PLAN INTERNATIONAL

For children and equality for girls

"EVERYTHING IS RACIALISED ON TOP"

Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment in the UK

CONTENT WARNING

This report contains information and descriptions about racism, public sexual harassment, and/or violence that may be triggering to survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

Every day, girls and young women across the UK are affected by public sexual harassment (PSH). It is a persistent and widespread problem that occurs in the many different places girls and young women live their lives: online, in school, at work, and in public spaces.

It has also been shown to have a significant impact on their lives and choices far beyond the immediate incident. Girls and young women have spoken about how PSH impacts on their physical and mental health, about the toll of 'safety work' and long-lasting fears and anxieties that follow experiencing PSH.[1] These testimonies reflect the serious implications PSH has for their rights and wider freedoms, safety, voice, and participation in public and political life.

Whilst public sexual harassment affects the lives of so many girls and young women, the prevalence and impact for some groups is felt more acutely and in different and complex ways.[2] In Plan International UK's 2021 research, *What Works for Ending Public Sexual Harassment*, minoritised groups, including Black and minoritised girls, disabled girls and LGBT+ girls were found to be more likely to experience PSH. Additionally, research shows that the ways in which gender intersects with other identity characteristics, such as sexuality, gender identity, disability, and ethnicity, produce unique experiences of violence rooted within wider inequalities and prejudices and sustain its harms.[3]

For Black and minoritised girls and young women in particular, research has documented how their experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) are distinct from their White peers in several ways. Black girls and young women have reported being oversexualised compared to their White peers, and the ways in which this contributes to boys and men assuming that they will put up with sexual touching and groping.[4] Other research has documented how the racialised objectification of Black and racially minoritised girls and young women across industries contributes to a particular view of their bodies, including in terms of their self-perceptions and wider societal perceptions.[5] When it comes to reporting and disclosing sexual violence and support, research has found that services were viewed as inaccessible and under-utilised by women in these communities.[6] Similarly, there is a documented reluctance on the part of Black and minoritised women who experience GBV to report to criminal justice agencies or the police.[7]

It is within this context that the research seeks to explore the unique ways that public sexual harassment is experienced by Black and minoritised girls in the UK.[8] Specifically, the research aims to build on the findings from our previous report showing Black and minoritised girls are more likely to experience PSH[9] and to explore in depth the particular ways and places PSH is perpetrated against this group of girls, including the impact PSH has on their lives, and the extent to which this differs from the broader literature on PSH.

In 2021, Plan International UK's report What Works for Ending Public Sexual Harassment explored the scale and impact of the issue and analysed the interventions needed to tackle it. Based on a survey of 1,515 girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in 2021, we found that:

88% of mixed-race girls girls have experienced PSH.

82% of Black, African, Caribbean and Black British girls, have experienced PSH.

75% of White girls have experienced PSH.

70% of Asian and Asian British girls have experienced PSH.

This research also aims to gain new and deeper insight into the ways in which Black and minoritised girls and young women feel able to report and disclose incidents of public sexual harassment to those in positions of authority and to build our understanding of the barriers to reporting PSH to the police and others.

Importantly, the research aims to explore what Black and minoritised girls and young women think the solutions are to tackling public sexual harassment. Their voices and insights are used to shape the final recommendations of this report to ensure that we are advancing solutions and recommendations for change that are led by, and meet the distinct needs and priorities of, Black and minoritised girls and young women.

In amplifying their voices, the challenges they face and the changes they seek, we hope this research will make a valuable contribution to informing policy and practice for tackling public sexual harassment through anti-racist approaches.

TERMINOLOGY

Public sexual harassment

We define public sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence. We draw on Kelly's concept of a *continuum of sexual violence*[10] to understand public sexual harassment as spanning multiple and overlapping forms of behaviours, actions and gestures.

Like other forms of violence, key to our understanding of PSH is the threatening or harmful impact these behaviours have on the victim/survivor, and their loss of ability to control these interactions; what Vera-Gray has termed 'women's experiences of intrusive men in public space'.[11] They are, as one girl described in this research, a spectrum of *unwanted* behaviours directed towards their self, body, appearance:

> **"I think it's (PSH) like any sort of I guess unwanted encounter and that kind of refers to you or your body or yourself. "**
> Jayai, 21

PSH can consist of unwanted sexual behaviour, actions or gestures in public spaces. These can be verbal, non-verbal, physical or technology-enabled. Specific behaviours include leering or persistent staring; following; sexual propositions; sexual gestures; sexually explicit comments; intrusive persistent questioning; so-called 'wolf whistling'; non-consensual physical contact, such as kissing, groping and stroking; technology-enabled sexual behaviour, such as 'air dropping' unwanted illicit images to someone's phone (also known as cyber-flashing); 'up-skirting'; and viewing or showing pornography in public.

PSH also takes place in a range of public spaces. Previous surveys Plan International UK has done with girls and young women who have experienced PSH show that many have experienced PSH outside, in school, college or university grounds or on public transport:

- **81%**
  have experienced it outside in a public area

- **46%**
  have experienced it in school, college or on university grounds

- **37%**
  have experienced it on public transport

- **33%**
  have experienced it inside a public building or facility (such as a leisure centre, shop, museum, or other type of public building)

- **3%**
  have experienced it in another public space.

In seeking to understand Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment an ecological model is used.[12] In an ecological model of violence, violence perpetration is enabled and sustained at multiple levels of society, including through structures and institutions, social norms, cultural beliefs, everyday interactions and through individual identities and histories. These drivers are important to understand the wider context in which Black and minoritised girls and women experience violence, as this allows us to understand their subjective experiences of PSH, as well as the ways in which peer and social cultures, social institutions (such as schools) and institutions (such as the police) enable or sustain harassment and violence towards them.

An ecological model of violence also allows us to understand how gender-based violence is perpetrated in a wider societal and systemic context of unequal power relationships and inequalities between men, women and marginalised genders, and other forms of inequality. It helps us to understand that in order to prevent PSH, we need action at all these levels.

Terms used for girls' and young women's race and ethnicity

Whilst there are several terms used in the UK to describe a person's race and ethnicity, in this report we primarily use the term Black and minoritised to refer to girls and young women who are racial minorities in the UK. All the girls and young women who took part in this research self-defined their minoritised racial or ethnic identity and have sometimes used other terms to describe their, or another person's, race, or ethnicity – such as people of colour (POC) or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME).

We recognise that Black and minoritised girls and young women are not homogenous groups or communities and that understanding the heterogeneity of minoritised girls' experiences is fundamental to making visible the nuance of marginalisation and the complex intersections between race, ethnicity, faith, and gender, as well as other identities.

Whilst we were not able to capture the experiences of girls and young women from all racially minoritised backgrounds, where possible, the report has sought to draw out how experiences of PSH differ across ethnic groups in unique ways, and in the context of the diversity of religious and cultural expectations about their behaviour in public spaces and the extent to which it can be discussed as a problem.

METHODOLOGY

Research methods

The research uses a youth-centred participatory qualitative approach, working with Black and minoritised girls and young women to develop understandings of the ways in which they make meaning of their experiences, understand sexual harassment, negotiate relationships with reporting bodies, including the police, and conceptualise meaningful and effective solutions to tackling public sexual harassment (PSH).

A combination of individual narrative interviews and focus groups were used to elicit Black and minoritised girls' and young women's views and experiences. Fourteen individual interviews and four focus groups were conducted; seven of these were conducted online. Participants were able to decide which mode they would like to participate in so that participation in interviews and focus groups was self-selecting.

The research approach aimed to enable the voices and experiences of Black and minoritised girls and young women to come to the fore through solidarity building, through making the links between structures and their everyday experiences visible and unpacking the ways in which their social positioning impacts those experiences.

All the methods centred the voices of young girls and women, allowing discussions to be guided by the issues that were most important to them. This meant that whilst semi-structured interview and focus group guides were developed, they were constructed to be flexible enough to engage meaningfully with our participants' concerns and to enable solidarity with marginalised young people.[13] In the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, methods were adapted for use in online interviews and focus groups.

Data from recent Plan International UK reports[14] were also used to compare how the unique experiences of Black and racially minoritised girls and young women differ from the experiences of girls and young women in the broader literature, the majority of whom are White.

Sample

An ethnically diverse sample ($N = 34$) was recruited that comprises 59 per cent South Asian girls and young women ($N = 20$), 32 per cent Black girls and young women ($N = 11$), and 9 per cent girls and young women from other racialised minority groups ($N = 3$) (e.g., mixed race, Central Asian, and not confirmed).

Black and minoritised young women were recruited from multiple settings including schools, universities and communities. Participants self-defined their minoritised racial or ethnic identity in the context of the UK. We interviewed girls and young women from across England, including the South-East, the Midlands, and the North-East. Many of our interviews were based in the North-East but involved participants from diverse places in England. These regions also differed in terms of ethnic mix, which is relevant to understanding how our participants' experiences were shaped by their relative minority status within a given context.

Further information about the methodology can be found in the **Appendix.**

BLACK AND MINORITISED GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Our findings show that Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment cover a wide spectrum of behaviours, including intimidating body language and staring; following in cars; honking car horns; receiving comments about their bodies or appearance; being groped, touched and sexually assaulted. We found that public sexual harassment was perpetrated in a range of spaces, including online, where girls highlighted the widespread nature of PSH and the lack of accountability when harassment is perpetrated through online platforms.

Gender-based harassment intersected specifically with racist and/or faith-based harassment, and this was particularly the case for girls and young women who were living or studying in contexts where they were an ethnic or religious minority.

The harassment of Black and minoritised girls often hinged on their difference from the White or majority norm, in terms of appearance, attire, and body shape. Their bodies were commented on by strangers and peers and this was linked to an oversexualisation of Black girls' and young women's bodies in particular. The bodies of minoritised girls and young women who wore modest or religious clothing were also commented on, and in some cases, their religion or perceived ethnicity was used to insult or degrade them.

The impact on Black and minoritised girls' and young women's lives is significant and wide ranging. Girls and young women spoke about how experiencing PSH had impacted on their mental health, self-esteem and identity. It particularly impacted on their body image and the pressures they experienced to conform to White Western beauty ideals. The cumulative impact of intersecting forms of harassment, combined with a lack of support to get 'closure' when incidents occur, may mean these behaviours have particularly harmful impacts on Black and minoritised girls' and young women's lives.

PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT BEHAVIOURS, ACTIONS AND GESTURES

Black and minoritised girls and young women described experiencing many forms of public sexual harassment, including:

CRUDE OR SEXUALISED COMMENTS

CATCALLING STARING

SEXUAL ADVANCES

APPEARANCE-RELATED COMMENTS SPIKING OF DRINKS

UNINVITED ATTENTION AND SINGLING OUT

INACTION
e.g., suddenly not speaking around women, which was experienced as unsettling or unnerving

RECEIVING UNSOLICITED GRAPHIC SEXUAL IMAGES

COMMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

CAR-BASED HARASSMENT
e.g., shouting and commenting on girls' appearance out of a car window

UNINVITED TOUCHING
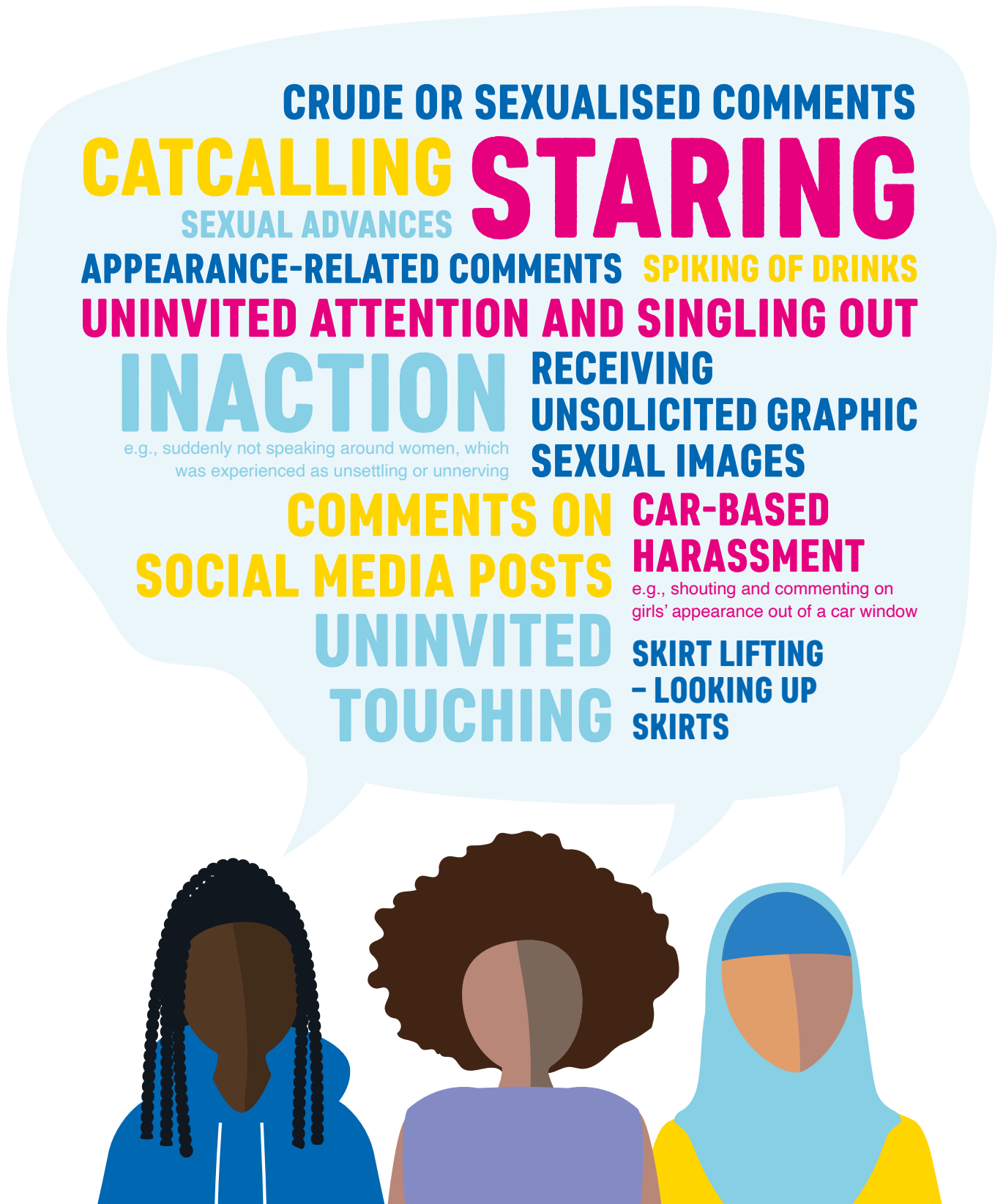
SKIRT LIFTING – LOOKING UP SKIRTS

Figure 1. Wordcloud showing the types of PSH reported by research participants.

Previous research from Plan International UK indicates that mixed race girls and young women and Black, African, Caribbean and Black British girls and young women aged between 12 and 21 are more likely to have experienced public sexual harassment compared to White girls and young women. Some groups of girls and young women may also be at particular risk of certain types of behaviours.

For example, our research found that mixed race girls and young women are significantly more likely to have experienced unwanted touching followed by Black, African, Caribbean and Black British girls, White girls and Asian and Asian British girls (see Figure 2). Mixed race girls and young women were also found to be significantly more likely to have experienced being filmed or photographed by a stranger without consent compared to other ethnic groups and most likely to have experienced sexual gestures. Girls and young women who selected 'other' race were most likely to have experienced sexual exposure/being flashed at followed by mixed race girls, White and Black girls and Asian girls (see Figure 3).

While the forms of harassment Black and minoritised girls and young women experienced bore similarities to those experienced by (majority White) girls and young women in the wider literature,[15] the PSH they encountered was also racialised and indistinguishable from the sexualised nature of the behaviour:

> **I can never tell if I am getting looked at because of race or sexual harassment.**
> Sita, 20

The ways race, gender, faith and other identity characteristics intersect in Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of PSH are described in more detail below.
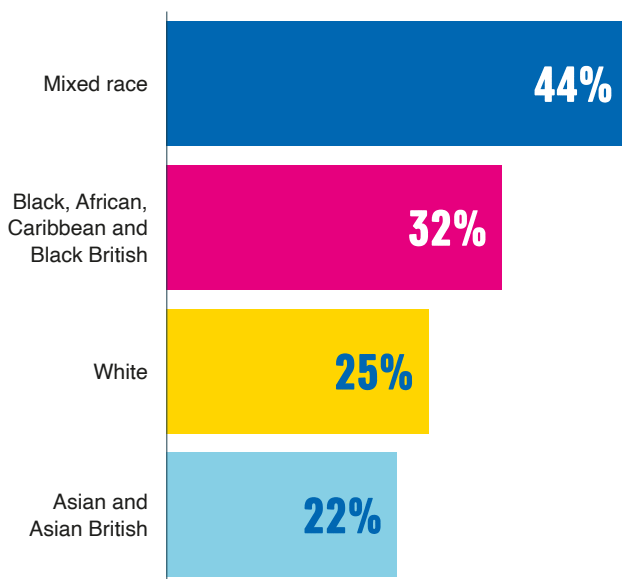
Figure 2: Percentage of girls and young women who have experienced unwanted touching, by race

Mixed race	44%
Black, African, Caribbean and Black British	32%
White	25%
Asian and Asian British	22%
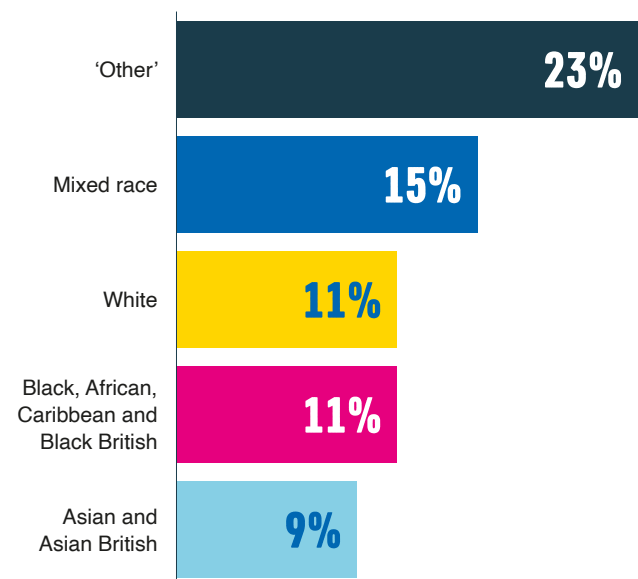
Figure 3: Percentage of girls and young women who have experienced sexual exposure/being flashed, by race

'Other'	23%
Mixed race	15%
White	11%
Black, African, Caribbean and Black British	11%
Asian and Asian British	9%

ONLINE HARASSMENT

> **My cousin, who is 19, has told me all the group chats and harassment she has seen online and it's shocking. It's very fast (social media) and I think it is changing the way people are being exposed to harassment.**
> Harsha, 20

Sexual harassment takes place in the many spaces girls and young women live their lives: at school, in the workplace, online and in public. Public sexual harassment is often reinforced by online harassment, which was frequently experienced by research participants, including on social media. Harassment on social media took many forms, including both direct (e.g., receiving inappropriate and unsolicited graphic messages) and indirect forms (e.g., group chat in which boys and young men discussed what they would like to do to girls and young women in their class sexually). Girls and young women described how online sexual harassment was so common it had become normalised, mundane and unremarkable:

> **It's just so normalised, to receive pictures and comments (on social media), it didn't even cross my mind to mention it.**
> Jayai, 21

> **It wasn't a big thing in high school for a boy to send a dick pic to a girl, it would just be something everyone would laugh about… but that wasn't okay, those were kids.**
> Aashvi, 21

Studies have documented the rise of online sexual harassment among young people, particularly the rise of unwanted image sharing. Douglass et al.[16] found around two-thirds of young women had experiences of online sexual harassment whilst other studies have highlighted the high prevalence and normalisation of unwanted image sharing.[17] Previous Plan International UK research[18] has also documented how girls and young women have described online spaces as sites of risk and anxiety to be navigated in the context of harassment, coercion and bullying. Research has suggested that women and minority youth may be more vulnerable to encountering these types of online behaviours.[19]

Online harassment was described as different to offline harassment, due to the unique ways social media facilitates interactions. In particular, girls and young women felt that online harassment somehow came easier to the male perpetrators since they did not immediately see the consequences of their actions. The ephemeral nature of some platforms was also felt to contribute to boys' and young men's lack of accountability within these platforms.

> **I feel like there is that layer where you can dehumanise someone further, with social media… it is easier for people to do, where in person you see people's emotions and fear.**
> Alicia, 19

> **On the internet, people seem to forget that consent exists.**
> Jasmine, 19

In stark contrast to the lack of accountability expressed by the perpetrators of sexual harassment in online spaces, victims described how they would blame themselves for being harassed. This was compounded by the actions of others, who similarly held them responsible for their own harassment.

> **I remember a lot of girls being slut shamed, especially if nudes were leaked, that was a whole thing; obviously it is a criminal offence to send pictures around, but the people sending them were not being shamed, just the people in the photos.**
> Sita, 20

SCHOOL-BASED PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

PSH was commonly experienced in schools, usually perpetrated by male classmates. For Black and racially minoritised girls there was a distinct racialised element to this harassment. For example, Muslim girls who wore longer skirts to school described hearing boys discussing what their bodies might look like underneath. Not only did harassment in school intersect with gender and race, but also with social class:

> **I remember my Year 11 prom, there were these boys, all White, all middle class, all very much not nice people. They had a group chat and were going round prom taking pictures of girls' bodies and they were rating them as being the most fuckable. They were all Black girls, and they were saying they like to look at their bums and Black girls have the best bums. Their group were pretty much White people.**
> Ebony, 19

Teachers were described as lacking the resources and training to deal with harassment in schools, and as a result tended to look the other way. Teachers and school staff were also described as normalising PSH, through their inaction and minimisation of harassment experienced by girls. This finding is consistent with past research[20] and recent reports by school inspectorates in England and Wales.[21]

> **Once it happens, even in primary school if like a boy might push you or touch you, and you go to your teacher, they are just like they are just playing with you. This normalises it from an early age.**
> Tanisha, 18

Due to the lack of concern shown by the school, girls often took their own action to minimise sexual harassment. Some ended up wearing trousers instead of skirts, to deter their male classmates. However, this did not solve the problem; boys still commented on their bodies within uniforms.

Sexual harassment was also experienced on the way to school. This harassment was often perpetrated by adult men while girls were wearing school uniform.

> **My friends at school were all pretty diverse, and people would drive by us and just shout out slurs, very much based on stereotypes. One of the girls was from Nigeria, I remember a group of men walking past and talking about her bum; we were in our school uniforms.**
> Harsha, 20

HARASSMENT IN OTHER PUBLIC SPACES

> **I remember once I was walking back from a festival, it was early in the morning, and I was with a girl I had made friends with who was camping near where I am, and as we walked past this group of men shouted something sexual at me. I told him to fuck off, and he said he would 'fuck my face with my pigtails you Paki bitch'.**
>
> Anon, 21

Public sexual harassment also took place in other public spaces, beyond online and school settings. Verbal harassment was described as more commonly experienced than physical harassment, particularly when encountering groups of men. This included behaviours such as so-called 'catcalling', talking more loudly when girls and young women are close, or encouraging each other to say crude things or engage in inappropriate behaviours. PSH could also involve immediate silence as a girl approached that was experienced as unsettling. Types of verbal harassment described could also have a racial element, as shown in the quote above.

PSH – both physical and verbal – was perpetrated by individuals in public spaces by strangers while young women were engaging in their everyday activity. These experiences affected their sense of personal safety and were often experienced as particularly terrifying.

> **And there was like there was a guy on the tube and he was going around the carriage, just like intimidating, like specifically women on the carriage, and this is on the Northern line, so I was there for a while, right to the end of the line. And by around like I think five or six stops to go, and it was just me and this couple next to me, and so obviously then I was kind of a really easy target, and for six or seven stops I was just being constantly harassed actually. I think I texted my friend, I texted my mum, I texted my sister, and I was like, I don't know what to do. I kind of looked to the guy next to me and I was like you know, like 'Help', and he just said 'Ignore him.' I was like 'I can't just ignore him, what do you mean?'**
>
> Kiara, 18

> **I was on a run and there was a man walking past, and he grabbed me from behind; it was terrifying, I was not that old. You just want to enjoy exercising and I was scared of the gym and now I am scared of going for a run.**
>
> Saanvi, 19

Young women described how there were clear double standards for men and women. They described how men could conduct their everyday activity without fear of harassment, whereas women could not:

> **I met my friend for catch up and we were talking about like in the heat wave like you know, when all the men like they go around like without their tops on, I'm just thinking like why doesn't anyone say anything about that, and we're just talking about how that's like embedded in total sexism, and the patriarchy and it's really messed up.**
> *(Kiara, 18)*

Girls and young women's socialisation experiences provided a lens for understanding their experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces. They described how messaging at home (e.g., from parents and other family members) tended to promote PSH as acceptable and that, on some levels, the attention should be welcomed. Common at-home messaging also focused on how PSH was mainly a woman's responsibility to ameliorate, not a man's. Specifically, grooming and attire were seen as largely under the control of the girls/women, whereas boys and young men were apparently unable to control their own behaviour that leads to PSH.

> **My dad's always like, you know, 'Make sure, you know, you're not wearing too short of a skirt, or you're not wearing like suggestive clothes', or whatever. That's bad in itself, because it suggests that you know the onus is on women to change men's behaviour, which I didn't agree with, but you know you have to stay safe, I guess.**
> *Kiara, 18*

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT WITH RACE AND FAITH

" It is when the two come together, racism and sexual harassment, it is just so massive, it is two things that you would hope would not collide, but they have collided, it is almost a niche problem, yet it isn't because it is so widespread. "
Saanvi, 19

The findings show that many Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of PSH are like the experiences highlighted in previous Plan International UK reports[22] in relation to the forms of harassment girls and young women experience and the spaces where PSH is perpetrated (on public transport, in the street, at schools and universities).

However, Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences differ in that they also experience racialised public sexual harassment in a variety of forms. Girls and young women spoke about the double-edged sword of being more likely to experience objectification and sexual harassment, but being less likely to be taken seriously as victims when they report harassment.[23] Research suggests this is linked to the wider issues of racism and dehumanisation that Black and racially minoritised girls and young women face.

" Black women are often hyper-masculinised and there is this idea that we should be able to fend for ourselves. The idea of the 'strong Black women', yet at the same time we are the most vulnerable and we are the most sexualised. We are the most exposed and least protected. "
Alicia, 19

Additionally, Black and minoritised participants reported that while their race did compound the issue of PSH, its effect varied in the ways in which it made them (in)visible versus (hyper) visible as potential targets of PSH:

" I often think if I am in a group of White girls, the attention is on them and not me, like they will be found more attractive. "
Sita, 20

" Sexist harassment, all that kind of thing […] I think, the undertones of very much that, like, I am to be perceived more sexually because of my race, or something like that. "
Kiara, 18

Participants reported being on the receiving end of disproportionate levels of attention to their bodies, specifically the ways their bodies compared with those of White girls and young women, reporting they had experienced derogatory comments about their body type and shape. This attention to body difference was also experienced through unwanted and uninvited touching. Participants saw parallels between boys inappropriately touching them in the classroom and peers touching their hair without asking – the underlying common reason being that they and their bodies were perceived as different to the norm. This was particularly prevalent whilst in school but also continued into higher education.

> **I always say to my White peers, like, 'You should always check yourself because I have never seen you go up to your White friends, when they change their hair, to want to touch it, but when it's people of colour all of a sudden it's your right and there are no boundaries there, almost like petting'.**
> Alicia, 19

> **Girls from a BAME background – there is a mystery about what do their boobs look like; this doesn't happen to White girls.**
> Kalisha, 19

The experiences of harassment that our participants told us about explicitly centred on their bodies as (negatively) different to their non-White peers. Some participants noted that a lack of education or knowledge about the fact that Black and racially minoritised bodies might look different or develop differently to White bodies was a hinge point for derogatory or sexually harassing comments.

> **My ex said to me, 'You shouldn't have hair on your arms, it makes me unattracted to you.' I am Indian, and I have hairy arms, it's normal.**
> Harsha, 20

Others told us that the fact that they were Black and developed at an earlier age than White peers became a focus for sexualised language and harassment towards them.

> **I was doing a presentation at school, it was non-uniform day and I was in jeans, and someone just said like 'big batty girl' to me, like saying I had a big bum, which is something weird for me to hear, because I am half Caribbean and that is a phrase my mum would use to me as a joke. So obviously the dialect has been transformed to slang, which is then directed at girls. And if school is not a safe space, where can I go?**
> Saanvi, 19

The (often exoticised) 'otherness' of Black and minoritised girls and young women was a particular feature of the harassment they experienced. For example, some girls and young women noted that religious attire such as a headscarf didn't offer 'protection' from harassment; on the contrary it became the focus of sexualised religious harassment. Their difference to the White norm was also highlighted in perpetrators' interactions.

> **I was wearing a baggy jumper and really wide leg jeans and a headscarf, and a guy shouted out of the window, 'Your tits look big, under that massive jumper.' I was wearing a headscarf as well; it is like modesty is not a cover.**
> Huda, 19

Racial stereotypes were also identified as a potential cause of public sexual harassment, as participants reported that they felt exoticised due to their race in British society (for example, the way in which they are depicted in pornography as overly sexualised or dominated by men) and that this led to an unwelcome sexual curiosity from some men and boys.

> **My first weekend of uni, we were queuing for a club and there was a group of guys behind us and one of them spilled curry sauce on themselves, and the other one said, 'Well now the Indian bird is going to shag you.' I told the bouncer and he said he would not let them in, and two minutes later they were let in.**
> Anon, 21

> **I went to Durham with a friend and there was only three people of colour in the club and loads of people were making a beeline for me, so that is another thing to worry about now, because I am Brown they are going to try and go for me, like because they have never had a Brown girl for it before, they are exotifying me.**
> Anon, 19

Some girls and young women also spoke about internalising the expectation that they should feel grateful for any attention from men that they were receiving, particularly because of their race and their perceived difference.

> **When I first got catcalled I thought I had made it: it showed I was pretty.**
> Jasmine, 19

These findings highlight the heterogeneity of minoritised girls' and young women's experience and the complex intersections between race, ethnicity, faith and gender. They also suggest that whether a girl is minoritised within a public space impacts how PSH is experienced. For example, racist and faith-based harassment was less evident in contexts where girls and young women were not minoritised and there was a high concentration of people from the same ethnic, cultural or religious background. This was also the case for harassment based on bodily or appearance-based difference from the White norm. In other words, the ways in which sexual harassment was perpetrated in these contexts centred much less on girls' and young women's difference to the majority norm or on their 'otherness' than it did for those who were a minority in their school, university or community context.
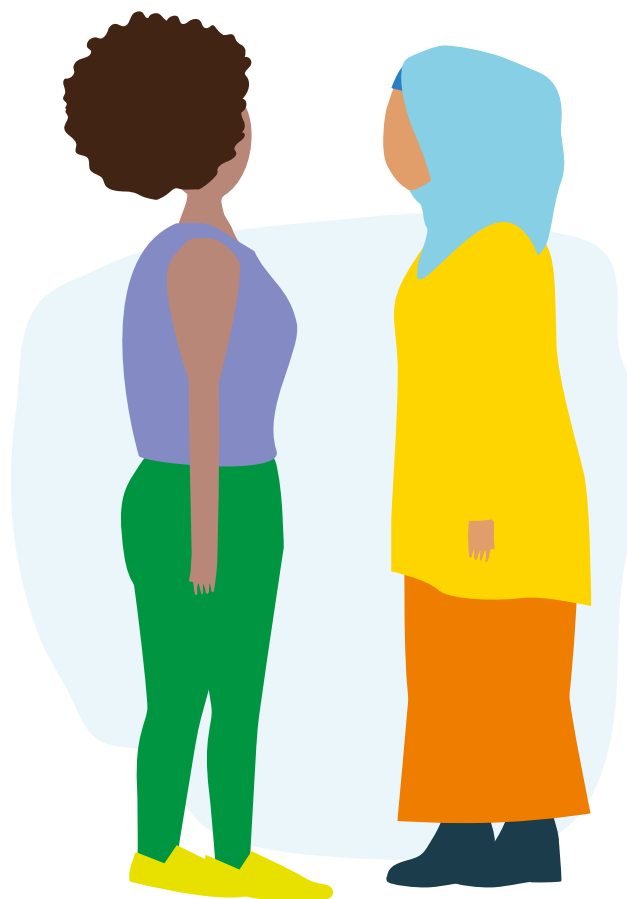
IMPACT OF PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

> **There was an experience where I was in a science class and these group of boys touched me inappropriately; I just went into shock. I think when it actually happens to you that confidence just disappears. I also didn't want to get them into trouble, there was a lot of pressure, I didn't know what would happen.**
> Sita, 20

> **I was assaulted whilst I was in school, during my GCSE period. I didn't know what the man looked like, I didn't know his name … I just remember it was around a history exam, because the next day I went into my history class and had a panic attack. I couldn't tell anyone or let it out because who would believe me?**
> Jasmine, 19

Public sexual harassment was described as contributing to young women's experience of stress and discomfort within their everyday environment. It affected their mental health, self-esteem and identity – even leading to physical symptoms such as panic attacks. It also had important consequences for their body image, especially as many of the verbal PSH that Black and minoritised girls encountered focused on how their body deviated from White Western beauty ideals.

> **I am South Asian, […] I have an abundance [of hair], and it almost became a ritual. I would wax my arms, shave my legs, hair removal cream, the works, laser hair removal machines, and my mum would say 'Do your [mous]tache.' I would sit there thinking who am I doing this for? All because a potential man is going to harass me.**
> Jasmine, 19

The negative psychological consequences of PSH were further compounded by the insensitive and dismissive reactions from other people. Instances of public harassment were often unresolved, either due to a lack of supportive intervention (e.g., in schools) or because the perpetrator was a stranger. As such, participants described being left with a lack of closure after experiencing PSH:

> **I think the problem is with harassment is that people's boundaries are different, and it is usually unresolved after, so like you don't actually get the closure a lot of the time when it is public sexual harassment, because a lot it is potentially strangers, you don't get the closure to say like 'That was wrong.'**
> Tanisha, 18

Their feelings of disempowerment and an inability to bring perpetrators to justice were commonplace but nuanced. For example, in some circumstances girls and young women spoke about how they felt able to challenge behaviours ('staring men down' when they looked at them in a sexual manner, confronting them verbally, or even threatening them physically). However, all these instances were when the harassment was perpetrated by a member of the same ethnic or religious community as them and girls explicitly said that they would not feel confident to do this if the perpetrator was from a different ethnic or religious background.

The results of these cumulative experiences of harassment meant that girls and young women described feeling unsafe – especially in situations where harassment was more likely to occur – such as in and around school, on the street and when passing a group of young men. They felt distrustful of authorities who could be dismissive of their concerns. Over time, girls and young women described internalising a sense of responsibility for their own harassment.

> **[You] have thoughts from 11 years old, maybe if I dress like them I will be safer, like you have to conform.**
> Harsha, 20

These experiences are corroborated by the wider literature showing how PSH has a significant impact on girls' and young women's mental and physical health as well as impacting on their mobility in public, voice and participation, education and economic opportunities.[24] Other evidence documents the adverse psychological consequences that can stem from experiencing public sexual harassment, including in relation to body image, anxiety and mental health.[25]

Whilst the harmful impact of PSH is felt by many girls and young women, the effect of these behaviours may be especially potent for racially minoritised girls and young women. For example, the ways in which Black and minoritised girls and young women can be more likely to be hyper-sexualised/hyper-visible to PSH, whilst also invisibilised and/or othered in relation to White Western beauty ideals. These experiences, combined with lack of support when incidents are reported, highlight how racially minoritised girls and young women may be especially vulnerable to the harms of PSH.

DISCLOSING AND REPORTING PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

All the girls and young women who took part in this research expressed a reluctance to report the public sexual harassment they had experienced to the police and other authorities – with structural inequalities clearly contributing to the obstacles that Black and minoritised girls and young women face when reporting.

Reluctance to report was mainly attributed to a perceived lack of action by those in authority in response to complaints. This is in line with similar findings from a recent study that found that 95 per cent of all women do not report their experiences of PSH.[26]

Girls and young women noted several specific barriers to the disclosure and reporting of PSH to authorities. These included: the lack of procedural justice when reporting to the police; the precedent for avoidance, minimisation and inaction toward reports of PSH embedded in educational institutions' policies; the stigma and shame associated with disclosing PSH to family members; and the personal fear of retaliation due to uneven power dynamics.

LACK OF PROCEDURAL JUSTICE FROM THE POLICE

At the institutional level, Black and racially minoritised girls' and young women's perceptions of a lack of procedural justice could partly explain their reluctance to report instances of PSH to authority figures such as school officials, university staff or the police. Procedural justice can be defined as "the perceived fairness of the procedures involved in decision-making and the perceived treatment one receives from the decision-maker".[27] Research also suggests that procedural justice matters much more to youth than to adults.[28]

> **It doesn't feel like a safe space if I have to prove I need to be protected, and that comes with the strong Black women kind of thing. If you then think of Black men, if a White woman comes in with a bruise, the sentence of that Black man is essentially sealed, but equally with a Black woman she is more boisterous, so if they are fighting with a White man the Black woman will be blamed.**
> Alicia, 19

> **The whole racism within the police is something I've experienced first-hand quite a few times. So I just, I think, I didn't have an overall great perception.**
> Kiara, 18

> **I am Brown, I am a Muslim, are they actually going to ever believe me? No, the police don't stand to serve people like me. They're against people like me.**
> Jasmine, 19

Media coverage of current events (for example, the case of the 15-year-old Black female student, 'Child Q', who was strip searched at school by the police after being wrongly suspected of carrying cannabis, and other incidents of sexual harassment within the police force) further contributed to participants' lack of trust in the police and perceptions of the police themselves as perpetrators of PSH and sexual violence. Specifically, participants brought up the following:

> **Police don't take sexual assault seriously either, not even sexual violence that happens within the police force.**
> Jasmine, 19

> **I think the other day I was reading the news and there was a police officer, he was like ranking his female colleagues in so far as attractiveness. How would you feel comfortable going to the police knowing that's how a lot of them view women?**
> Kiara, 18

> **Of course you are not going to go to the police, who are over policing you; they don't have measures in place, they are not aware of your cultural beliefs, like why calling your parents up is not safe for everyone.**
> Alicia, 19

Additionally, participants reported that they would be reluctant to disclose experiences of PSH to authorities partly because they do not feel racially/ethnically represented by authorities and thus have difficulty envisioning feeling safe or protected in these situations.

> **Maybe if I saw someone like me (in the police force)… it would take a dire situation for me to go to the police.**
> Jasmine, 19

AVOIDANCE, MINIMISATION, AND INACTION AT EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

With specific regard to educational institutions, many girls and young women said that reporting less extreme harassment, such as boys saying sexual things or giving a lot of unwanted attention at school, would not be dealt with; therefore, reporting seemed pointless. Girls and young women felt that nothing would be done about PSH if they did report at their school or university, and girls worried about not being believed.

> **What stops people from speaking up in school is that you won't be believed, you will be seen as dramatic, and the stigma of mental health problems.**
> Jasmine, 19

> **I would feel comfortable reporting it [PSH at university] but I would think what is the point? … Is it going to gain much traction?**
> Anon, 19

In secondary schools, girls felt that staff lacked the capacity to respond to 'minor' incidents of PSH and that these incidents were so widespread that they had become normalised. Many girls expressed a lack of trust of some teachers stemming from an uncertainty about the teacher's stance on PSH, as it was rarely talked about. While in the university setting, participants spoke of a lack of clarity about how to report any incidence of PSH. Additionally, in the few incidents where young women had reported PSH at a university, they found the response to be very limiting and rarely followed up.

> **People just weren't reporting at school, it was just normalised.**
> Saanvi, 19

> **I mentioned (an assault) to my supervisor (at university) at the time and he glossed over it and it made me think it was not a big deal.**
> Anon, 21

Girls and young women lamented that they did not hear enough condemnation of PSH from people in authority – such as teachers or staff at university, and thus they worried that if they reported it, they would not be taken seriously. For example, it was reported that throughout secondary school the onus of the responsibility to stop PSH was placed on girls themselves, which implies that they are the ones to blame when PSH occurs. In turn, internalisation of this attitude can discourage reporting.

> **No, I think school kind of reinforced it [not to report PSH] in a way, by telling us all, like to pull down our skirts and pull up our socks. This kind of reinforced this quite a bit and they never said that boys shouldn't be doing it.**
> Jayai, 21

Furthermore, girls reported little confidence that staff in schools were equipped with culturally relevant skills training and resources to deal with reports and disclosures of PSH, which often meant that they looked the other way. In a related example, one participant recalled that a teacher's desire to maintain the school's 'zero-bullying' record led to reported incidents of PSH going undocumented. In line with this dangerous precedent of minimisation of PSH in schools, Black and racially minoritised girls reported that they were inadvertently being taught to perceive sexual objectification as a legitimate form of flattery.

There was a situation in school and I told a teacher, who was a female. She kind of said 'Don't worry, that just means they like you, don't think too much about it.' But in reality I felt really uncomfortable.
Tanisha, 18

A lot of people think catcalling can be flattering, like in school it was like 'If he teases you he likes you'; it was seen as validation.
Sita, 20

When authority figures do not take reports of PSH seriously and treat such reports dismissively, then they are effectively normalising such behaviour and discouraging reporting of similar events in the future.

I think it's not just the university it's just my knowledge of how these things tend to play out, having seen it happen to a lot of my friends, even when I was at school. You hear about it online and also like unless you have tangible evidence and even when you do have tangible evidence, sometimes nothing happens, but like these institutions… Oftentimes, it just comes down to your word […]. I kind of understand that there's not a lot they can do, but... it doesn't make us very safe.
Kiara, 18

SHAME AND STIGMA IN THE FAMILY

At the relational level, traditional family values were seen as a barrier to reporting. Several girls and young women noted that being brought up in strict religious households impeded open conversations about sex and sexual harassment. Participants felt that they had to keep intimate relationships secret which prevented them from seeking advice about issues related to sex, consent, and harassment, thus making them vulnerable to having nowhere to turn if an instance of sexual harassment did arise.

The stigma associated with reporting acted as a barrier for participants concerned about how their experiences of harassment would reflect on their family if they were to be made known. Specifically, participants shared that being from a strict family exacerbated the shame that accompanied the mere thought of reporting instances of PSH.

> **Family is like a big one [barrier to reporting]: it was quite clear from a young age, the very strict roles. I was brought up in a Christian household, so like no sex before marriage, you should be dressing modestly, and when you don't have these open conversations about the reality of the world, you are set up to be most vulnerable, and for me it is a dichotomy of who I am and who I present to my parents. Also there is a lot of assault that happens in the family… if there is this attitude of keep it to yourself, you are not going to want to go to authorities.**
> Alicia, 19

Additionally, participants expressed some frustration that PSH was normalised within their own families, which also discouraged reporting to family members and thus contributed to their perception that there was no safe space to report PSH.

> **If we went out on the streets and got harassed, our parents would be like, 'What were you wearing? Why were you out?'**
> Syeda, 17

Finally, some girls and young women expressed a reluctance to report any incidents of PSH because of the potential of negative public reactions to such disclosures from their own ethnic communities.

> **I feel like it is worse in our culture, because I feel like the stigma that comes with it, no matter what happens to us, I feel like we're going to get the blame, we get the shame, the guys can obviously move on, but we're going to have to live with that, like it happened to you, and you will always feel like everyone knows, and everyone talks about it. Your parents say 'Don't go to the police, don't make a big issue out of it, because if other people hear what has happened then no one is going to marry you, respect is gone.'**
> Rahmi, 17

POWER DYNAMICS AND FEAR OF RETALIATION

At the individual level, Black and minoritised girls and young women felt that they were more likely to be seen as hypersexualised and welcoming of untoward advances than their White peers, and thus were not expected to object to PSH. Because of this perception, participants expressed worry about how men will react or retaliate if they say anything to defend themselves. If the young women did not know the men and boys that were harassing them, they were reluctant to show any annoyance or to complain as they were fearful of what the perpetrator might be capable of doing. Additionally, if young women did know the subject harassing them, they feared what would happen in instances of repeated exposure to the perpetrator.

> **I was getting on the train and this guy slapped my bum. I was shocked and I got on the train and he was a few seats down. There was this number you can text on the train, but I felt the train was an enclosed space and I just didn't feel comfortable reporting it. I have never seen what the consequence will be, I am like, 'What would actually happen if I did do it?' It is not enough to say do this, I would like to know what would happen.**
> Sita, 20

> **I think at the uni it is signposted [where to report], but it is scary, because it is my word against his. I saw him [the offender] a few times afterwards and had a panic attack.**
> Anon, 21

Several participants also recounted that they were reluctant to report instances of PSH due to social class power dynamics. Specifically, working class girls and young women felt it would be futile to report 'posh' boys or White men and boys who harassed them. Not only were participants worried that they would not be believed if they reported PSH in such instances, but there was also concern that they would be retaliated against by persons with extensive financial means to defend against accusations of harassment. This would mean that reporting would be more costly for the victim than the perpetrator, which served as a barrier to reporting.

> **A lot of the lads that do this in the university are from quite privileged backgrounds, and they get away with stuff all the time and they say stuff to you all the time and they will intimidate you and they will say they are going to get their family lawyers involved and stuff like that and you haven't got a leg to stand on. And then when they go to these appeals they sit there and they have polished shoes on and a nice shirt on and nice trousers and they talk beautifully, and they have this silver tongue and they get out of it. And you are there in your trackies or whatever and your frizzy hair and they don't believe you.**
> Kalisha, 19

BLACK AND MINORITISED GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S VIEWS ON SOLUTIONS AND PREVENTION OF PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Girls' and young women's views on solutions and prevention of public sexual harassment fell into three main themes: systemic and cultural change; education; and institutional change. These views are well-aligned with an ecological approach to violence prevention[29] in which the interrelationship between structural, sociocultural and individual factors are considered as necessary to understand how gender-based violence is sustained.

SYSTEMIC AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Girls and young women noted that attitudes surrounding violence needed to be changed, with a particular emphasis on challenging victim-blaming and removing the stigma around disclosure and reporting. Victim-blaming attitudes included blaming the way girls and young women are dressed for public sexual harassment; the idea that they should be grateful for the attention; or teachers turning a 'blind eye' or even implying that girls should feel flattered by the attention.

> **If you're from a BAME background, everything is racialised on top. I remember getting really badly harassed, I was unwell basically because it had happened for so many years, and my French teacher in Year 11 was like, 'They're just jealous because you look like Beyoncé.' I was like, 'This is not helpful, I just want them to stop.'**
> Kalisha, 19

> **I feel if the media was less harsh to women, it would be easier to report.**
> Jayai, 21

Victim-blaming was specifically gendered, with different standards being imposed on girls and young women, compared with boys and men. Some participants noted that men are not judged for what they wear and that Black women are oversexualised compared with their White peers.

> **Men can have shorts on and don't get sexualised in the same way; men can walk around in public with no top on and nobody says anything: it's just weird.**
> Kalisha, 19

> **If I make new friends on social media and they comment on a photo, because I am half Indian and half Caribbean they always mention something about me being really exotic?**
> Sariika, 19

Our participants also noted that their fear of retaliation or an aggressive reaction prevented them from reacting to harassment and that the normalisation of everyday practices of harassment was used to 'gaslight' girls and young women and prevent them from disclosing or reporting their experiences.

> **I told my mum that a 28-year-old (man) was cornering me in my kitchen and she said 'Don't worry about it, he was just complimenting you.'**
> Jasmine, 19

> **I don't know, I feel like just you see like on the news how things blow up and often things go against the women, and as a woman of colour I think it would go against the community, like 'She should not be wearing that', so I would get shame from some of the community as well.**
> Jayai, 21

The girls' and young women's experiences of victim-blaming, normalisation and trivialisation of violence by authority figures, including teachers, points to the need for cultural change within certain institutions, including schools and universities, and the police. The attitudes held by teachers were cited as a barrier to disclosure and reporting of sexual harassment, and girls and young women said that if complaints were taken more seriously by schools and universities and by the police, it would prevent more serious harassment from taking place.

IMPROVED EDUCATION

Education was mentioned as a key pathway for the prevention of sexual harassment. The need for improved education was discussed in a range of ways, including educating people about what constitutes public sexual harassment and how to prevent and respond to it, education about body diversity and cultural norms, and about better relationships and sex education.

Participants noted that education about what constitutes public sexual harassment was necessary so that young people are better equipped to recognise and to report such practices. Young women noted that girls themselves internalise and normalise a wide range of harassing practices, including 'creepy smiling', 'men staring', and being followed in public spaces. While they often voiced concern and fear – and sometimes anger – about being subjected to these practices, they discussed them as so frequently occurring as to be 'normal', everyday experiences.

> **School is where it [public sexual harassment] starts and where it is normalised, and letting girls know that it is not okay, everyone needs to be taught there will be consequences, what PSH is and how common it is.**
> Sita, 20

EDUCATION FOR BOYS

A common theme was that boys need more explicit and targeted education about what sexual harassment is, and about the importance of respect for women and girls and for boundaries more generally.

> **If we were taught that if someone touches you inappropriately, this is what will happen, and this will how it will be dealt with, then I would feel better reporting it. Perhaps if there was a clear rule then they (the boys) would know what would happen to them; there is no excuse.**
> Sita, 20

The idea that boys need to be taught to respect women specifically intersected with the view that Black and minoritised women's bodies were afforded less respect. The notion that boys more freely commented on girls of colour, their body shapes and their difference to the White norm was prevalent.

> **Boys are far too comfortable commenting on Brown and Black girls' body shapes, which builds up from a young age, so education about women's bodies would help.**
> Aashvi, 21

> **In middle school I was the only Black girl in my year. I was developing, and in my class I was getting a little bit bigger, developing faster. I feel like the boys in my class would talk about me a lot, I didn't really like the way they were talking about my body. Once while we were doing an activity in the school, we were all packed together in one side of this big room, and the boys were behind the girls, and all of a sudden someone touched my bum. I was so confused, and when I turned around the guys were laughing. It was almost such a normal thing for them to do, but I did not like it and I felt so awkward.**
>
> Ebony, 19

As in previous research,[30] girls and young women noted that better education was needed for boys and young men to prevent sexual harassment, including by fostering healthy and positive attitudes, behaviours and masculinities, as opposed to putting the responsibility on girls and young women to 'stay safe'. Girls and young women felt that the focus of some public education campaigns reproduced the idea that the onus is on them to avoid PSH and that this might be linked to wider victim-blaming attitudes they felt were prevalent within the police force and within families.

> **Showing that sexual harassment is such a big thing and educating boys how extensive it is.**
>
> Tanisha, 18

> **And I think it's good to like start young, especially with like the boys and I think in school, especially from my all-girl school perspective, there is a lot about how to avoid it, but I remember speaking to my brother and he got barely anything said to him about what not to do.**
>
> Jayai, 21

> **Personally when these situations happen to me I don't go (to the police), I just like get away because once I did contact the police about it and they just like brushed it off, and since then, the same situation I just take myself out quickly, because I know from experience that I speak to the police about something they may not hear me from my perspective, they may just feel like 'Oh, this girl's overreacting.'**
>
> Tanisha, 18

> **If it is so ingrained in our families, where do we find refuge? It is just continuing, that boys will be boys, they (men) are just allowed to be vulgar.**
>
> Jasmine, 19

Girls and young women in the study also thought that 'safe spaces' were needed for boys and young men to be made aware of the impacts of harassing and abusive practices, and that more open conversation should take place about girls' experiences of sexual harassment in order to expose the prevalence of the problem.

EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS

Better education of boys around what constitutes sexual harassment and its impact on victims and survivors would not only challenge ingrained social and cultural norms that normalise PSH and minimise its harms but also reassure girls that teachers were on 'their side' when disclosures were made.

This was seen to be particularly important given girls noted that teachers themselves minimised and normalised sexual harassment as part of 'everyday' experience and did not respond or address such practices appropriately even when disclosures were made. Teachers themselves may hold victim-blaming attitudes that place the responsibility for staying safe on girls and women.

> " At school, even like, the teacher will tell us like, 'Oh no,' like, 'Pull down your skirt' and like, 'Pull up your socks' – very peculiar … we were on school grounds and it was an all-girls school. "
>
> Jayai, 21

> " At school I was told I should just take [public sexual harassment] as a compliment, like, there are other ways to give me compliments. "
>
> Anon, 19

> " We were in an all-girls school, but we were told that our short skirts would attract attention and we were like attention – from who? You know, like is it like the suggestion of like our male teachers? Should they be teachers if that's the case? "
>
> Kiara, 18

Education about what constitutes PSH, its impacts on survivors, and how to prevent and respond to it, was therefore thought to be necessary for adults in positions of authority, including teachers, the police, community leaders, and parents in order to address the normalisation and trivialisation of such practices.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

The provision of comprehensive sexuality education was mentioned by several girls as a pathway for prevention of sexual harassment and violence in schools and in other public settings. A more comprehensive and inclusive approach to relationships and sexuality and health education (RSHE) should go beyond the current focus, despite an updated curriculum, on the provision of information on contraception and STIs by taking a more transformative approach such as substantive discussions on gender, power and identity to challenge harmful norms, practices and other forms of gender-based violence.[31]

It is also important that RSHE embraces a sex-positive approach which enables adolescents and young people to explore, experience and express their sexuality in healthy, positive, pleasurable and safe ways, rather than only focusing on negative health consequences.[32] As noted in Sundaram, Maxwell and Ollis (2016),[33] conversations regarding sexual agency, pleasure and desire are a necessary foundation for prevention of violence against women and girls.

> **There is a stigma in our culture about talking about our private parts and our bodies, but obviously that should be talked about; also, being told that you should have to feel compliant.**
> Hazeema, 18

Girls noted that RSHE should address issues of body diversity and in particular the ways in which different bodies look and develop, in order to challenge an idealised (White) body norm. This was closely linked to Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment as frequently being about their difference to an idealised and normalised beauty and body standard.

> **There is a need to see Brown bodies in education (material)... it has always been White bodies. If we are not learning about our own bodies, how do we take ownership of those bodies?**
> Jasmine, 19

> **I feel this sex talk in school is really brief, like if you have sex and get pregnant; appearance and those stuff never got spoken about in school. I learnt this stuff about different body types from social media, in a good and a bad way. We should have to talk about appearance. Someone may look different from us by skin, hair colour or size, even though, like you can see it, not everyone will know, if that makes sense. Because I feel like it's better to be spoken about, then any questions people may have they can answer without feeling uncomfortable about, 'cause we're there [secondary school] for so long and we're going through so many changes, that's the best time stuff should get spoken about.**
> Tanisha, 18

In addition to addressing issues of body diversity, girls' and young women's experiences strongly point to the need to challenge multiple inequalities of power, including racist, homophobic *and* sexist values and norms, through relationships and sex education.

INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Girls and young women noted that there were multiple barriers to disclosure and reporting that necessitated structural and cultural changes to organisations. Unconscious bias, diversity and cultural sensitivity training is necessary for authority figures who might receive disclosures from girls and young women of colour, including police officers, teachers, religious and community leaders. Participants said that they had little confidence that authority figures had the skills to respond appropriately, without blaming the survivor, minimising their experiences, or gaslighting them.

Girls and young women told us that educational institutions had inadequate processes for responding to disclosures, despite having public-facing initiatives that purportedly espoused a 'zero-tolerance' culture towards sexual harassment. One girl talked about there being:

> **Seventy different PowerPoints about sexual harassment but when you report it, they don't do anything.**
> Hazeema, 18

Others noted that the actual systems for reporting were inaccessible or that it was scary to use those systems, as there was a complete lack of transparency about what would happen once the report had been made.

> **I think better reporting systems and more education to teach young and confused teenagers; they need more detailed discussion.**
> Anon, 21

> **A lot more clarity over what happens after reporting would help, and making it a clear criminal offence.**
> Sita, 20

The issue of *who* to report to was also raised, with some participants noting that having to report to a man or even a panel of (White) men was intimidating and potentially re-traumatising. More thought should be given to having a representative network of well-trained staff who know how to respond appropriately to a disclosure, and who understand and can explain the reporting process in detail. The recognition and understanding that there might be different barriers to disclosure for different communities is also necessary, in order to challenge the assumption that a one-size-fits-all outcome is wanted or that an identical disclosure/reporting process should be followed.

> **Having more diverse people to report it to (at uni) would be better: someone that looks like you and someone that understands your culture.**
> Jayai, 21

> **At university, having a clearer network and clearer signposting of where to go to would help: I want a network there to help people.**
> Jasmine, 19

Girls wanted more people they could talk to about sexual harassment within schools, and they advocated for more safe spaces for girls to discuss their experiences openly and to support each other in making decisions about whether to report their experiences. There was a need identified for reporting systems within schools to be more accessible and survivor centred.

Many participants expressed their mistrust of reporting PSH to the police. They noted there was a lack of representation of people of colour within the police force and that this made them feel unsafe to report to those they felt were unable to relate to their specific experiences. The issue of trust and being taken seriously was also a key issue that was raised, with minimisation and dismissal of sexual harassment and its impact by the police representing a significant barrier to reporting.

> **Lots of women I know think there is no point (in reporting) as they will just have to relive the trauma and not get anywhere. Most of my friends have had some kind of assault, and I don't think any of them have reported it... I would be too scared (to report to the police); I do not know if I would be treated as a victim, and if it would be worth it: the police force has a bad reputation for how they treat women and racial minorities.**
> Anon, 21

Black and minoritised girls' and young women's lack of confidence that reports will be handled judiciously must be taken seriously by the police and addressed as part of measures outlined within the policing violence against women and girls National Framework[34] and the police Race Action Plan.[35]

Diversity and unconscious bias training were suggested as potential pathways to changing the culture of the police, alongside increased representation of minoritised women. Research suggests that procedural justice training can have moderately positive effects on police officers' attitudes and behaviours on the job.[36] University-based research has also shown that training on responding to sexual violence disclosures can have positive effects, at least in terms of understanding and recognising what sexual violence is, and in relation to skills for receiving a disclosure supportively.[37] However, we also know that training alone cannot effectively prevent sexual harassment and violence; this needs to sit alongside structural and cultural change within organisations.[38]

SECTION FIVE:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This research has shown the range of ways and spaces in which Black and minoritised girls and young women experience public sexual harassment pervasively and in multiple settings, including on public transport, in and around schools and universities, at festivals, in clubs, and while exercising.

Black and minoritised girls and young women told us how their experiences of sexual harassment centred on their bodies as different from the White norm, treating them as oversexualised, desexualised, undesirable or unattractive, and exotic. These contradictions and inconsistencies are important to highlight, as they illustrate what we already know about sexual harassment: that it is centrally about the exercise of power – linked to the privileging of dominant masculinities – *not* about sexual attraction or desire.[39] The specific dynamics of power operating in Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment intersect several axes of inequality relating to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and faith.

In line with existing research on survivor-informed, restorative justice approaches to sexual violence, our research has found that Black and minoritised young women conceptualise 'justice' and solutions in a range of ways, and that a blanket solution or response to all forms of sexual harassment is not always desirable. The findings highlight the need to understand the unique experiences of Black and minoritised girls and young women, including the specific barriers to disclosure and reporting that girls and young women from different communities may face, situated within wider contexts of structural inequalities and marginalisation including misogyny and racism, ensuring this does not occur as a process of 'othering' which reproduces racist and sexist dynamics.[40]

Gender stereotypes and expectations, and victim-blaming, present significant barriers to reporting sexual harassment and violence for girls and young women. These barriers affect Black and minoritised girls and young women in different and specific ways. Black participants noted that they were often oversexualised due to their bodies developing differently to their White or Brown peers; or conversely, they were hyper-masculinised due to their ethnic/racial status.

Teachers often minimised their experiences or said they should take it as a 'compliment'; they trivialised the impact of sexual harassment on these girls and young women. Disbelief, minimisation, trivialisation and victim-blaming therefore manifested in unique ways for these participants.

For our participants of South Asian heritage, victim-blaming and gender expectations also presented specific barriers to disclosure; there was significant stigma associated with having been subjected to harassment and it was viewed as affecting a girl's purity and as bringing shame on the family. They therefore found it challenging to disclose to family members or to report experiences of harassment more formally to authority figures, such as teachers.

In exploring solutions, girls and young women identified a wide range of change needed, including more culturally sensitive education and RSHE. Girls and young people want and need comprehensive education on public sexual harassment. The forthcoming[41] introduction of statutory relationships and sex/ sexuality education in schools in England and Wales will be a welcome step forward in helping children and young people to disrupt gender norms and understand public sexual harassment in education settings. However, action must be taken to ensure high quality and culturally inclusive RSHE in every school.

Girls also raised the importance of more open conversations and safe spaces for them to talk about their experiences of sexual harassment, and shifts in victim-blaming attitudes by those in positions of authority. These solutions highlight the need to address PSH at many different levels and as highlighted in Plan International UK's previous research calling for a 'multi-component' approach.[42]

Increasingly, action is being taken to address the harmful cultural, social and gendered norms that perpetuate and sustain PSH. The Home Office's national communication campaign 'Enough', for example, has sought to change behaviours by driving awareness of GBV and its harms and calling on the public to safely intervene when they witness GBV, including PSH. Other, similar campaigns have emerged in Scotland, Wales, London and Manchester. These initiatives sit alongside local action being taken to train public officials and practitioners in different settings to tackle PSH, including in universities, colleges and schools.

Whilst progress is being made, the findings from this report highlight that there is some way to go to address the widespread PSH that girls face in general, and in creating meaningful change for Black and minoritised girls and young women in particular. The Black Lives Matter Movement has yet again exposed the deep inequalities that people of colour face in the police and justice systems, while the regular mishandling of gender-based violence cases continues to reduce girls' and women's confidence in the police to protect their rights and keep them safe. These events have undoubtedly shaped their views and concerns about reporting to the police as well as, for many, confirming lived experiences.

The following recommendations therefore focus on the structural, cultural and policy changes Black and minoritised girls and young women identify to tackle PSH and are situated within the wider inequalities of power embedded in their lives in distinct and unique ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Make public sexual harassment a criminal offence

The UK government should introduce new legislation that specifically makes public sexual harassment a criminal offence. The current set of complex, disjointed laws results in many sexually harmful behaviours falling through the legal cracks. It also makes it very difficult for victims to know what to report to the police. Clearly and unambiguously criminalising public sexual harassment (in legal terms, 'unwanted sexual conduct') would send a clear message that this type of behaviour is unacceptable and could empower victims by making it clear what is and is not an offence. New legislation could be modelled on a draft bill, developed by Plan International UK and Our Streets Now with leading human rights lawyers, which draws on best practice from across the world but is tailored to the UK's unique legal traditions and context. The introduction of any new legal offence should be underpinned by sufficient funding and training to implement, which may go some way to improve reporting.

Online sexual harassment also needs tailored legal solutions including through being adequately addressed through the Online Safety Bill.

2. Listen to girls and young women in all their diversity

All duty bearers and service providers, including national, devolved, and local government, as well as education institutions, the police and the justice sector, should support and adequately resource the meaningful participation of girls and young women from diverse backgrounds, as well as specialist organisations led by and for Black and minoritised women, in the development of legislation, policy, standards, and programmes aimed at preventing and responding to PSH. This should be done through establishing strong standards for their meaningful engagement, which will ensure any response is better tailored to their intersecting needs and experiences, and through the elimination of age, race and gender-based discrimination and other inequalities and hierarchies that could hinder effective engagement of Black and minoritised girls.

3. Transform education on public sexual harassment

The **Department for Education,** and the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where relevant, can improve education on public sexual harassment through developing further guidance and teaching materials on how to address public sexual harassment in the curriculum, including within RSHE, covering what it is, how it affects different groups of minoritised girls and young women and root causes. Guidance should include content on body diversity and cultural norms around sexuality to ensure that education is culturally sensitive, inclusive and promotes racial justice.

Schools should seek to adopt a whole-school approach[43] to tackling PSH, including online sexual harassment, that includes teaching and learning about PSH and where the gaps are and tackling the stigma and embarrassment around it. Teaching and learning about PSH should be delivered by trained teachers and experts, as part of regular timetabled RSHE lessons and a whole-school approach. Teaching and learning should reach all children and young people, but particular attention should be given to supporting boys to embrace healthier masculinities and promote gender equality, respect and consent. It will require active engagement to support them to reflect on, question, and actively challenge the prevalent structural drivers of gender and other inequalities that normalise PSH.

4. Invest in training for public officials

Education professionals and other public officials, including the **police,** should be supported by **Government** to invest in training to prevent PSH and ensure officials know how to adequately, sensitively and appropriately respond to disclosures, improve reporting, better support those who have experienced PSH, and drive institutional and cultural change. This should include increasing efforts to diversify public institutions, especially the police, as one mechanism to help build trust. Training should be shaped by the evidence of what has been effective in other interventions and programmes to train staff in different sectors, such as the rail network or in the education sector.

Schools should work towards ensuring that all staff have a basic understanding of what constitutes PSH, the extent to which it is experienced by young people, particularly girls of colour and marginalised genders, and the impacts it has. Staff should be aware of how to support and empathise with pupils if they report PSH and how to decide whether action needs to be taken. Training should not be one-off or compliance-focused as evidence shows that these are unlikely to be effective at shifting gender norms and expectations that normalise PSH, shape and perpetuate victim-blaming responses to disclosures, and create barriers to reporting.[44] Importantly, training should be trauma informed, intersectional and sensitive to the particular challenges that some groups of girls face in reporting so that different approaches can be taken to support them.

5. Improve reporting processes and systems for girls

All girls and young people should have **clear information from police forces** about how they can **report PSH** (whether face-to-face or online), what will happen next if they do, and how perpetrators should be held to account in line with current legislation. Tailored support should be provided to girls and young women throughout reporting processes and regardless of whether a perpetrator is able to be charged or convicted. The introduction of the Victims Bill could be an opportunity to improve victims' experiences of the justice system and address some of the barriers Black and minoritised girls face in reporting PSH.

Schools, colleges, universities and transport providers must also have clear, accessible and transparent processes in place to report PSH and these should be clearly communicated to girls and young women, including about what happens following a disclosure. More safe spaces should be created for all girls and young women to share their experiences and and they should be supported to report.

6. Communities as part of the solution
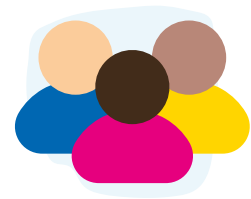
Community activism to shift attitudes and norms has been found to be an effective way to improve gender equality, address power imbalances and tackle violence against women and girls.[45] As part of efforts to address the unique ways PSH impacts on Black and minoritised girls and young women, approaches that work with **members of minoritised ethnic and religious communities** should be scaled up as a valuable way to challenge and disrupt dominant norms of gender and understanding of sexual harassment. In particular, organisations that are run by and for Black and minoritised women and girls to promote racial justice and gender equality and counter gender-based violence, should be supported through increased funding and resources. Other productive avenues for change may be through school outreach to minoritised ethnic and religious communities to collectively educate young people about the importance of respect, consent, boundaries, and the intersectional impacts of sexual harassment.

APPENDIX

Research methods

A youth-centred, participatory qualitative approach was adopted for this research report, working with Black and minoritised girls to develop understandings of the ways in which they make meaning of their experiences, understand sexual harassment, negotiate relationships with reporting bodies, including the police, and conceptualise meaningful and effective solutions for tackling PSH.

A total of 14 individual interviews and four focus groups were conducted; seven of these were conducted online. Participants were able to decide which mode they would like to participate in so that participation in interviews and focus groups was self-selecting.

Table of participants by pseudonym, age, ethnicity, setting and method

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic Identity	Location	Method
Aadya	17	South Asian	Community	Focus Group
Thema	17	Black	Community	Focus Group
Zuri	16	Black	Community	Focus Group
Helena	17	Not confirmed	Community	Focus Group
Harsha	20	South Asian	University	Interview
Alicia	19	Black	University	Focus Group
Kalisha	19	Black	University	Focus Group
Tanisha	18	Black	Community	Interview
Ebony	19	Black	University	Interview
Shanice	20	Black	Community	Interview
Aliyah	19	Black	Community	Interview
Nia	19	Black	Community	Interview
Deja	21	Black	Community	Interview
Jasmine	19	South Asian	University	Interview
Sita	20	South Asian	University	Interview
Quinn	20	Central Asia	University	Interview
Saanvi	19	Mixed Race	University	Interview
Aashvi	21	South Asian	University	Interview
Kiara	18	Black	University	Interview
Jaya	21	South Asian	University	Interview
Nawaal	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Reham	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Rida	18	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Shaima	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Yashal	16	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Yashma	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Zainab	18	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Zoya	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Arafaa	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Hazeema	18	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Rahmi	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Souma	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Yaseera	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group
Syeda	17	South Asian	School	Focus Group

The techniques and approach used drew from the work of Muna Abdi (2017)[46] in developing anti-oppressive research methodology that is especially important in the context of work with young people whose voices are marginalised in multiple ways.

A combination of individual narrative interviews and focus groups were used to elicit Black and minoritised girls' and young women's views. In narrative style interviews participants were encouraged to share their own story, as well as explore how they interpret and attach meaning to these stories. For example, in asking participants to tell us about a time they have been harassed publicly, we used additional prompts to ensure that all relevant themes were explored (e.g., experiences of reporting to police, experiences of reporting to friend/family member).

In focus groups, we facilitated exploration of how harassment is co-constructed, understood and experienced collectively as a group (i.e., the shared meanings that Black and minoritised girls attach to these experiences). Focus groups are also particularly useful for co-designing solutions to issues as a group. The combination of in-depth narrative interviews and focus groups allows for understandings to be developed at the personal and group level.

A range of creative methods were used in both interviews and focus groups to elicit participants' views on public sexual harassment, which is a sensitive topic, and to co-design solutions to problems with participants. Specifically, we employed the following methods:

- **Photo elicitation or photo diary:** Photo elicitation is widely used in discussion of sensitive topics (e.g., trauma, mental health, bullying) with young people and/or minority group members.[47] In this project, participants were encouraged to bring images that related to their experiences of sexual harassment to the interview (e.g., picture of a place, item of clothing, social media post, screenshot of text message) and use these as prompts for their stories or to stimulate group discussion.

- **Experience mapping:** Participants were encouraged to draw or craft their own map of their experiences in relation to a sensitive topic (public sexual harassment). Maps might depict safe and unsafe spaces or could be an autobiographical map that records sexual harassment at different time points and in different settings. Maps were used to prompt discussion in individual interviews or to direct discussions of solution and prevention design in focus groups.[48]

- **Arts-based methods:** We have used a range of activities from the Agenda Matters resource (https://agendaonline.co.uk/) that aim to elicit young people's views on sensitive issues, including gender-based harassment. We have used activities such as *Stop/Start*, which asks young people to reflect on which experiences they want to stop and what actions they'd like to start; *What Jars You?* which allows young people to anonymously express all the things that 'jar' them about how unfair or unequal society is when it comes to race, gender and sexual harassment; and *Runway 4 Change*, which allows participants to creatively address areas of change they want to address in their communities, in their school, or in their university.

- **Persona work.** Personas, i.e., realistic yet fictitious case studies of individuals, are widely used in sensitive topic research to facilitate discussion and enable the co-design of solutions. In this project, personas of public sexual harassment have been developed based on existing Plan UK reports for use in focus groups.[49]

All these methods centre the voices of young girls and women, allowing discussions to be guided by the issues that are most important to them.

The approach centred on an ethics of care and solidarity building with marginalised communities. The well-being, dignity, rights and safety of the children who participated were respected and protected and ethical and safeguarding standards and practices were applied throughout the whole research process.

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