

UNSAFE ON THE STREETS

GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF GROUP HARASSMENT

Why is group street harassment by men towards women often viewed as harmless, part of normal, permitted, male behaviour when in fact for girls and young women it can be frightening, restricting and undermining? In this new research report, girls and young women share their stories and reflect on their experiences.

"I'm tired, street harassment hurts me to the bone. Is it that perhaps they do not realize that their 'compliments' hurt? I am starting to be afraid to leave home."

GIRL, 16, LIMA

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

In 2018, Plan International's ground-breaking research report, *Unsafe in the City*, shone a light on the relentless harassment and abuse that girls and young women face in the streets of their cities and underlined what girls and young women thought could and should be done about it. fresh analysis of the data that informed *Unsafe in the City*, this report takes a closer look at the group dynamics which underpin the abusive behaviour of men and boys towards girls and young women.

One thing is clear, if the public harassment of girls and young women which the 2018 research uncovered is to end, changing male, not female, behaviour is essential. Girls and young women are not responsible for the harassment they face because they are out late, or because they are walking alone, but because men feel entitled to grope, catcall and threaten.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- ▶ Group dynamics seem to aggravate and normalise gender-based violence and harassment: girls and young women told us how severe, persistent and frightening this harassment is. Boys and men endorse harassing behaviour in groups, possibly fearing that they themselves would be targeted or ostracised, were they to speak out against it.
- ▶ Street harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys is overwhelmingly sexual in nature.
- ▶ Verbal harassment, and in particular catcalling, is the most common form of street harassment perpetrated by groups across the cities surveyed.
- ▶ Groups of men and boys frequently followed girls and young women: a particularly frightening form of intimidation which often leads to them having to run or hide from the perpetrators.
- ▶ Overwhelmingly, group harassment occurs on the city streets as girls and young women go about their everyday lives.
- ▶ In some cities, a disturbing amount of harassment happens in and around school buildings, with groups of men and boys gathering to target women and girls as they arrive, leave or walk past.
- ▶ Group harassment is repetitive: it often happens at the same time, in the same place, every day.
- ▶ Power imbalances between men and women are amplified when men and boys gather and act in larger groups. Men and boys are then able to exploit these power imbalances and often target the most vulnerable – girls or very young women on their own who feel powerless to stop the incident or prevent it escalating.
- ▶ Groups perpetrating harassment often see it as a form of entertainment and amusement – male bonding – with little or no thought for the target of the abuse.
- ▶ Bystanders are unlikely to intervene, and in some cases actually encourage the behaviour of the perpetrators.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

“There are always drunk men in a group, annoying the women who pass by. It is very uncomfortable because there are a lot of them and it is impossible to ignore it.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 25, LIMA

Changing the behaviour of men and boys

- ▶ Men and boys need to **recognise that their behaviour is intolerable** and change it by learning to respect girls and women as their equals: standing out against the culture of verbal and physical abuse, not standing by.
- ▶ Group street harassment is particularly intimidating and real change needs leaders from all walks of life standing up to acknowledge this specific issue as **allies and champions** of girls and young women.
- ▶ **Conversations at all levels of society** – at home, at school and at work – should be used to both educate and shame perpetrators.
- ▶ **Public campaigning** must make it clear that group street harassment should not be part of a “normal” life for girls and young women and, alongside **behaviour change campaigns** to encourage male empathy, needs to clearly call out disturbing and harmful behaviour.

Girls' participation in decisions

- ▶ Those in authority and positions of power in cities, at all levels, must **listen to and work with** girls and young women, **involving them in co-designing the provision of services and the policies that govern their cities.**
- ▶ Authorities must **collect accurate data** in order to properly understand the levels of group street harassment they are dealing with.
- ▶ Institutions like **schools, colleges and workplaces** must also work with girls and young women to acknowledge and address the issues that affect them as they attempt to carry on their daily lives.

Enforcing laws and policies against sexual harassment

- ▶ Many aspects of group sexual and street harassment are not covered by current legislation, **public law and policy making needs to be extended** to fill these gaps.
- ▶ Governments should put in place effective legislation to ensure girls' safety and inclusion, **including criminalising all forms of gender-based violence and tackling areas where alcohol and drug taking** enhances harassing behaviour.
- ▶ Police, transport staff, security companies and local government officials of all kinds need to listen to girls and young women on a regular basis and make a **public commitment to making cities safer** for women and girls, including initiating repercussions against all perpetrators.

“Because the men aren't punished for this, women see it as their fault and we have to change our actions rather than men changing their actions. The consequence is that women feel as if they are lesser, they begin to question the validity of their experience...”

YOUNG WOMAN, SYDNEY, REFLECTION WORKSHOP

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The *Unsafe in the City* research was conducted, in partnership with Monash XYX Lab and Crowdspot in Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Sydney and Madrid, using **Free to Be**, a map-based social survey tool co-designed with girls and young women. It enables them to identify and share public spaces that make them feel uneasy and scared, or conversely, happy and safe. In this report, the data is re-analysed to examine questions specifically about street harassment by groups of men and boys.