



For children and
equality for girls

**WHAT WORKS FOR
ENDING PUBLIC SEXUAL
HARASSMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
SEPTEMBER 2021**

THE PROBLEM

For 84 years, Plan International UK has fought to deliver and protect the rights of millions of children – especially girls – across Latin America, Africa and Asia. In 2016, we turned our attention to the UK. Through rigorous research titled *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK*, we found that girls across the nations were being denied their rights. A problem that has arisen time and time again through our research and engagement with girls is sexual harassment. In short, girls want this relentless, abusive behaviour to stop. Our intent is for policymakers and decision makers to recognise this reality – and act.

Public sexual harassment is a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG). It is unwanted sexual behaviour, actions or gestures, which can be verbal, non-verbal, physical or technology-enabled. It disproportionately impacts girls and women and perpetrators are overwhelmingly male. As with other forms of VAWG, we must respond to the issue by focussing on the feelings of the person experiencing it, not others' perceptions of what is or is not problematic behaviour.

Public sexual harassment has a wider impact on girls' rights beyond the immediate incident. The evidence shows that it

violates their human dignity, restricts their movements and makes them feel insecure in public spaces. For many girls and young women, it affects their mental health, physical health, participation and voice, education and work opportunities, as illustrated in the full report. The research found that the impact on girls' rights is especially stark for lesbian, gay and bisexual girls and for disabled girls.

The underlying causes are shared with other forms of VAWG; public sexual harassment is driven by harmful social norms and attitudes, gender inequality and unequal power relations between men and women.

THE SOLUTIONS

Legislative intervention

Global evidence shows that an effective law on public sexual harassment is an essential part of the solution. It would help prevent public sexual harassment by deterring perpetrators, changing attitudes and protecting the right to live free from sexual harassment. It would also help mobilise resources for prevention work.

The evidence shows that in order to ensure the law is implemented effectively, it must be publicised widely and have political commitment and resourcing, trained personnel to enforce it, clear reporting mechanisms, ongoing monitoring of its effectiveness and collaboration with the private sector, which can play a key role in ensuring the effectiveness

of the law in privately-owned areas which the public has access to.

At present, the existing legal framework in England and Wales is incomplete and ineffective. In July 2021, the Government committed to 'looking carefully at where there may be gaps in existing law and how a specific offence for public sexual harassment could address those' in its Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy. Not all forms of this harmful, threatening and abusive behaviour are captured by existing legislation, as shown in the main report, and since the laws are ambiguous and not designed for public sexual harassment, enforcing them remains a challenge.

A girl is walking home in her school uniform when two men approach her from opposite directions and corner her. She backs into an alley. They leer at her body, and ask her about her sexual experience, and say no one could do anything to them as she doesn't know who they are.

She is not protected.

Since November 2020, Plan International UK and Our Streets Now have campaigned for a new, standalone offence. We have worked with two leading human rights lawyers who developed a tailor-made bill, learning from best practice around the world and applying it to the UK's unique context. It includes the crucial elements of public

space, 'sexual' conduct, a mental element (that is, 'intention' to cause harassment or 'recklessness' about the effect it would have) and a proportionate penalty, from a fine up to one year's imprisonment. It would offer all those who experience public sexual harassment the protection they need and deserve.

Other interventions

In addition to a new law, we reviewed other interventions on public sexual harassment, its underlying causes and other forms of violence against women and girls, both from the UK and other countries. We found that a range of other interventions are needed alongside a new law in order to effectively tackle public sexual harassment – but that some work better than others. These include schools-based initiatives which address gender attitudes among young people; community activism that shifts social norms and attitudes towards gender equality; and public behavioural change campaigns which challenge ideas about the acceptability of public sexual harassment.

It is clear from the research that more investment in interventions and their impact is needed. We found that some interventions have conflicting evidence of impact, such as bystander approaches, which encourage people to intervene in situations whereby women and girls are being sexually harassed,

perpetrator interventions, which aim to reduce re-offending, and direct work with boys and men, which aims to promote healthy, positive ideas of masculinity.

Furthermore, more impact assessments are needed for the training of police and transport workers, the provision of essential services (including police and legal support), gender-responsive urban planning and workplace interventions. The limited evidence available for these initiatives is often due to a lack of funding into addressing the issue.

Through rigorous analysis of 140 documents and sources, this report provides an invaluable contribution to understanding what works to tackle public sexual harassment. Not only this, it evidences the impact that this harmful and abusive behaviour has on women and girls' lives, far beyond the immediate incident.

The evidence is here, now policymakers must act on it.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

Based on the survey of girls and young women aged 12 to 21:

- 75%** have experienced a form of sexual harassment in a public space in their lifetime. 39% have received unwanted comments, insults or questions of a sexual nature. 26% have experienced unwanted physical contact such as touching, groping, stroking, kissing or grabbing of any part of their body. 13% have been filmed or photographed by a stranger without their permission.
- 54%** of girls aged 12 to 14 years have experienced public sexual harassment.
- 92%** of girls and young women who consider themselves to have a disability have experienced public sexual harassment.
- 90%** of lesbian, gay and bisexual girls and young women have experienced public sexual harassment
- 88%** of mixed-race girls, 82% of Black, African, Caribbean and Black British girls, 75% of white girls and 70% of Asian and Asian British girls have experienced public sexual harassment.
- 81%** of those who have experienced public sexual harassment have experienced it outside, 46% have experienced it in school, college or on university grounds, 37% have experienced it on public transport and 33% have experienced it inside a public building or facility.
- 62%** have avoided doing something due to either experiencing or feeling worried about public sexual harassment, including exercise, socialising, hobbies, work and education. The impact on girls' wider rights is stark for lesbian, gay, bisexual or non-heterosexual girls (78%) and for disabled girls (83%).
- 26%** of those who have experienced public sexual harassment have ever reported an incident to the police. Of those, only 26% said the police took their case forward and dealt with it as a crime.
- 49%** of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 say they have received workshops or lessons on sexual harassment at school, university or college, yet 91% believe it should be taught.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are designed based on the evidence. A multi-component approach is needed to address public sexual harassment in the UK, therefore this is not a menu of options to choose from, but actions that must be taken together.

Recommendations to policymakers:

- **A law that makes public sexual harassment a criminal offence** and fills the gaps left by current, incomplete legislation.
- **Accompanying investment in the effective implementation of laws**, including political commitment and resources, training of public officials (including police and transport workers), awareness-raising of the law, reporting mechanisms, ongoing monitoring and research to identify areas in which further reform is needed, and collaboration with the private sector.
- **Investment in promising pilot initiatives** aimed at tackling the underlying causes of public sexual harassment, including impact evaluations. Pilot interventions should include educational and skills-based initiatives.
- **A national behavioural change campaign** designed to reduce perpetration of public sexual harassment. This should use behavioural change techniques and learn from other types of behavioural change campaigns on violence against women and girls. Awareness-raising campaigns should be delivered alongside other activities designed to change behaviour and not on their own.
- **Funding for women's organisations** so they can continue to drive efforts on preventing and responding to public sexual harassment and build on the work that is already being delivered.
- **Engagement of girls and young women in the development of policy and practice solutions**, particularly listening to the voices of adolescent girls who so often experience public sexual harassment.

Recommendations to researchers

There are a number of gaps and limitations in the evidence base where further research is recommended:

- **Disaggregated data and research** on the experiences of girls and women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, to help design more inclusive interventions.
- **Girl-led research** (research by girls and for girls) to understand their unique experiences, as well as the involvement of girls in monitoring and evaluation interventions, using participatory approaches such as maps, transect walks, video and photo diaries, and games and role play.
- **Research to understand pathways to perpetration**, including risk factors, childhood experiences of violence, and overlaps with different types of violence.
- **Collaboration with technology companies and innovative research methods** to understand how to prevent technology being used to perpetrate sexual harassment, such as airdropping, ‘upskirting’, and viewing or showing pornography in public spaces.
- **Standardised measurement approaches** to enable comparisons over time and between researchers.
- **Rigorous evaluations** to assess the effectiveness of different types of interventions in preventing and responding to public sexual harassment.
- **Measurement of the social and economic costs of public sexual harassment**, including the costs to society of not intervening.

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Report design by Hannah Moore www.hannahmmoore.com

Photography by Joyce Nicholls www.joycenicholls.com

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Plan International UK

Finsgate,
5-7 Cranwood Street,
London,
EC1V 9LH

www.plan-uk.org

@PlanUK

T: 0300 777 9777

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