

BECAUSE I AM A
GIRL



Plan International UK

STREET HARASSMENT

IT'S NOT OK

Girls' experiences and views

Jessica Southgate and Lucy Russell

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL UK

Plan International UK is a global children's charity. We work to give every child the same chance in life. But not every child is born with the same opportunities. When you're a girl it's even harder to be safe, to be in school and to be in charge of your body. We're working to give every girl the chance to take on the world.

Through our global programme **Safer Cities**, running in cities including Cairo, Kampala and Hanoi, we have been shining a light

on the challenges faced by girls in some of the world's major cities. Lack of safety, cultural norms that limit when and where girls can travel around their city, plus girls and their families' fear of abuse and harassment mean that every city contains no-go areas, threatening girls' freedom and autonomy to move safely around the place where they live. In the UK we run STAND with Girls in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Oxfordshire and Leeds. Through this, girls assess the areas they live in for safety, services and how the needs of girls are met locally.

66%

OF GIRLS IN THE UK HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ATTENTION OR SEXUAL OR PHYSICAL CONTACT IN A PUBLIC PLACE¹

38%

OF GIRLS EXPERIENCE VERBAL HARASSMENT LIKE CATCALLING, WOLF-WHISTLING AND SEXUAL COMMENTS AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH²

15%

OF GIRLS ARE BEING TOUCHED, GROPED OR GRABBED EVERY MONTH³

SECTION 1: OVERVIEW

This research emerged from Plan International UK's work to uncover the reality of growing up a girl in the UK today. Our report, *The State of Girl's Rights in the UK* (2016)⁴, found that girls didn't feel safe in the classroom, online or on the streets, and that experiences of harassment were so widespread that many felt that this was just 'part of growing up'.⁵ We heard a clear message from girls that they considered harassment to be a problem, and one that they wanted to find solutions to.

Around the world harassment and the threat of harassment can have serious implications for girls' freedom, autonomy and perceived safety. In both the UK and internationally, evidence shows that harassment of girls and women in public places is widespread and profoundly affects their lives. This is a particular issue for girls, as harassment – and the behaviours that allow it to happen – often starts at a young age and is likely to be experienced more frequently by adolescent girls and younger women than by older women or their male peers.

This report reflects the voices of girls we interviewed and sets out what they think about harassment, how they experience it, and the things they want to change. It is based on focus groups and polling involving girls from across the UK, evidence from literature and research, and interviews with leading experts on the subject of harassment in public places.

We explore some of the innovations being developed, including work in Nottinghamshire to record misogynistic incidents as hate crime, efforts by the police and transport authorities in London to increase reporting of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport, and some of the creative ways girls and women have resisted harassment in their everyday lives. We define street harassment as a form of gender-based violence and on the continuum of violence against women, as well as considering how other identity characteristics – like race or sexual orientation – intersect with gender to mean girls experience harassment differently.

This work is part of a growing global movement – including leading experts interviewed for this report and organisations like Hollaback!, Stop Street Harassment and Everyday Sexism – to shine a light on harassment and resist its widespread acceptance.

Plan International UK's global programmes have shown that work can be done to make public spaces safer for girls. This report aims to amplify girls' voices and their priorities for change to encourage everyone to take the harassment of girls seriously and take steps to end it.

Nora and Sophie, 15, London



SECTION 2: THE PROBLEM – HOW GIRLS DESCRIBE STREET HARASSMENT

All of the girls we spoke to had stories of intimidating and unwanted behaviour, with many having witnessed and experienced harassment from a very young age – some as young as eight years old. This often happened when they were in uniform – travelling to and from school or college – which they felt made them a particular target.

Worryingly, harassment was such a prevalent part of girls' lives that some felt they were taught to expect sexual harassment, because so many had experienced it, and often on such a regular basis. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of girls in our polling had experienced unwanted sexual attention, including catcalling, sexual comments and being started at, or sexual exposure. A third (35 per cent) had experienced unwanted sexual contact, including being touched, groped or grabbed. Academics we spoke to confirmed that many women felt it was just 'part of growing up' and something they had to get used to. They also described the harassment of girls starting at a young age, and often being more pronounced in the teenage years. Girls felt that being seen as young, and as less likely to 'fight back' or tell anyone what happened to them, made them particularly vulnerable.

Girls described being 'catcalled', experiencing unwanted touching or invasions of their personal space, alongside more serious incidents of being groped, grabbed or 'flashed at' in public. A small number reported technology being used as part of the harassment they experienced, with a quarter (26 per cent) of girls in our polling having been filmed or photographed by a stranger without permission, and almost one in ten (9 per cent) having been the victims of 'upskirting', having their underwear photographed whilst wearing it, without their consent. In focus

groups they described all these acts of harassment as frightening, threatening and intimidating, making them want to 'disappear', and talked about the shock, shame and embarrassment they felt when it happened. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) and Black, Asian or another Ethnic Minority (BAME) girls talked about the dual discrimination of being harassed both for their ethnicity or sexual orientation, as well as their gender.

Harassment is so prevalent in girls' lives it can happen in any of the spaces they occupy, and overlaps between the different worlds they inhabit. Girls could often name specific locations near where they lived which were virtual 'no-go zones', because they feared harassment in those places. They described being particularly targeted when on their own, when out walking or jogging, when travelling to and from school, as well as in busy, central areas like main high streets where something might happen but no one could see who did it. They talked about being shouted at or beeped at from passing cars, as well as experiencing unwanted touching or staring on public transport. Girls felt particularly vulnerable on nights out or working in night-time venues. They were very conscious of potentially predatory behaviours around bars and clubs.

Whilst the evidence we explore in this report tells us that girls and women are overwhelmingly the targets of harassment and boys and men are overwhelmingly the ones who perpetrate harassment, there is very little research into the motivations of boys and men who harass girls and women. More research is needed to better understand the motivations behind harassment, as well as how to prevent it in the first place.



“One time someone asked me to get in a car and I was just like, “No!”. I walked away and they were driving alongside on the road at the same speed as me like they were following me...

Then they turned down the side of the road and I thought they'd gone, but they actually went down there to park their car. They came and walked up to me, and I was really scared because I was by myself at the time...

My phone was upside-down, but I pretended to be on the phone and was trying to make out like my dad was coming to pick me up. From him hearing that, he just turned around, put his hood up and moved away...

“Now my parents are more cautious about when I'll be home and going out after dark, which affects my plans and my work if they can't always pick me up.”

MALIKAH, 19, BIRMINGHAM



“It’s like a constant cycle, we’re [girls/women] always facing sexual harassment in some way whether it is just in the street or in town or wherever. I think there is still a long way to go [for women’s rights in the UK].”

SOPHIE, 18, GLASGOW

SECTION 3: THE IMPACT OF STREET HARASSMENT

Street harassment has a clear impact on where girls go and what they feel free to do. Girls spoke about the range of emotions they felt when they were harassed. They talked about being embarrassed and ashamed for having attention drawn to them, disoriented and confused about who was doing the harassing and why, angry but in fear of what might happen if the situation escalated, and helpless but feeling responsible for making sure they stayed safe. These complex and often contradictory feelings could be hard to process – both girls and professionals said that minimising harassment when it happened was one of the ways in which people dealt with it. It is clear that the cumulative effect of these daily events can take its toll and have a damaging impact, with research showing that harassment and ‘everyday sexism’ can contribute to trauma-like symptoms in women and can have a negative impact on well-being and self-esteem.

The potential threat that harassment posed was constantly in the back of the minds of the girls we spoke to, with these kinds of behaviours seen as the ‘thin end of the wedge’ along the continuum of gender-based violence.

Although many wanted to react to harassment when it happened, the fear of escalation or being ‘victim blamed’ often stopped girls from doing so – thinking that people’s reactions to any potential retaliation would be: **“You shouldn’t have said anything.”** This meant many ‘played along’ with a situation – such as engaging in conversation when they did not want it, or feeling like they had to respond to requests for their name, number or information about where they were going – even if they did not want to.

Research shows that people who experience harassment are likely to change their lives, activities or behaviour in some way as a result of their experiences, meaning they often feel unsafe in public spaces and on public transport. Girls we spoke to were clearly always alert to the possible risk involved in travelling and being in public spaces, describing multiple ways in which they changed their activities or behaviours to avoid the potential risk of harassment. They talked about limiting their access to certain places, not travelling at certain times of day, mentally planning possible ‘escape routes’ or taking alternative journeys

– even if these were not the most direct – to avoid potential harassment.

Girls described using a number of avoidance and self-protection techniques to not have to interact with people or be able to ignore them, like trying to appear unavailable or unapproachable, or methods such as having **“a screen shot of a phone call so I pretend I’m on the phone”** or wearing headphones so **“if someone talks to you, even if you do hear them, I can act as if I can’t hear them”**. They often cited an invisible or fictional boyfriend to get other boys to stop talking to them, or said they only went to certain places with boys or their parents to be left alone. They spoke about moderating how they looked, feeling anxious about what they wore and trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Girls said that these kinds of preventative activities were **“considered as givens, that you have to do in your everyday life”** as a girl. But as Dr Fiona Vera-Gray told Plan International UK in interview, when you consider the extent to which girls constantly have to think about how to avoid the potential

risk of harassment, **“you start to see how much it limits their ability to have space to themselves; to think and plan and design and create.”**

Adults often failed to recognise girls’ reality or invalidated their experiences with the way they reacted when they were told about experiences of street harassment. Those in positions of authority or care, such as parents, carers or teachers, were those most likely to give girls advice on how to ‘stay safe’, with their messages centring around what to wear, how to behave, where to go, who with and at what times. Girls were very clear that there were gender differences between how they were spoken to about safety and how their male peers were, telling Plan International UK in focus groups **“the girl has to walk all the way around, change how she dresses...but it’s never like, ‘boys, let’s have a discussion about how not to harass women’.”** Girls felt that all this was deeply unfair and placed the responsibility on them to avoid harassment rather than telling those who harassed them to stop.

SECTION 4: GIRLS' PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

Girls' number one priority was for a world where they could feel safe and free, without the constant potential threat of harassment. As one girl said: *"We shouldn't have to tolerate it."*

Girls wanted action from across society to stop street harassment from happening, including clear messages that communicated that this kind of behaviour was 'not ok' and that challenged the social norms perpetuating gender inequality.

The lack of common understanding about what constitutes harassment, and whether those behaviours are socially acceptable, contributed to the fear girls expressed about not being believed or having their experiences minimised. Girls said it was important to know their rights and felt there should be advertisements stressing this in public places where harassment happens, like on transport and in high streets.

Across the board, participants spoke about the urgent and paramount importance of working with boys and young men to improve their attitudes, knowledge and awareness about how unwelcome stranger harassment is and the impact it can have on girls' lives. Girls wanted work to be done with boys from a young age to challenge their attitudes, to question gender stereotypes, to develop empathy with girls and help *"solve the problem at the source"*. There was a strong call from both professionals and girls for better education and awareness for all young people to explore consent, healthy relationships, street harassment and other forms of gender-based violence through relationships and sex education across the UK.

While more work is needed to understand which bystander interventions are effective in which contexts, girls told Plan International UK that positive bystander intervention can make a big difference when harassment happens. Where

people had intervened it often stood out as a particularly positive experience for girls, and in many cases the inaction of witnesses to street harassment played a key role in the negative impact an incident had on girls – intensifying feelings of embarrassment, frustration, shame or anger when people saw but did not help. Girls said they wanted bystanders to: **step up** and take action if it was safe to do so; **check in** with girls if they saw something happen and ask them if they were ok; **acknowledge** and recognise what had happened, helping to validate girls' feelings about the experience; and **listen to girls** about what they wanted to happen next.

The fleeting nature of harassment incidents, the challenge of identifying or finding a perpetrator, having little evidence to go to authorities with and not wanting to go through the 'hassle' of reporting, all contributed to putting girls off from telling anyone in authority what had happened to them. As street harassment is widely trivialised, many girls felt that no one would take them seriously if they did report it. But some professionals we spoke to stressed the value of reporting to build a better picture of the problem. Girls felt more could be done to raise awareness of their rights, of what kinds of behaviours they can go to the police about or what might constitute a criminal offence, and that information should be provided about where to go if they did want to report an incident.

Girls also want to be supported by professionals in public spaces tackling and preventing harassment and responding seriously to their complaints. They wanted professionals in positions of social responsibility who may witness harassment – including in schools or universities, on or around public transport or bouncers and staff in night-time venues – to be there for girls to report to and get help from if they want it.

SECTION 5: POLICING STREET HARASSMENT: MISOGYNY AS A HATE CRIME

'Hate crime' is a term used to distinguish "forms of violence and microaggressions directed towards people on the basis of their identity, 'difference' or perceived vulnerability". Whilst street harassment is not commonly viewed in this way, there are growing calls for misogyny – a dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women – to be labelled as a hate crime to encompass a range of gender-based harassment.

Although it has been enthusiastically embraced by some, the usefulness of the categorisation of misogyny as a hate crime

remains a live debate, and divided views amongst the professionals Plan International UK spoke to. Those in favour of the concept believe that explicitly naming harassment, discriminatory attitudes and prejudicial targeting of women on account of their gender as misogyny, and therefore as a hate crime, challenges the idea that street harassment is trivial. Feedback and evaluation from Nottinghamshire Police and Nottingham Women's Centre indicates that the approach may empower the police to act on street harassment and encouraged reporting from women.

SECTION 6: RESISTING STREET HARASSMENT: IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS

The global movement to call out sexual harassment and declare "It's Not OK" is growing. Innovations span from Japan to Delhi to Egypt to New York using apps to track harassment, art to express the impact of harassment and social media to spread women and girls' stories. The approaches span from on-the-street action, to encouraging support from bystanders, to specific projects for public transport and to preventative work in education.

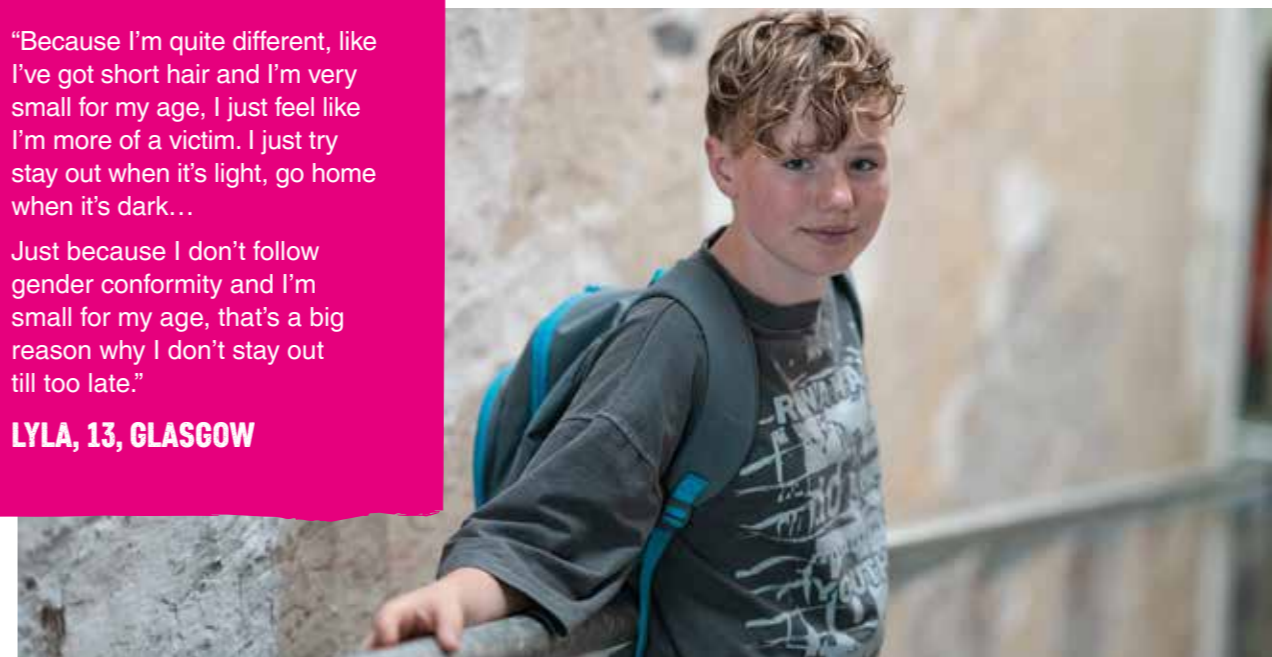
The UN Women's Global initiative "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces" has developed evaluation tools and policies for the prevention and response to sexual harassment.

In the UK, Nottinghamshire Police Force have trialled the use of misogyny as a hate crime, exploring how this impacts on reporting, women and girls' understanding of the crime and public recognition of it as an offence.

"Because I'm quite different, like I've got short hair and I'm very small for my age, I just feel like I'm more of a victim. I just try stay out when it's light, go home when it's dark..."

Just because I don't follow gender conformity and I'm small for my age, that's a big reason why I don't stay out till too late."

LYLA, 13, GLASGOW



CONCLUSION

This is a critical time to think about street harassment. As the #MeToo movement has shown, raising awareness of the pernicious and widespread impact of sexual harassment on girls' and women's lives can make a real difference – forcing changes in the law, improving the likelihood that women will be believed when they share their experiences, and bringing perpetrators to justice. This same attention must now be paid to girls' experiences of all forms of sexual harassment, and their voices must be at the heart of this work.

Gender-based harassment takes place in the wider context of other inequalities, so taking steps to address these in the broadest sense will be essential to eliminate harassment. Harassment can be experienced very differently by girls depending on different aspects of their identity, with sexual harassment frequently intersecting and overlapping with homophobia, transphobia and racism, and this must be taken into account to effectively challenge street harassment.

As this report makes clear, street harassment is an almost universal experience for girls around the UK, to the point that some even consider this to be a normal part of growing up. Girls start to experience these behaviours as early as when they are in primary school, go on to be targeted in their uniforms as teenagers, and then continue to be harassed as they become young adults. These experiences are widely trivialised, creating a culture of acceptance and normalisation – making it harder for girls to tell someone what has happened and get the help they might need.

Girls spend considerable time and effort to try and prevent harassment from happening



– changing what they wear and where they go. Girls can name long lists of things they have been told to do to 'stay safe' and entire areas of the places they live that have become virtual 'no-go zones' in their efforts to avoid harassment. Girls have a right to move freely, express themselves and participate in activities and education without worrying about the potential of harassment in public spaces that should be used and enjoyed by everyone.

Girls have told us that they find this situation unacceptable, and they want to change it. Many of the professionals we spoke to also reinforced the message they were hearing from girls and women, that *"I don't want to be treated like this every day"*.

Girls need to hear a strong message – that society understands this, that they are supported and that they will be listened to and believed – so that they can feel empowered to speak out when it does happen. Given the pervasive nature of harassment and the culture that enables it to continue, we all have a part to play in tackling this problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the heart of this report are girls' voices and their calls for change. What emerges first and foremost is that girls would like their experience of street harassment and the negative impact it has on them to be recognised and taken seriously. Street harassment is part of a wider culture of gender inequality and cannot be tackled through one mechanism or one single approach, but by combining community, education, professional responses, policing and policy change to tackle the problem.

THE PUBLIC

1

JOIN US TO SAY – IT'S NOT OK

Girls have a right to move safely around public spaces. We call on police forces, transport bodies, local authorities and corporations who can have an impact on the spaces and businesses girls use day-to-day to run public messaging campaigns. We encourage these bodies to run campaigns so that from a young age, girls hear a clear message that says they should not have to tolerate street harassment.

Such campaigns need to

- spread awareness,
- encourage public intolerance of harassment,
- ensure that girls and women know where they can go if they experience harassment and
- show that people who report harassment will be taken seriously.

We welcome the initiatives across the UK which are already running this message. Plan International UK will initiate its own campaign to amplify this message.



2

BYSTANDERS – CALL IT OUT!

Bystanders can be any member of the community that witness an incident. Ordinary people taking even the smallest action can be a catalyst for change. A quick check-in for example, or an acknowledgement that a girl has a right to be in a space, feel safe and not be harassed, can reduce the negative impact of a girl's experience of harassment. Bystander training is needed to show community members how to support girls who experience harassment and how to **safely** intervene if witnessing harassment. Such training can be offered by unions, local authorities, community groups, business leaders and more.



EDUCATION AND YOUTH SERVICES

3

BOYS CAN GENERATE CHANGE

International evidence shows that involving boys and young men is key to challenging and ending all forms of violence against women and girls. Boys and young men can have a central role in generating change. They need to be supported to change their attitudes, develop knowledge and increase awareness of the impact of harassment, and they need support to challenge their peers and be able to respond positively when girls disclose experiences to them. Such work requires dedicated time and capacity in **both** education and youth settings, and must be delivered by trained and informed experts that work from principles of gender equality.

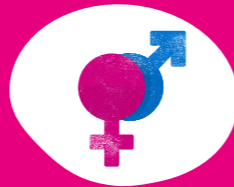


4

GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

Young people need comprehensive relationships and sex education. Specifically, boys need education on gender roles and masculinity that addresses respect, consent, and the nature of gender-based violence in both intimate relationships and interactions with strangers. Space and time should be given to help young people understand the impact of sexual harassment in public places.

We welcome the commitment of the UK government and the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to improve Relationships and Sex Education. Given the government is currently consulting on the future shape of Relationships and Sex Education in England, this is an ideal time to get the content of such lessons right and meet the needs of young people who are asking educators and policy makers for change.

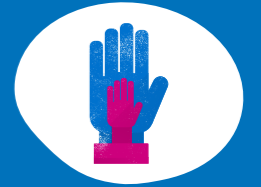


POLICE, POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

5

STREET HARASSMENT IS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Government – national, devolved and local – must explicitly recognise street harassment as a form of gender-based violence and commit to tackling it through budgets and strategies, as well as through its obligations under national and international law. To be effective, this approach must go beyond the ‘usual suspects’ of policy making; it should be considered in strategies for public transport, town planning, the night-time economy, for example. These strategies must recognise that harassment is disproportionately directed towards girls and is experienced in different ways by LGBTIQ+ and BAME girls. The UK’s obligations under Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Article 40 of the Istanbul Convention clearly requires government to take steps to tackle harassment. At the local level, the public sector Equality Duty within the Equality Act (2010) should be used as an instrument to make decisions around planning, licensing, schools and other factors that impact on the local environment in order to proactively tackle harassment and make spaces safer for girls.



6

BUILD A PICTURE OF WHAT’S HAPPENING

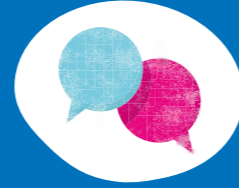
Police and Crime commissioners should take a lead in national data collection to measure not only the scale and nature of sexual harassment, including public harassment, but also the impact. This should include specific data on girls’ experiences and be able to reflect their intersectional experiences of harassment by different identity characteristics. Existing data that could shed further light on girls’ experiences, including hate crime data, should be broken down by gender and age. This will help to build a picture of the true scale and nature of girls’ and women’s harassment in public.



7

LISTEN TO GIRLS

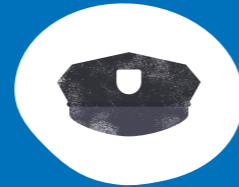
They are the experts on their own experiences and what changes they want to see. Those developing policy and solutions to street harassment must involve girls and young women from a diverse range of backgrounds. Plan International's Safer Cities programme runs safety audits led by girls across their cities and supports them to feedback to local authorities. We want to see this model rolled out across the UK. This engagement with girls shouldn't be limited to violence against women professionals; we want to see town planners, night-time economy businesses, transport planners and the police listening to girls, as well as local and national governments.



8

GIRLS NEED THE RIGHT TO REPORT AND SUPPORT

Girls need to know what their rights are and where they can go for help if they are harassed. Police forces, in partnership with businesses, community groups and public bodies, should make clear, accessible information available about what behaviours would be considered a police matter or constitute a criminal offence, alongside information about what to do if someone wants to report an incident. We welcome the existing initiatives to improve reporting and would like to see support for police forces to share learning and impact measurement, innovative methods for police forces to share learning and impact measurement as well as support to build and develop innovative methods that make it easy to report.

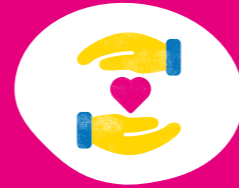


LOCAL SERVICES

9

MAKE YOUR SPACE A SAFE SPACE

Training or guidance should be developed for adults with responsibility for public places, such as bus drivers, shop security staff and university staff. Such professionals could take on the role of 'public safety guardians' and play a greater part in responding to harassment when they see it, and be trusted adults who girls know they can report to.



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A very special thank you to all the youth workers who helped to organise focus groups and to the girls and young women who took part in focus groups and shared their experiences and ideas with us.

The names of the girls and young women who are quoted in the blue boxes in this report have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

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