Dr. Leonardo told him during her trip that she and Mr. Purja had had this interaction and that she did not want to be alone with him. The person asked not to be named for fear of professional or personal repercussions.



The K2 base camp. Dr. Leonardo said her experience with Mr. Purja tainted the achievement of summiting the world's second-tallest peak. Sayed Fakhar Abbas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On another occasion, Dr. Leonardo said, Mr. Purja showed up uninvited at her tent. She was in her sleeping bag, wearing a shirt and underwear, she recalled, and he crouched next to her and said he wanted to check on her knee, which she had injured. Mr. Purja reached inside her sleeping bag, which made her feel panicked, she said, so she quickly pulled her leg out. He kissed her, she said, and grabbed her hand and placed it on his crotch, forcing her to feel his erect penis through his pants. She said she felt trapped in her sleeping bag, unable to leave because she wasn't dressed.

According to Dr. Leonardo, Mr. Purja told her he wanted to have sex with her but had to wait until no one was around, and then left.

Another time, she said, Mr. Purja grabbed her arm while she was walking alone through camp and asked, "When can I mount you?" He suggested they go to her tent, she said, but she made excuses.

Dr. Leonardo sent her father, Leon Leonardo, a text during her trip saying that Mr. Purja kept trying to have sex with her. “Not ok,” she wrote in the message, which was reviewed by The Times.

Two employees of Elite Exped on Dr. Leonardo’s K2 expedition, Chandra Bahadur Tamang, the head chef, and Ramesh Gurung, a senior guide, said in statements provided by Mr. Purja’s lawyer that they provided security for the storage tent because it contained valuable items and that Mr. Purja never went inside it during the expedition. Dr. Leonardo said people were often around the tent but no one was there when she and Mr. Purja briefly went inside.

Another senior guide, Pasang Tendi Sherpa, said in a statement that Mr. Purja “was not in any private setting” with Dr. Leonardo during the trip. Pasang Tendi Sherpa’s statement did not explain how he knew that and he did not respond to interview requests. Mr. Gurung did not agree to an interview. The Times could not reach Chandra Bahadur Tamang.

For several months after the trip, Dr. Leonardo had cordial text exchanges with Mr. Purja, partly because she was waiting for reimbursement for some lost gear, she said. She didn’t see him again.

## **Warning Other Women**

The women who spoke to The Times about Mr. Purja said that they didn’t know what recourse they had. Elite Exped is a small company run by Mr. Purja, and because the incidents happened outside their home countries, the women weren’t sure what to do. They did not alert law enforcement or other authorities.

Ms. Hintsu said she was telling her story in hopes of making the male-dominated sport of mountaineering safer for women. Only with time has she come to understand the effects of her experience.

“I hadn’t realized the scars that it had left,” she said. “It has made me realize that it’s not only the rock fall or the avalanches that are dangerous for a female climber.”

Mr. Purja's star has continued to rise. As a face of high-altitude climbing, he has worked with major companies like Red Bull and Nike, which this past winter released a clothing collection inspired by Mr. Purja, called 8K Peaks, and featured him in a towering Manhattan billboard. In December he received an honorary doctorate from Loughborough University in England. Outdoor brands including Grivel, Osprey and Scarpa have worked with him on co-branded products.

Dr. Leonardo's achievement of summiting K2, she said, was tainted by what she experienced. She hopes that sharing her account will help other women avoid a similar scenario.

"I can't let it keep happening," Dr. Leonardo said, adding: "I don't want another woman to have to go through this."

Johanna Lemola and Bhadra Sharma contributed reporting. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

**Jenny Vrentas** is a Times reporter covering money, power and influence in sports. More about Jenny Vrentas