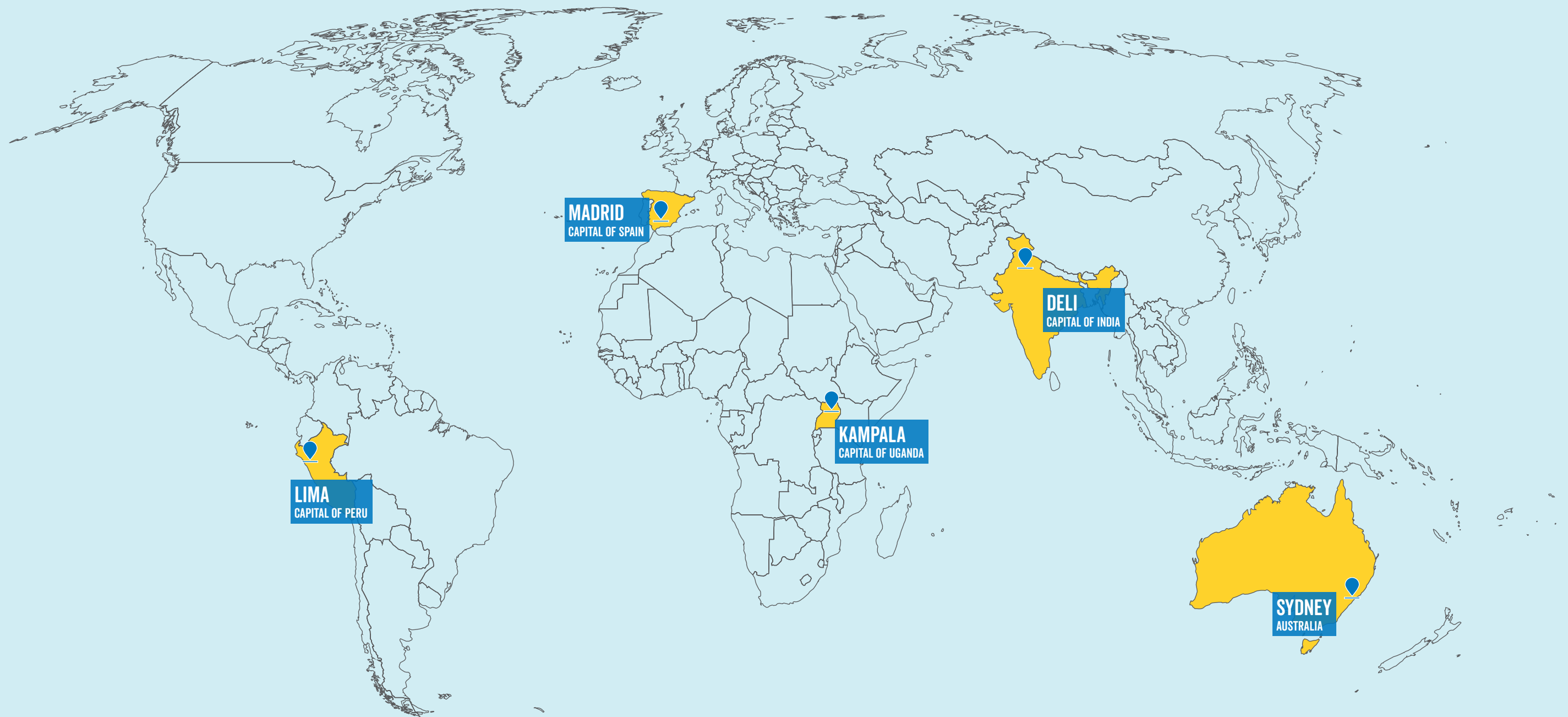


**REPORTING TO
AUTHORITIES:
GIRLS' AND YOUNG
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES
OF REPORTING STREET
HARASSMENT**



MONASH
University



RESEARCH SUMMARY

This report looks at the rates and experiences of reporting street harassment to authorities across five major cities. Why is reporting to authorities often viewed as useless or even harmful, when in fact reporting is an important avenue for ending street harassment?

In this new analysis of the original Free to Be data, girls and young women share their stories and reflect on their experiences.

Our work in this space aims to shine a light on the issue so as to improve responses, increase reporting rates and ultimately end sexist behaviours and sexual harassment in public spaces to create safer cities for all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4	What are the responses from authorities?	9
Methodology	4	What is the impact on young girls and women?	9
What's the issue?	6	What can be done?	10
What is reported to authorities?	7	Acknowledgements	12
What stops people from reporting?	7		

INTRODUCTION

About this Report

Plan International's crowd-mapping survey Free to Be enabled girls and young women to identify and share the location of public spaces that make them feel uneasy and scared or happy and safe, and detail the reasons why. The survey was designed in collaboration with Crowdsplot, Monash University's XYX Lab and young women, in alignment with Plan International's values on research and advocacy in the best interests of the child.

Unsafe in the City: The Everyday Experiences of Girls and Young Women (plan.org.au/learn/who-we-are/blog/2018/10/11/unsafe-in-the-city), a report that painted a picture of the experiences of girls and young women globally related to sexist and sexual harassment in public places, was released in October 2018 alongside individual city reports outlining the findings from the five-city crowd mapping project.

Two reports have followed, including *Unsafe on the Streets: Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Group Harassment* (plan.org.au/learn/who-we-are/blog/2019/04/09/unsafe-on-the-streets) and this report, for which the data has been re-analysed to examine questions specifically about reporting sexist behaviours and sexual harassment to authorities.

Defining Street Harassment

Street harassment is unwelcome sexist behaviours and sexual harassment that occurs in public spaces, which could be expected to make a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. These can be verbal and/or physical, and may include unwanted so-called 'compliments' (or 'piropos' in Lima and Madrid); catcalling, whistling or honking; intense staring/leering; surreptitious photography; propositioning; being verbally threatened with rape; physical intimidation such as being stalked, chased, followed, flashed and blocked; groping and other forms of sexual touch; and rape.

Note: Any incident involving physical contact is technically sexual assault, but many young women are inured to some forms of physical contact and would not categorize them as assault.

Who are the authorities relevant to street harassment?

When we use the term 'authorities' in this report we are referring to all levels of governments, the police, transport authorities, licensed venue staff, security and other groups who have responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of people in public spaces and transport.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The Free to Be project was conceptualised and piloted in Melbourne, Australia, in 2016. It was developed by girls and young women and Plan International in collaboration with Crowdsplot and Monash University's XYX Lab. The map-based survey tool was further developed before being rolled out in five other global cities in 2018.

Free to Be includes an online interactive map of the city and a survey which allowed girls and women both to drop 'pins' on the map – 'good pins' on areas of the city they love and feel safe in, or 'bad pins' on the locations where they feel unsafe or uncomfortable – and leave comments about their experiences there. All comments were anonymous.¹ In March 2018, discussions were held with young women from Plan International's programmes in the five participating cities to allow for input into the tool and interface.

Crowdmapping is a means for gathering impressions and stories from a wide range of people, but is not a probability sample, meaning that percentages included in this report are indicative rather than representative. The total number of valid responses – those from female or other gender respondents, aged 30 or younger, and not identified as offensive or false – are summarised in Figure 1. Recruitment of participants varied across the five cities, but included social media campaigns, news media reports, and, particularly in Delhi and Kampala, inviting people to participate directly through face-to-face recruitment on the streets.

In addition, reflection workshops were held with a small group of young women, to discuss findings and develop plans for responding to them. Further information about the methodology applied in each city can be found in the detailed city reports.²

Analysis of reporting to authorities

Although there were more than 14,500 pins denoting bad incidents/places placed on the city maps, only 1,270 (9%) used the 'reported to authorities' tags.

- Pins that selected the 'reported to authorities' tags ('Reported it and authorities did something' and 'Reported it but authorities did nothing') were collected;
- Not all of the reporting tagged pins had comments attached. This meant these pins were not able to provide any useful information for the purposes of this report either about the incident or the reporting process were eliminated;
- Tagged pins with comments that were not about street harassment were also removed from consideration (these mainly involved theft);
- Street harassment that was report to authorities was almost exclusively sexual harassment;

- Comments associated with these tagged pins were examined and coded, first using the broad sexual harassment coding of the original reports, and then in-depth detailed coding; and
- In addition to tagged pins, comments connected to all pins were checked to see if any mentioned reporting or not reporting. This garnered another 54 comments. These were not coded, but instead provided material about why participants might not report.

Limitations

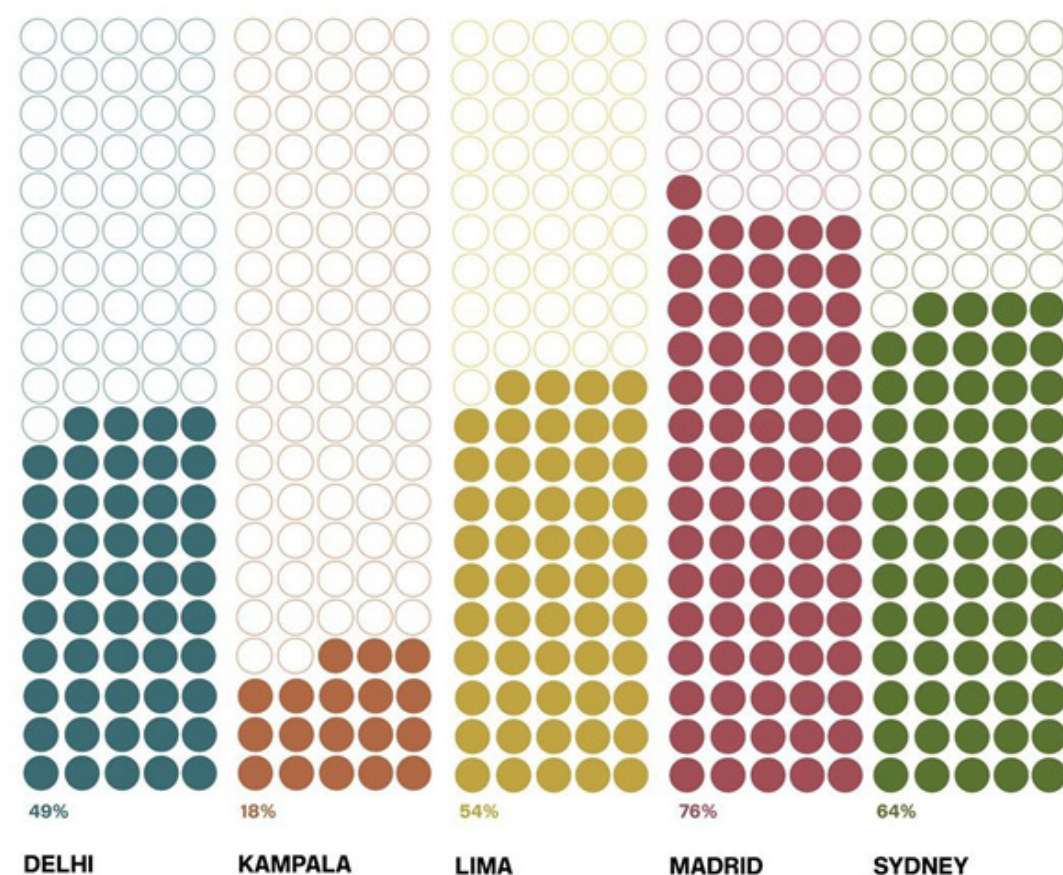
It should be noted that the nature of comments differed markedly between cities, since this report draws extensively on the comments that Free to Be participants made. Sydney and Madrid participants were generally much more descriptive than the other three cities and detailed particular incidents in depth. Delhi had far fewer comments than the other cities (less than a third of all the Delhi pins had comments) and many of those comments were short and generic. In contrast, Kampala participants commented on almost every pin and gave a greater amount of detail but merged short descriptions with comments about policing and other matters. Lima was a mix of detailed and brief. In addition, translations into English from Delhi, Kampala, Lima and Madrid were not always clear.

The data analysis for this report produced just under 300 pins across the five cities. The small number of incidents reported to authorities highlights the fact that much of street harassment is invisible to authorities. This indicative dataset therefore provides some valuable initial insights into this issue.

Ethics

Plan International takes very seriously its duty to safeguard all children and young people. Due to the anonymous method of the data collection from participants through a digital platform, it was not possible to follow up directly with survivors of violence, but any participant who dropped a pin on Free to Be was alerted to local support services and provided with their contact details. For further details on the ethics and methodology, see the full *Unsafe in the City* report at plan-international.org/unsafe-city

Figure 1: Percentage of all reported & commented pins that detailed sexual harassment



Each dot represents one percent (%) See separate appendix for full size graph

WHAT’S THE ISSUE?

“Followed and eventually chased home by a [sic] older looking man in a hoodie. Police did nothing, laughed at me on the phone, said unless I was assaulted there’s nothing to report despite there being cameras all the way down the street.” - Young woman, 20, Sydney

All sexist behaviour and sexual harassment serves as a reminder of, and further compounds, girls’ and young women’s social and physical vulnerability. This plays a significant role in increasing the fear of a more serious violent attack.³ It is also important to recognise that all forms of street harassment – including those viewed as ‘accepted’ or ‘minor’ – are capable of causing harm.⁴

Authorities include governments, the police, transport authorities, licensed venue staff, security and other groups who have responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of people in public spaces and transport; places where street harassment occurs and authorities to whom people can or should be able to report such incidents.

Table 1: Officially reported incidents breakdown

	DELHI	KAMPALA	LIMA	MADRID	SYDNEY	TOTAL
Reported it and authorities did something	271	54	32	17	44	418
Reported it but authorities did nothing	280	285	144	45	98	852
Total	551	339	176	65	142	1,270
With comments						
Reported it and authorities did something	1	52	20	13	38	124
Reported it but authorities did nothing	109	265	114	36	85	609
Total	110	317	134	49	123	733
Commented pins detailing street harassment						
Reported it and authorities did something	1	11	12	12	27	63
Reported it but authorities did nothing	45	49	61	25	52	232
Total	46	60	73	37	79	295
% of SH reports where authorities did something	2%	18%	16%	32%	34%	21%
% of all reported & commented pins that detailed sexual harassment	49%	18%	54%	76%	64%	21%
Additional pins	15	3	3	8	25	54

* As noted in the city report for Delhi, nearly 700 pins for Delhi initially recorded that the incident had been reported to authorities and in a high 59% of cases, the authorities ‘did something.’ This was a much higher proportion than the other cities in the project and so we took a closer look at the pins. Just under one-third had comments describing the incident. In all but one case, the comments simply listed very generic incidents (‘I feel unsafe’, ‘eve-teasing’, etc) which, based on the experience of other cities, are less likely to have been reported, let alone acted upon. These were removed from the final count shown in the above table.

WHAT IS REPORTED TO AUTHORITIES?

“When I was returning home and passed by the bridge on the right side of the subway, I noticed that a man of about 35 or more was following me. I kept walking and when I was near my house I turned around and that man was jerking himself while he looked at me, in broad daylight. I got scared and threatened to call the police. Then he left. Didn’t notify the police because a friend had something similar happen to her and they did nothing.” - Young woman, 23, Madrid

According to the *Free to Be* data there is a low level of reporting for street harassment overall, with under one in ten – seven per cent – of girls and young women stating that they reported at all. When reporting does happen, it is the incidents of sexual harassment involving physical attack or harm that are reported.

The small number of incidents reported to authorities highlights the fact that much of street harassment is invisible to the authorities; the Free to Be data shines a light on non-reported incidents as well as the small number that are reported so as to improve responses, increase reporting rates and ultimately end sexist behaviours and sexual harassment in public spaces to create safer cities for all.

WHAT STOPS PEOPLE FROM REPORTING?

1. Interpretations of what is ‘serious’

“The same man on multiple occasions has followed me through train carriages and around Central Station harassing me for my number. This man (over 50) made me (aged 17) feel so uncomfortable and unsafe that I now don’t attend university lectures that align with the times I found him there. Didn’t believe I could report it due to lack of evidence and was afraid I would be told that ‘he is just being friendly’ or some other BS excuse.” - Girl, 17, Sydney

Comments and cat-calling – forms of verbal abuse or intimidation – are largely not reported. Although girls and young women often spoke of how terrifying these could be, they were unsure what the authorities could or would do if they reported these experiences, or even if these are ‘serious enough’ to constitute a crime.

A range of personal, social and cultural factors inform perceptions of seriousness – of both the target and the authorities – including girls and young women accepting harassment as ‘normal’ because of the frequency with which it is experienced.

For both groups, myths and misperceptions in particular influence understandings of what sexual

violence is, and what constitutes ‘serious’ forms of such violence. Typically, these myths suggest that ‘real’ sexual violence involves the use of physical force, and involves penetrative sexual violation. As a result, other forms of sexual violence – including street harassment – that do not reflect these limited constructions of ‘real’ violence may be dismissed as ‘minor’ or ‘trivial’, if they are acknowledged as a form of sexual violence at all.⁵ This is likely to be particularly acute for street harassment, which is routinely described and dismissed as a ‘compliment’, ‘joke’, or ‘friendly banter’.⁶

2. The often fleeting nature of street harassment

“A middle-aged man flashed his thing to me during the day around 3pm. He was a tradie because I saw him sitting in a van. I bolted so can’t describe what he looks like.” - Young woman, 22, Sydney

In addition to being unsure about what constitutes ‘serious enough’ harassment, participants also spoke about their uncertainty in reporting incidents where they did not have much information to pass on. This was particularly the case when the initial reaction to the incident was one of shock or fear, which resulted in women either freezing or fleeing to escape and therefore not able to fully detail the incident. This was especially so for younger girls, who are also some of the most vulnerable to harassment.

The shock of the incident could also combine with the very fleeting nature of some street harassment making it difficult to ascertain details about the offender (e.g. appearance, car make and model, number plates), meaning that reporting seemed futile.

3. Victim blaming

“As a woman I have repeatedly been harassed around this place, in and around North campus. The police were utterly useless in helping me and rather indulged in moral policing.” - Young woman, 22, Delhi

“At the age of 17 a guy grabbed my butt while climbing the stairs of the train station to go to my home after school. Security helped me to take it to court, but it won’t proceed any more. I was denounced for having been in a public place. They recommended I leave it there. Disappointing, the laws of this country.” - Young woman, 19, Lima

These myths, believed by many girls and young women, are often perpetuated by the authorities when incidents are reported. Whether in person or simply by hearing how authorities talk about street harassment in media and social media, or from friends and acquaintances, the messages commonly heard by girls and young women is that, by being in any public place, anything that might happen is her responsibility – and worse, her fault.

4. Anticipation of the reporting experience

“When I was returning home and passed by the bridge on the right side of the subway, I noticed that a man of about 35 or more was following me. I kept walking and when I was near my house I turned around and that man was jerking himself while he looked at me, in broad daylight. I got scared and threatened to call the police. Then he left. Didn’t notify the police because a friend had something similar happen to her and they did nothing.” - Young woman, 23, Madrid

Overwhelmingly, girls and young women thought they would not be believed by authorities, that the incident would be belittled as unimportant or ‘nothing to worry about’, or even that they would be further harassed by the authorities themselves. This belief was, unfortunately, often reflected in the lived experiences of girls and young women who did report incidents of street harassment to authorities.

There is also a widespread belief that the chances of something positive happening from a report were slim, as a result of both ‘victim-blaming’ and trivialisation of the experience.

In addition, there is the consideration of the emotional toll that reporting might take, especially if the target is not met with sympathy; as such, girls and young women considered how reporting might extend and/or aggravate their emotional trauma.

5. Power imbalances

“The ‘Pymble Boys’ gang are notorious for their harassment of women of all ages. These boys are all known to come from wealthy families. Therefore, they are not afraid of getting caught because they know their families will retain high-priced lawyers to get them off.” - Young woman, 19, Sydney

The quote above highlights the fact that there is very often a power imbalance between perpetrators and their targets that grants an assumed impunity to the perpetrators. Given that many forms of harassment are not illegal, are difficult to report or document when they do meet criminal thresholds of behaviour, and that sexual offences more broadly face low levels of reporting and successful convictions, this assumed impunity is likely accurate.

“Last week I was groped outside by a homophobic man while I was on a date with another woman. The bouncer saw and told me not to be upset, but said nothing to the attacker.” - Young woman, 25, Sydney

Power imbalance is not just a matter of men and boys often being physically bigger, stronger, and sometimes operating in groups. There is also the generalised power imbalance between genders (which may vary considerably between cultures and societies, but typically stems from gender inequality, patriarchal social structures, and men’s greater access to resources). In addition to this, there are other elements that add to the imbalance. This can

include, but is by no means limited to, factors such as class and wealth (as in the case above), race, being in a position of authority, (dis)ability, and sexual and gender diversity. In other words, there are many reasons why power imbalance might mean that girls and young women in all their diversities would not report to authorities.

6. Legislative gaps

“The problem is that verbal harassment is not a crime, so I’m sure that if the police saw that a guy was physically hitting you then, obviously, they would act accordingly and intervene if they see it. But if someone says ‘Hello gorgeous’ to you... ‘Did this man call me beautiful or did he say that he’d like to come in my face’, you know? What are the police going to do about that part of it, because it isn’t a crime.” - Young woman, Madrid Reflection Workshop

This research demonstrates that, currently, girls and young women bear the burden of proof.

The fact that many types of street harassment are not clearly defined as offences under criminal legislation was a clear deterrent to reporting, as well as shaping whether an incident of harassment is perceived to be ‘serious’ enough to report.

While some cities included in the research do have legislative provisions addressing ‘offensive’ or ‘obscene’ language,⁷ these are typically applied to ‘swear words’, and often only enforced when such language is directed towards police.⁸ Likewise, phrases such as ‘hello gorgeous’ seem unlikely to be interpreted as ‘offensive’, despite the fact that contextual factors (such as tone of voice, geographical location, isolation, time of day), and the pervasive nature of such harassment in the lives of many women and girls, can make such utterances offensive, threatening, or, at the very least, annoying and unwelcome.



Jackline, 21, is campaigning to make Kampala, Uganda, safer for girls and young women. Through Plan International’s Safer Cities programme, she is advocating to local authorities, police, boda boda (motorcycle taxi) drivers and the Kampala Capital City Authority to address threats to girls’ safety in the city.

WHAT ARE THE RESPONSES FROM AUTHORITIES?

“When we complain to someone, they make fun of us.” - Young woman, 25, Delhi

“Police didn’t mind about [the attempted rape], they just wanted money from me in order to help.” - Girl, 16, Kampala

Of the girls and young women who did report, the majority of the responses ranged from belittling, disbelief and dismissal, to further harassment from authorities themselves, to a complete lack of justice resulting in frustration and a lack of trust in the system. This contributes to the re-victimization of those whom the system is supposed to support, and is a considerable factor in girls and young women not reporting incidents.

“When I went to report a violation,

1, they did not believe me, only with proof did my word have value.

2, To get help you are forced to report, without being fully prepared for the consequences.

3, my case by 3 or 4 lawyers of which only one moved the case [forward].

4, a lawyer, started with macho jokes about my case.” - Young woman, 28, Lima

In some of the very serious cases, girls and young women record that the legal or otherwise systems for redress were disappointing and/or ineffective.

Others who reported to authorities were told there was insufficient evidence to proceed.

Overall, there was a general lack of trust that the authorities would believe the incident, consider it important or be able to do anything about it.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

“If they go to the police station they will take no notice of us, it’s a wasted effort, a waste of time. We lose more by going if the chances are they won’t listen to me.” - Young woman, Lima Reflection Workshop

Girls and young women in all their diversities clearly indicated that authorities failing to respond thoughtfully, sympathetically and supportively can be extremely damaging. It reinforces the belief that reporting is not worth it and that girls and young women may be unable to rely on others for support. This in turn increases the internalisation of stigma and shame, as well as further reproducing a cultural context in which street harassment is normalised and treated as ‘trivial’ or ‘minor’.

Given the symbolic weight afforded to the formal criminal justice system, a lack of official response reinforces this. The failure of authorities to respond constitutes part of the ‘cultural scaffolding’⁹ that enables street harassment to occur with impunity.



Eric, 24, is one of the boda boda riders in Kampala who Plan International has worked with: “Before Safer Cities, I used to sexually harass girls a lot – catcall, touch them inappropriately and demean them. It was the culture in the boda boda industry.”



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of some comments there were strong pleas for action and change:

“Whenever I go down in that bus stop after college there are guys who insult women and try to outdo themselves. I see this every day even with young girls. You can not argue with those guys anymore because they’re also criminals and if you say anything, they rob you. Do something please!” - Young woman, 23, Lima

“I pass through here twice a day to get to work and am routinely verbally abused by men. I feel unsafe and would never go through here at night. I wish the police or government would listen to women’s stories and do something about this place.” - Young woman, 29, Sydney

“For women to understand that harassment is a kind of violence, that they shouldn’t remain silent. They should talk with the authorities and have them see our point of view about sexual harassment.” - Young woman, Lima Reflection Workshop

1. Improve responses

Authorities must respond to reporting on street harassment thoughtfully, sympathetically and supportively.

It is recommended authorities actively **invest in providing gender-sensitive education and training on street harassment and how to respond**. Such education and training, where providers do not already have existing relevant modules, should be co-designed with young women and girls in all their diversities.

This should include:

- What is street harassment
- How to talk about street harassment (sexist behaviours and sexual harassment) and violence against women; and
- How to ensure targets and bystanders are treated with respect, taken seriously and protected from retaliation.

In particular, training should cover how to respond to reports in person and over the phone, with an emphasis on not victim-blaming, taking the incident seriously, ascertaining what the person reporting wants to see happen next, and providing clear referral pathways for psychosocial support of targets. In instances where such mechanisms or networks do not exist, authorities should take steps to instigate setting them up.



2. Increase reporting

Alongside implementing effective processes and training authorities in how to respond, it is important to increase reporting rates.

Authorities should:

- **Improve reporting systems.** They should be clear and simple, with the option of reporters remaining anonymous, and should be transparent about the follow up process by providing reporters with feedback.
- **Be clear on what can be reported**, such as identifying sexist behaviours and sexual harassment as being reportable (not just severe harassment and assault).
- **Ensure clear framing** and that the language used in reporting processes encourages default reporting. This is particularly important for technology solutions to data collection or reporting systems, where incidents can be reported using check boxes or open fields. For example, research suggests that naming individual behaviours, such as “sexist jokes” or “unwanted physical contact”, rather than asking general questions about the experience of “sexism and harassment” increases reporting.¹⁰
- **Provid clear pathways to report** such as a phone number, web link, email address, app, or 24-hour sexism and sexual harassment reporting hotline.

Authorities, governments and civil society should:

- **Deliver public awareness-raising campaigns** that encourage reporting for incidents that themselves cannot be progressed to a formal report (either because they are not illegal or the target does not wish to pursue that process), but can nonetheless help build a picture of repeat offenders as well as providing information on experiences of such behaviours to inform

behaviour change campaigns. This could also inform other prevention strategies.

- **Assess relevant legislative change** to make street harassment illegal and/or clarify the existing patchwork of laws that can apply to the various types of harassment. This can provide clarity regarding what can be reported; however any legislation must take into account civil liberties and ensure they do not contribute to increased targeting of vulnerable groups



3. Address the broader, systemic issue of sexism

Increasing reporting and improving responses can contribute to important institutional and social changes. Recognising and understanding the root cause of sexist behaviours and sexual harassment is crucial to ultimately reducing the number of reports and people experiencing such harassment.

Implementing or collaborating on widespread public education campaigns that address these root causes, informed by improved reporting data, should include:

- Educating men and boys that it is unacceptable to pester, harass and abuse someone because of their gender (or other discrimination factors);
- Encouraging bystanders to call out unacceptable behaviour when they see it, cause a distraction or delay, call for help, or help by documenting and supporting the target to report.
- Trusted individuals - friends, family members and colleagues - can also be active bystanders when they are told about experiences of street harassment. It is important to believe the person who is disclosing the incident, not judge them, and assist them to access support if needed and wanted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Crowdspot: an award-winning, Melbourne-based digital consultancy specialising in map-based community engagement and data collection. Their mission is to help create quality spaces in a social, inclusive and engaging process. They do this by connecting decision makers with targeted community groups through the use of online map-based social survey tool. Special thanks for work on the Free to Be project are due to Anthony Aisenberg.

The XYX Lab: a team of experienced design researchers from Monash University in Melbourne specialising in exploring gender-sensitive design practices and theory. The work operates at the intersection of gender, identity, urban space and advocacy. Through the research, they bring together planners, policymakers, local government and stakeholders to make tangible the experiences of underrepresented communities in urban space and planning. Special thanks for work on the Free to Be project and analysis are due to Gill Matthewson, Nicole Kalms and Isabella Webb.

Plan International Australia: the Free to Be digital mapping project was developed by Plan International Australia in 2016. Initially launched in Melbourne, the project continues to expand to cities worldwide. Bringing together youth activists, decision makers and other partners, Plan International Australia has enabled thousands of girls and young women to map their experiences of street harassment and violence in the city, share their stories and create change.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Plan International takes very seriously its duty to safeguard all children and young people. Due to the anonymous method of the data collection from participants through a digital platform, it was not possible to follow up directly with survivors of violence, but any participant who dropped a pin on Free to Be was alerted to local support services and provided with their contact details.
- 2 Detailed Free to Be reports for each city can be accessed and downloaded here: <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-countryreports>
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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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Girls and young women pictured in the report provided consent to do so. All comments and data in this report was collected anonymously however, and should not be attributed to any particular individual.

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