

# UNSAFE ON THE STREETS

GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF  
**GROUP HARASSMENT**



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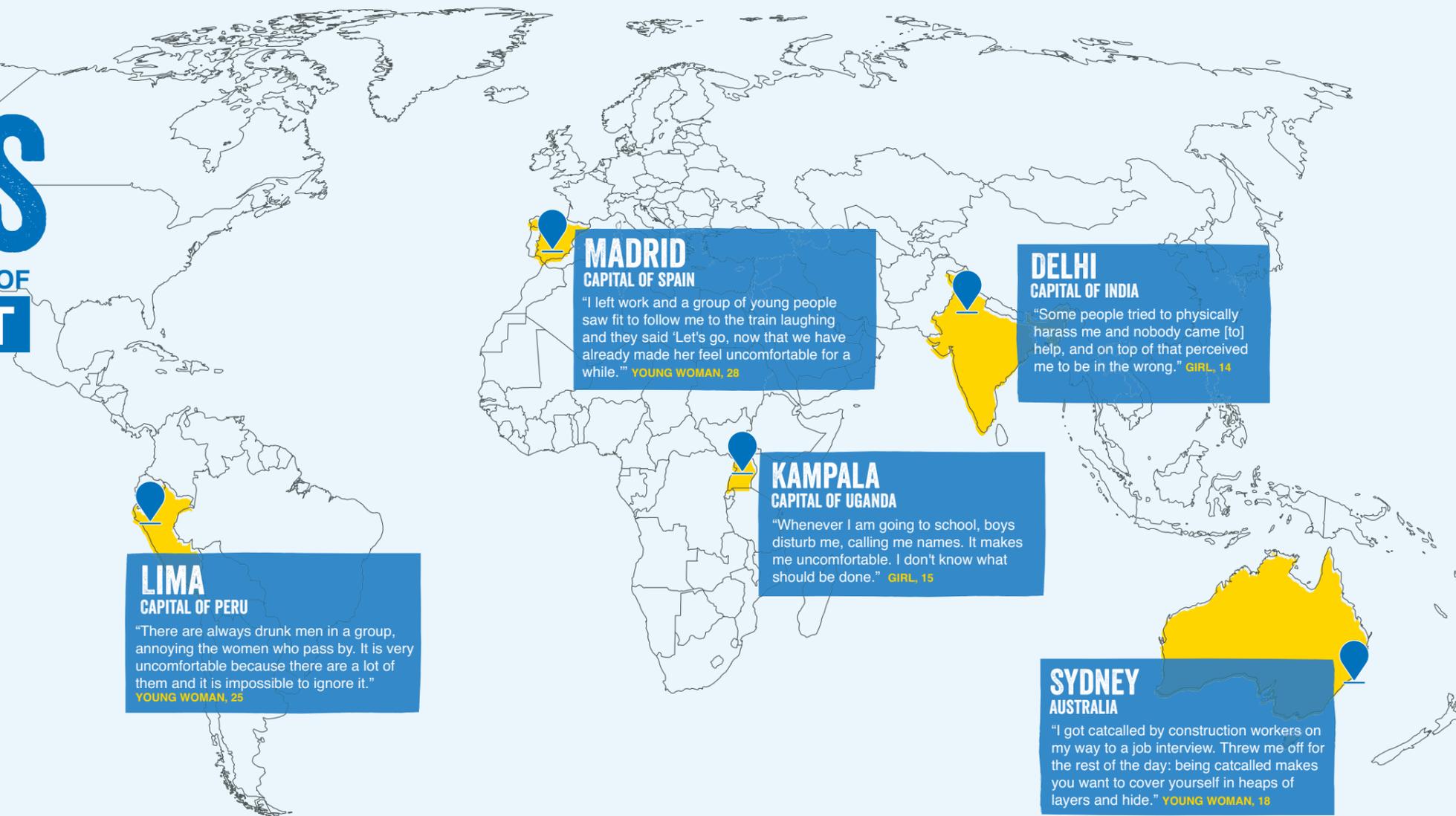
**MONASH**  
University

# UNSAFE ON THE STREETS

## GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF GROUP HARASSMENT

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

This report looks at street harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys across five major cities. Why is street harassment by groups of 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 analysis of the original *Free to Be* data, girls and young women share their stories and reflect on their experiences.



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Note: Photos in this report do not depict research participants and have been staged.

Front cover: © Plan International - All characters on the photo acted a street harassment scene as part of a video footage for Unsafe In the City.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to all the research participants from Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Madrid and Sydney who took the time to drop their pins and bravely share their stories. Thanks are due also to Plan International staff and their partners, including all the youth activists involved in design, implementation and analysis of this research, without whose help the work of amplifying girls' voices would be impossible.

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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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Special thanks go also to Maria for her personal contribution to this report.

# FOREWORD

**Hi, my name is María.** Today I want to talk to you about the group harassment that is affecting girls in my community and school: we feel intimidated and have no possibility of defending ourselves.

Group harassment takes place every day and it's tragic that we have to be on the alert at all times, particularly outside of school. I have heard many of my friends talk of feeling uncomfortable about being pursued by men who will not take NO for an answer. If school is supposed to be a place where we can learn and feel comfortable, why do we have to rush to get there? Why do we always have to walk there in groups? Why do we always have to walk with a boy to feel safe? It's only when you're walking with a man at your side that these aggressors think they shouldn't mess with you because you're 'owned' by someone else. Many of us are afraid to use public transport. We can't get on a crowded bus: getting on a bus involves a significant risk with people rubbing themselves up against you, groping you, and you can never be sure who's done it.

The fact that men view harassment as a game means they place no importance on how we feel. And no-one takes it seriously, the authorities do nothing about it. It's frustrating not to know who to turn to, to have no-one, because everyone refuses to help you. This is a constant problem for teenagers. The fact that we have a schoolbag with us doesn't gain us any respect, quite the opposite! They see schoolgirls as even more helpless and attack us even more. **Why aren't children's voices heard in an adult world?**

Group harassment in the street is even more complicated. If you are walking along and you hear a whistle, you don't know who to challenge. Group members cover up for each other and you're not

sure where the attack is coming from. If you're with friends, they think they can "choose" one of you: you become their property which means that they have decided that you cannot be approached by anyone else. It is not up to them. This situation is degrading to women. We aren't able to decide for ourselves: they decide with who, when and how we will be.

Harassment is a reality that affects us all and, the sad thing is, no-one takes any notice of what's going on until something worse happens. So far this year, in my country, 31 women have been murdered and it is still not understood that it all starts with a "compliment", flattering a woman for being "pretty." It needs to stop now because, if we continue to accept harassment as "normal", even more dangerous things will continue to happen to girls, and I'm talking about more aggression, more ill-treatment, more murders.

It is essential that teenage girls are, first of all, able to talk to their family because they are the people who should be most concerned for their well-being, and then they should also be able to talk to their friends, their school and their wider community, up through all the levels. It is also important to talk to boys and men, from an early age, so that they know there is no reason for violence against women, not now, not when they are older, not ever: a woman is not a chattel, she is not a sexual object.

The girls who experience harassment on a daily basis are best placed to find a solution, better than the grown-ups, better than the city mayor, who doesn't understand the problem. Although, to begin with, we didn't have many spaces in which to get our voices heard, this is now changing. We need and have a right to feel safe in the city. **As teenagers we have huge potential and, together, we can combat street harassment!**

**María, 15, Lima**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The research on which this report is based was conducted in April - June 2018 in five cities – Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Madrid and Sydney. The primary purpose of the research was to inform Plan International's State of the World Girls report, released in October 2018. It built on Plan International's extensive experience of working with adolescent girls and young women, including through the Safer Cities for Girls programme, and collected relatively comparable data to tell a story about what they experience as they move around their cities. In particular, the research examined girls' and young women's feelings of safety, or risk, in relation to their physical environment. It looked at how harassment and violence against young women and girls can be both the *result* of unhealthy gender norms and a *cause*: creating and maintaining the acceptability and normalisation of violence and harassment in public spaces.

The research was conducted through *Free to Be*, a map-based social survey tool that enables girls and young women to identify, and share, the location of public spaces that make them feel either uneasy and scared or happy and safe and asks them to detail the reasons why. The tool was designed with girls and young women through a partnership between Plan International, Crowdsport and Monash University's XYX Lab.

There was a positive response rate across the cities, generating a huge amount of quantitative data and qualitative comments for coding and analysis. Analysis was conducted in June-July 2018, and research reports from each city were published as well as a global summary.<sup>1</sup> Given the volume of the data, Plan International asked XYX Lab to conduct further analysis and to look in more depth at the prevalence of street harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys. This was a topic that had emerged as an area of interest for Plan International from the *Free to Be* data, and in research reflection workshops and analysis. The findings of this more in-depth study are presented in this report.

<sup>1</sup> Detailed *Free to Be* reports for each city can be accessed and downloaded here: <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-country-reports> and the global summary report here: <https://plan-international.org/unsafe-city>



## 1.1 STATE OF THE WORLD GIRLS 2018: UNSAFE IN THE CITY

The *Unsafe in the City* report, which looked broadly across the *Free to Be* data, had the following key findings:

- ▶ Cities are not safe places for girls and young women: on the streets, on public transport and in most public spaces they are frequently made to feel uncomfortable, unsafe and intimidated, just because they are young and female.
- ▶ The underlying cause of many girls' and young women's feeling of insecurity is men's behaviour, particularly the use of violence against women and girls. The problem cannot simply be blamed on a lack of security and lighting.
- ▶ Transport hubs, train and bus stations and bus stops are prime locations for groping and harassment – central meeting points, crowded places through which men could pass quickly without being identified.
- ▶ In all five cities, to be groped, catcalled and abused is so common, girls and young women start to perceive it as "just normal".
- ▶ Girls and young women are harassed at all times of the day and night.
- ▶ For the most part, witnesses just stand by: they do little or nothing to help, and girls and young women feel that there is little point in reporting harassment to the authorities because they believe the authorities have neither the will nor the power to do anything about it.
- ▶ The indifference, inaction and/or insufficient action of city authorities and wider society leads many girls and young women to blame themselves for abuse and harassment.
- ▶ Girls and young women are forced to modify their own behaviour to keep themselves safe: this places limitations on their freedom, opportunity and equality.
- ▶ Many avoid certain places on their own. Some have even dropped out of school or had to leave their jobs because they simply cannot get around their cities safely.

These findings provide a useful backdrop to the findings on group harassment presented in the rest of this report.

## DEFINITIONS

**In this report, we refer to ‘group harassment’ to describe the street harassment (sexual and sexist) perpetrated by two or more people acting together.**

‘Street harassment’ is a term commonly used to describe harassment in public spaces.<sup>1</sup> Gender-based street harassment can be defined as “unwanted comments, gestures, and actions forced on a stranger in a public place without their consent and is directed at them because of their actual or perceived sex, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation”.<sup>2</sup> Street harassment can also be directed at individuals on the basis of discrimination on race, caste or other factors.

Sexual harassment can be defined as “any unwelcome sexual behaviour which is likely to offend, humiliate and intimidate”.<sup>3</sup> In the analysis for the *Unsafe in the City* research, reported in October 2018, sexual harassment was divided into that involving physical contact and that with no physical contact. Sexual harassment not involving physical contact ranged from unwanted so-called ‘compliments’ (or ‘piropos’ in Lima and Madrid) and catcalling, whistling or honking, to intense staring or leering, surreptitious photography, propositioning, and being verbally threatened with rape, through to physical intimidation such as being stalked, chased, followed, flashed and blocked. Sexual harassment involving physical contact ranged from a ‘pat on the bottom’ (creepy contact), to groping and other forms of sexual touch, through to rape.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that any incident involving physical contact could technically be sexual assault, but many young women are inured to some forms of physical contact and would not categorise them as assault.

## 1.2 GROUP HARASSMENT

Overall there is a gap in the literature on group harassment and crowd behaviour, as the little evidence there is on this topic focusses on perpetrators and looks predominantly at individual motivations and enabling factors.<sup>4</sup> Even then, most research is from high income countries, notably the US and Australia. The few empirical studies that have looked into the perpetration of harassment by groups draw out the common features around group behaviour and, linked to that, the norms and attitudes which connect upholding masculinity and power to the harassment or belittling of women. In addition, available evidence suggests that group actions conceal the individual perpetrator, allowing a level of anonymity or ‘de-individualisation’ which removes internal accountability.<sup>5</sup>

### GROUP DYNAMICS

Like social norms more broadly, group norms are “general or consensual standards of behaviour that are considered common or appropriate in a specific context.”<sup>6</sup> They have a strong influence on group members even if the individual members privately disagree with them or would not usually commit to them due to social constraints: this is particularly the case in aggressive instances and behaviours.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, if sexual harassment is perceived as tolerated or expected by other group members, then members are more likely to engage in it.<sup>8</sup>

Further, it has been argued that in a group setting there is a higher chance that one member favours aggression, which can act as a trigger or enabler for individuals who might otherwise not commit aggressive acts.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, there are arguments that harassment of strangers acts as a group bonding exercise, an “enjoyable activity to the groups of men involved”<sup>10</sup> or to “amuse or gain status with male friends”, and subsequently receive positive reinforcement for sexual harassment or aggression from their peers.<sup>11</sup>

This sense of group bonding appears to be intrinsically tied to ideas of masculinity and power. A recent study found that men who have a higher conformity to masculine norms are more likely to engage in gender harassing behaviour when encouraged by a peer than those with a lower conformity to masculine norms.<sup>12</sup>

Group bonding and group norms are powerful factors in shaping an individual’s behaviour, largely because they reduce accountability. Acting as a member of a group can “lead to a sense of anonymity and de-individualisation,” allowing for uninhibited selfish or aggressive behaviour.<sup>13</sup> This anonymity might allow group norms to subsume general social norms in the regulation of an individual’s behaviour.<sup>14</sup> The ‘de-identification’ that results from being a group member can also result in more competitive behaviour, characterised by “situation-specific” responses.<sup>15</sup>

Sexual harassment by a group is a way for men and boys to prove their masculinity to their peers:<sup>16</sup> a “form of hypermasculinity that relies on exerting power over people who are perceived as less valuable.”<sup>17</sup> There is evidence that there are men who only harass women when in the company of other men, to reassert a group identity of men as the ‘dominant sex’.<sup>18</sup> Some of the literature also suggests that sexual harassment is often a response to an individual or group threatening their masculinity or privileged status, including by being “non-traditional women”.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.3 AREAS OF INVESTIGATION

The following areas of investigation were developed for the analysis of the *Free to Be* data on group harassment:

- What are the most common types of street harassment perpetrated by groups?
- When and where does group harassment happen?
- Who is targeted and why?
- How do group norms drive the behaviour of perpetrators?
- How does the response of bystanders influence outcomes?

# 2. METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 DATA COLLECTION

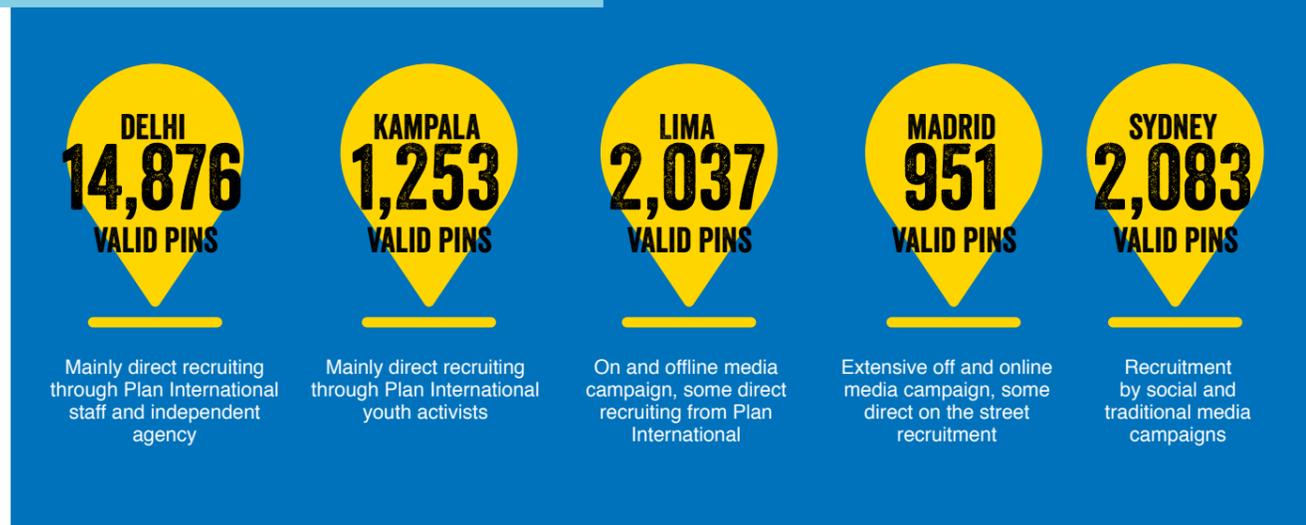
The *Free to Be* project was conceptualised and piloted in Melbourne, Australia, in 2016. It was developed by girls and young women and Plan International in collaboration with Crowdsport and Monash University's XYX Lab. The map-based survey tool was further developed before being rolled out in five 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.<sup>i</sup> 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.<sup>ii</sup>

FIGURE 1: VALID PINS AND RECRUITMENT METHOD, BY CITY



<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Detailed *Free to Be* reports for each city can be accessed and downloaded here: <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-country-reports>



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## 2.2 ANALYSIS OF HARASSMENT PERPETRATED BY GROUPS

Following a full analysis across the *Free to Be* tool, in-depth analysis using the same data was subsequently conducted by Monash University's XYX Lab on street harassment perpetrated by groups (hereafter referred to as group harassment). The analysis only looked at responses to bad pins that included comments with sufficient detail for analysis (in total, 7,221 across the five cities). These were then refined according to the following criteria:

- They mentioned more than one perpetrator: ambiguous comments were excluded (for example where it was unclear if 'boys' was a generic reference to all boys or a specific group of boys).
- They referred to incident/s or experiences of street harassment (for example, incidents of group theft were removed): almost all comments referred to sexual harassment and/or abuse, but a very small number also included racial and homophobic abuse.

This resulted in 750 detailed comments on 'bad pins' across the five cities which were included in the analysis. The pins and comments were examined and coded using in-depth detailed coding on the type of harassment, location, type of perpetrators and information about the respondent.

## 2.3 LIMITATIONS

This analysis of the existing data seeks to investigate new research questions, maximising the use and insights from the stories told by women and girls.

As a result, the sample size for each city is fairly small compared to the wider *Unsafe in the City* findings. Given the methodology and small sample in each city, it is difficult to draw specific conclusions, especially given that participants provided different levels of detail with varying levels of depth and quality.

- Participants from Sydney and Madrid tended to be more descriptive than the other three cities, with more detail on particular incidents.
- Delhi participants made fewer comments than in the other three cities (less than a third of all Delhi pins had comments) and many of these comments were short and generic.
- In Kampala, participants commented on almost every pin and with a greater amount of detail but merged short descriptions with notes about policing and other matters.
- In Lima, comments were a mix of detailed and brief.

However, given the research gap in this area, the trends and details in the comments provide valuable evidence on group harassment.

TABLE 1: TOTAL NUMBER OF BAD PINS WITH COMMENTS, NOTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GROUP HARASSMENT

	Delhi	Kampala	Lima	Madrid	Sydney	Total
# bad pins with comments	3,239	1,006	1,209	592	1,175	7,221
Of the bad pins with comments:						
# comments which reference sexual harassment	1,734	231	987	467	836	4,255
# comments which reference street harassment perpetrated by a group	178	82	205	109	176	750

# 3. FINDINGS

**THIS SECTION OUTLINES WHAT THE FREE TO BE DATA TELLS US ABOUT GROUP HARASSMENT.**

- TYPES OF GROUP HARASSMENT .....15
- WHEN AND WHERE GROUP HARASSMENT HAPPENS.....17
- TARGETING OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN .....22
- GROUP NORMS AND BEHAVIOURS.....24



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## 3.1 TYPES OF GROUP HARASSMENT

This section examines the types of street harassment perpetrated by groups (hereafter referred to as group harassment).<sup>i</sup>

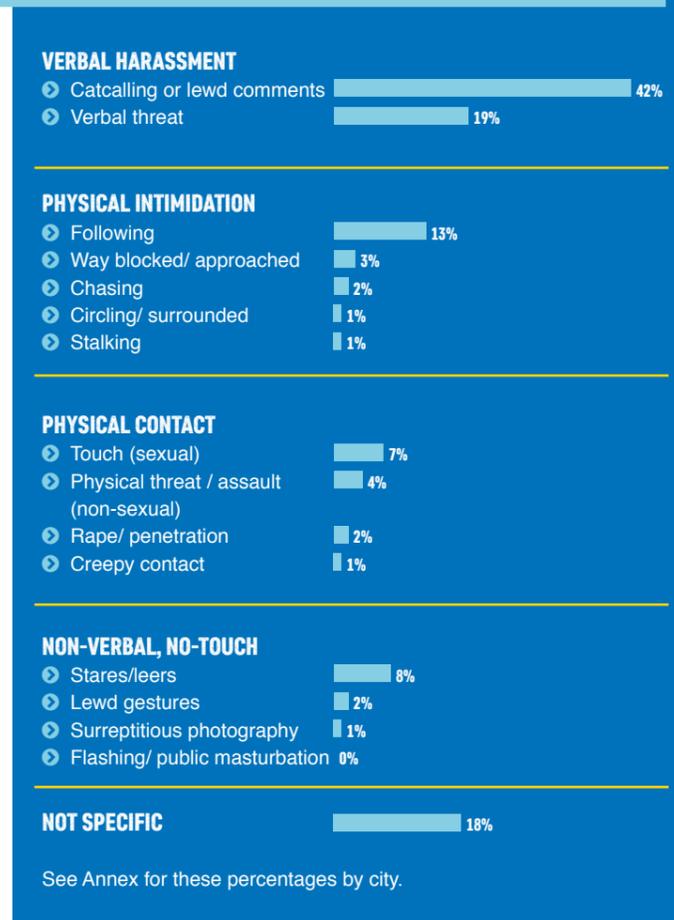
Across all cities, harassment involving groups was noted in an average of 13% of comments on 'bad pins'. This rises to 22% when taken as a percentage of all comments involving sexual harassment. Overall, an overwhelming number of *Free to Be* participants' comments and experiences refer to sexual harassment and abuse: ranging from descriptions of how groups of perpetrators used sexual language when they verbally harassed and threatened girls and young women, to how they groped and touched girls and young women and, in some incidents, raped them.

However, it was not always clear from comments – about 18% were not specific – what form of group harassment the incident refers to, and this was more likely in Lima and Delhi.

### 3.1.1 VERBAL HARASSMENT

Verbal harassment was overwhelmingly the most common form of group harassment reported by participants across all cities (see Figure 2). Of that, catcalling was more frequently mentioned by girls and young women than aggressive verbal threats.

**FIGURE 2: TYPES OF GROUP HARASSMENT, AS % OF ALL GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS ACROSS FIVE CITIES<sup>iii</sup>**



**TABLE 2: % OF COMMENTS NOTING PERPETRATORS IN GROUPS<sup>ii</sup>**

	% of all comments noting groups	% of sexual harassment comments noting groups
Delhi	5%	10%
Kampala	8%	35%
Lima	17%	21%
Madrid	18%	23%
Sydney	15%	21%
Average across cities	13%	22%

i As stated in section 1.2, this report uses the term group harassment to describe gender-based street harassment, or the harassment against women and girls in all their diversity perpetrated by groups of men and boys in public spaces (rather than in private spaces such as within homes). It is also recognised that some of girls' and young women's experiences could also constitute sexual abuse, violence and/or assault.

ii Refer to Table 1 detailing the numbers which generate these percentages.

iii Some group harassment comments were allocated multiple codes as they reflected multiple forms of harassment.

The comments highlight how frightening, intimidating and/or infuriating verbal harassment is, especially when performed by groups.

“I got catcalled by construction workers on my way to a job interview. Threw me off for the rest of the day: being catcalled makes you want to cover yourself in heaps of layers and hide.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, SYDNEY

“When I am in the market, men yell at me that we want to touch where your mum and dad can't touch, which makes me feel I am not safe here because they are always there doing nothing.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, KAMPALA

“A few days ago, I was harassed by several guys, they are usually in that area, they said all sorts of things to me and I was very scared... I do not go through that area anymore.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 25, MADRID

Harassment directed at LGBTIQ+ participants, and racist harassment on the street by groups, was also reported by a small number of *Free to Be* participants.

“They wanted to hit me for being trans.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 27, LIMA

“I was with my girlfriend down the street and a group started insulting us by calling us lesbian whores and shouting things [...] We have had a very bad time.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, MADRID

“Use of offensive language and racist slurs by a group of youngish boys and an old man. Got yelled at and display of threatening and aggressive behaviour.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 30, SYDNEY

### 3.1.2 FOLLOWING AND CHASING

The most common form of physical intimidation was being followed by a group of harassers, which girls and young women reported often occurred alongside verbal harassment. On average across the cities, 13% of group harassment comments referred to being followed, rising to 29% in Madrid.

“Wrong comments, following and eve teasing by group of boys in my street.”

GIRL, 15, DELHI

### TYPES OF GROUP HARASSMENT REPORTED

- All forms of harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys were overwhelmingly sexual in nature.
- Verbal harassment, and in particular catcalling, was the most common form of street harassment performed by groups.
- Being followed by groups of men was also reported fairly frequently: a particularly frightening form of physical intimidation which often led to girls and young women having to run or hide from the perpetrators.

“Followed by a car with 2 unknown young men as I was returning from a party. There were no street lights and it was deserted. They seemed to drive away so I ran and hid in someone's front yard. Within 1 minute the car returned, slowly doing laps of the street. They eventually drove off and I ran home terrified.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SYDNEY

“Old men follow me in their cars often asking me for sex when am coming from work.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, KAMPALA

“Boys in moto-taxi pass saying uncomfortable things. Also happens with men in cars, twice was followed by these cars.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 28, LIMA

In some instances, the situation escalated to one in which the young woman felt compelled to run in order to escape. Although this was not a frequent occurrence (reported in 2% of incidents) it does indicate the level of fear and intimidation experienced by the *Free to Be* participants and how incidents can escalate.

“I was returning to my house at 9 o'clock at night, when a car stopped and two men got out. They started following me and I started running until I got home.”

GIRL, 16, MADRID

“Friend and I were harassed up King street while walking by a pair of tradies [tradesman] driving in their van, yelling about what I was wearing and telling us to get in the van. They stopped their van and one got out and began to chase us back down King street until we hid in a shop.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, SYDNEY



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## 3.2 WHEN AND WHERE GROUP HARASSMENT HAPPENS

Street harassment limits the ability of women and girls to move freely, safely and comfortably in their city.<sup>20</sup> Findings from *Unsafe in the City* demonstrate how such harassment is taking place throughout their journeys to and from school, college or work, and at all times of day and night. This means that girls' and young women's movement around the city is limited, as are their opportunities and their participation in city life.<sup>21</sup>

This section outlines the characteristics of group harassment in terms of location and time of day, noting particularly how it differs from street harassment more generally, as described in the *Unsafe in the City* report.

### 3.2.1 LOCATION

#### ON THE STREET

As shown in Figure 3, across all five cities, an average of 88% of group harassment recorded occurred on the streets of the city. When comparing the incidents of group harassment with overall street harassment and violence, as described by girls and young women in *Unsafe in the City*, this is higher than the 66% of 'bad pins' recorded<sup>22</sup> - indicating that group harassment was a significant issue for girls and young women as they moved through the streets of their cities.

However, the average incidence of group harassment on public transport was lower, at 17%, than the 22% recorded for 'bad pins' in *Unsafe in the City*.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that individual perpetrators use the crowded space on public transport as a cover for harassment. In contrast, on the street, it is the group context which provides that lack of accountability for each individual, encouraging uninhibited, self-centred and aggressive behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

Levels of group harassment on or around public transport varied from city to city, with bus stops often being places where young women might be targeted on a regular basis.

“Two guys on a bus watched me the whole way to my stop then got off at my stop with me. I ran.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 27, SYDNEY

“I get home from work around 11pm and this is my bus stop. Once when leaving 3 guys surrounded me and followed me home. I'm sure that if I hadn't taken out my phone and pretended to talk to someone and said that I saw them on the terrace, they would DEFINITELY have done something.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, MADRID

#### AROUND SCHOOLS

There were a large number of group harassment incidents as young women and girls moved to and from school. This was especially noted in Delhi (37%), as shown in Figure 3. It is particularly worrying as in South East Asia harassment has been found to contribute to girls and young women dropping out of school.<sup>25</sup> In just under a third of the cases in Delhi, groups of men and boys were described as gathering on a daily basis outside schools at the times when students would enter and leave.

“There are boys who say bad things at the school gate.”

GIRL, 12, DELHI

“On the way to school, at the gate, boys stand around and engage in harassment.”

GIRL, 17, DELHI

**FIGURE 3: LOCATION OF INCIDENTS CATEGORISED AS GROUP HARASSMENT, AS % OF ALL GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS<sup>i</sup>**



**On the street**

Delhi: 91%  
Kampala: 99%  
Lima: 89%  
Madrid: 79%  
Sydney: 82%  
Total: 88%



**To and from schools**

Delhi: 37%  
Kampala: 22%  
Lima: 12%  
Madrid: 2%  
Sydney: 7%  
Total: 16%



**Bars and clubs**

Delhi: -  
Kampala: 2%  
Lima: 1%  
Madrid: 6%  
Sydney: 3%  
Total: 2%



**Public transport**

Delhi: 22%  
Kampala: 20%  
Lima: 12%  
Madrid: 23%  
Sydney: 14%  
Total: 17%



**Public space (parks/shops)**

Delhi: 30%  
Kampala: 4%  
Lima: 7%  
Madrid: 12%  
Sydney: 9%  
Total: 13%

**Not specified**

Delhi: 1%  
Kampala: 1%  
Lima: 1%  
Madrid: -  
Sydney: 1%  
Total: 1%

<sup>i</sup> Some incidents were allocated multiple codes

To a lesser extent, this gathering of groups of men and boys outside schools also occurred in other cities.

“There are so many gang members behind the school that, at the time students depart, you cannot feel safe because they start whistling, bothering, and they start following you. The patrols pass by but they do not do anything when they see a student in the middle of being abused!!” GIRL 14, LIMA.

“Whenever I am going to school, boys disturb me, calling me names. It makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what should be done.” GIRL, 15, KAMPALA

In Sydney, groups of boys were likely to hang around outside their own school gates and harass women and girls walking past.

“Grew up nearby and was constantly harassed when walking past this school by the students. [...] Have seen it happen to other women. Recommend avoiding the area around school start/end times.” YOUNG WOMAN, 25, SYDNEY

“Group of boys in the boys' high school sit out near the gate during lunch or recess hours. Every time I walk to or come from the station during these times, they are calling out and giving me unwanted attention. This makes it a very uncomfortable walk every day.” YOUNG WOMAN, 22, SYDNEY

The gathering of men on a daily basis to harass was also noted as occurring in other locations where women might walk past.

“Men on their lunch break lurk to watch women going to the nearby gym in their sports gear. They elbow each other, point, laugh and take photos of lycra clad bottoms.” YOUNG WOMAN, 22, SYDNEY

**3.2.2 TIME OF DAY**

Group harassment tended to occur more often in the evenings and late at night (an average of 44%, as shown in Table 3). This percentage rises to 58% in Madrid, and 60% in Sydney. However, in Lima, group harassment occurred more frequently during the day – morning and afternoon (44%) – than in the evening or late at night (36%).

When comparing group harassment incidents with general street harassment and violence, however, the group harassment was more prevalent during the day for every city, except Kampala where a much larger proportion of group harassment occurred at ‘any time’. On average, across the five cities, 34% of group harassment happened in the morning or afternoon, compared to 26% of all ‘bad pins’. This aligns with the earlier descriptions of group harassment taking place as *Free to Be* participants travelled to and from school and work.

**TABLE 3: TIME OF DAY INCIDENTS OCCURRED, COMPARING % OF ALL BAD PINS AND % OF ALL GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS, BY CITY**

		Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Late night	Anytime	N/A
<b>Delhi</b>	All bad pins (9360)	4%	20%	25%	14%	37%	1%
	Group harassment (178)	10 %	28%	21%	7%	35%	-
<b>Kampala</b>	All bad pins (1007)	5%	8%	28%	30%	29%	0%
	Group harassment (82)	5%	7%	27%	21%	40%	-
<b>Lima</b>	All bad pins (1821)	13%	24%	23%	10%	29%	1%
	Group harassment (205)	12%	32%	25%	11%	20%	0%
<b>Madrid</b>	All bad pins (798)	9%	20%	28%	21%	21%	1%
	Group harassment (109)	8%	25%	33%	25%	9%	-
<b>Sydney</b>	All bad pins (1566)	7%	17%	23%	32%	19%	1%
	Group harassment (176)	7%	22%	26%	34%	11%	-
<b>Average</b>	All bad pins (14552)	8%	18%	25%	21%	27%	1%
	Group harassment (750)	9%	25%	26%	18%	22%	0%



### 3.2.3 FREQUENCY AND LENGTH OF INCIDENT

#### REPEATED INCIDENTS

Many participants described incidents which frequently occur in a particular place and/or at a particular time: this was mentioned in 35% of group harassment comments across the cities but rose to a staggering 70% in Delhi (see Figure 4).

The persistent nature of this harassment was wearying and frightening for respondents.

“On the street in front of my house, a construction is being carried out, the bricklayers call out ‘piropos’<sup>i</sup> not only to me, but also to my fifteen-year old sister, who - not wanting problems - has had to pass uncomfortable moments while she’s waited for the door to open.” YOUNG WOMAN, 21, LIMA

“Around 18.00 there is usually a group of workers waiting for a bus. Some make comments and others can’t stop looking at you.” YOUNG WOMAN, 21, MADRID

“I always get catcalled by men (usually groups of around 2-3) driving past in their cars in the afternoon. The most irritating thing is that you can’t do anything about it.” YOUNG WOMAN, 18, SYDNEY

#### SHORT AND EXTENDED EVENTS

In Figure 4, ‘short events’ refer to those verbal and sometimes physical incidents, where perpetrators have disappeared or driven off before a participant realised what was happening. These were fairly common in all cities, occurring on average in 10% of group harassment incidents. Many incidents of group harassment, especially in Sydney, happened from vehicles, with harassers calling out abuse before driving away.

“Some boys were driving in the market at a very fast speed, they pulled my scarf and I fell on the road.” YOUNG WOMAN, 18, DELHI

“Was walking back to the train station with two work friends and a car beeped at us while we waited for the lights to turn green. We ignored it thinking nothing of it, but they beeped again, and again... and again. They also yelled out ‘Where you going?!’ Then they drove off and swore at us because we didn’t respond.” YOUNG WOMAN, 27, SYDNEY

“A car slowed to my walking pace on a main road and yelled out how they were going to f\*\*k me in the ass. I was in tracksuit pants and a baggy jumper.” YOUNG WOMAN, 24, SYDNEY

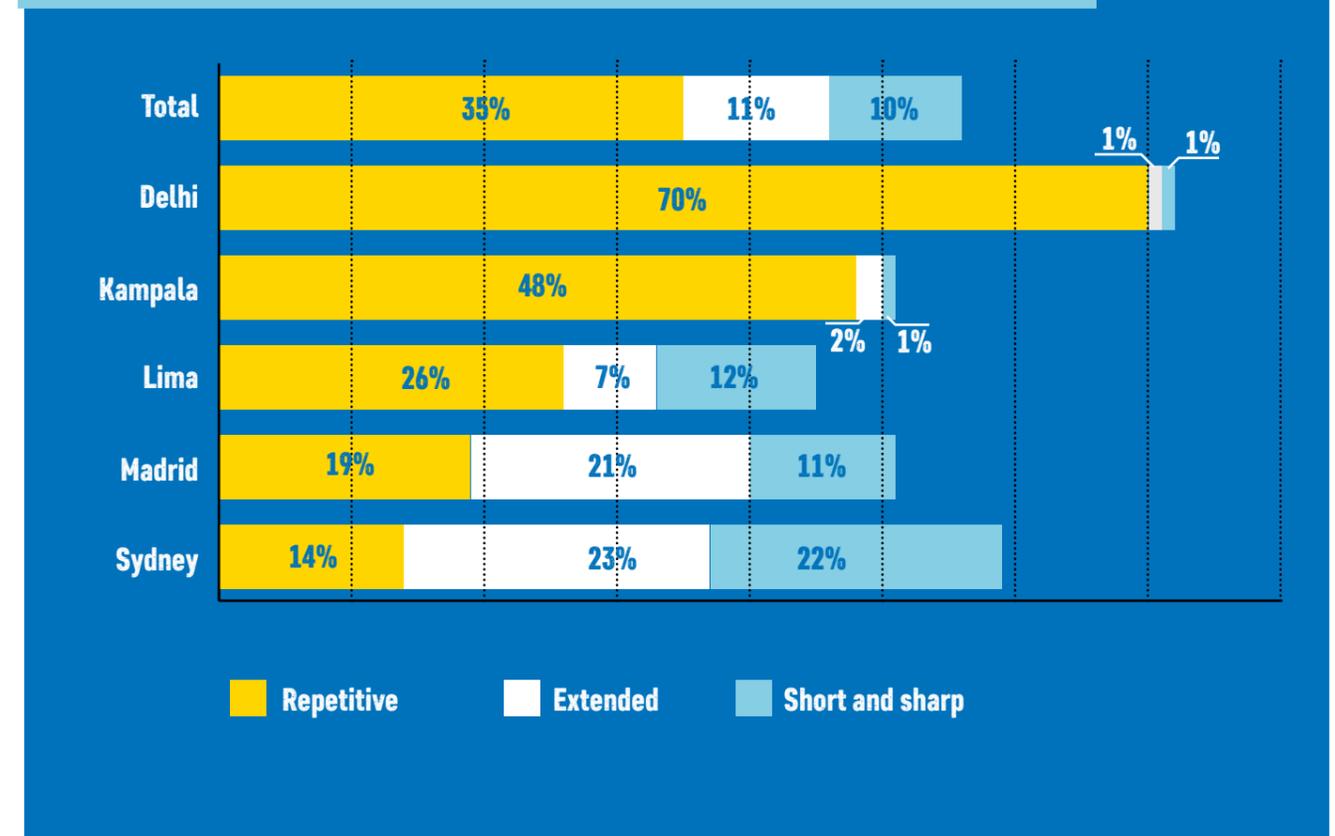
The last comment, in which the young woman details what she was wearing, sheds some light on how girls and young women try to defend themselves against being blamed for the harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys.

‘Extended events’ were those, averaging out at 11% of all incidents, which continued over time and space, often including multiple types of abuse, ratcheting up tension and fear for those being harassed. There were considerably more of these incidents recorded for Sydney (23%) and Madrid (21%).

“I identified a group of 3 guys who were trying to sneak into a house. When I returned around 1 in the morning to home, they saw me and began to walk behind me faster and faster. I had to put myself in a bar near the park and then run to my house. They stayed for a long time waiting on the sidewalk in front.” YOUNG WOMAN, 18, MADRID

“Two men [...] started talking to my friend and I on the platform. We got on the train and they sat with us (they were much older), even after constantly being told to ‘leave us alone please’. Even after we moved carriages, they followed us. All the way to Rhodes. No one helped us. Not until we told the guard at Rhodes station.” YOUNG WOMAN, 19, SYDNEY

FIGURE 4: FREQUENCY OF GROUP HARASSMENT INCIDENTS, AS % OF GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS



#### WHEN AND WHERE GROUP HARASSMENT HAPPENS

- Group harassment, as compared to the broader harassment and violence described by girls and young women, tended to occur more often on the street and less often on public transport.
- A concerning amount of group harassment happened in and around school buildings, with groups of men and boys gathering to target young women and girls as they arrived and left or walked past.
- Group harassment was often repetitive, even on a daily basis.
- Group harassment tended to occur more during the evening and night.
- When comparing group harassment incidents with general street harassment and violence, however, the group harassment was more prevalent during the day.
- Some group harassment incidents were short and sharp, with the harasser departing before the women or girl had processed what was happening to her. Other incidents were extended, taking place over time and space, often with more than one type of harassment.

<sup>i</sup> ‘Piropos’ refers to verbal harassment such as unsolicited comments about a woman’s appearance. These are often considered by the harasser to be ‘compliments.’



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### 3.3 TARGETING OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Street harassment is often characterized by a power imbalance between perpetrators and their targets, due to a complex array of social and cultural factors including gender inequality and patriarchal social structures.<sup>26</sup> The *Free to Be* data suggests that this imbalance is amplified when perpetrators operate in groups. In a group, harassers may be keener to demonstrate their power: a “form of hypermasculinity that relies on exerting power over people who are perceived as less valuable,”<sup>27</sup> and those targeted will feel more vulnerable and powerless by virtue of being outnumbered.

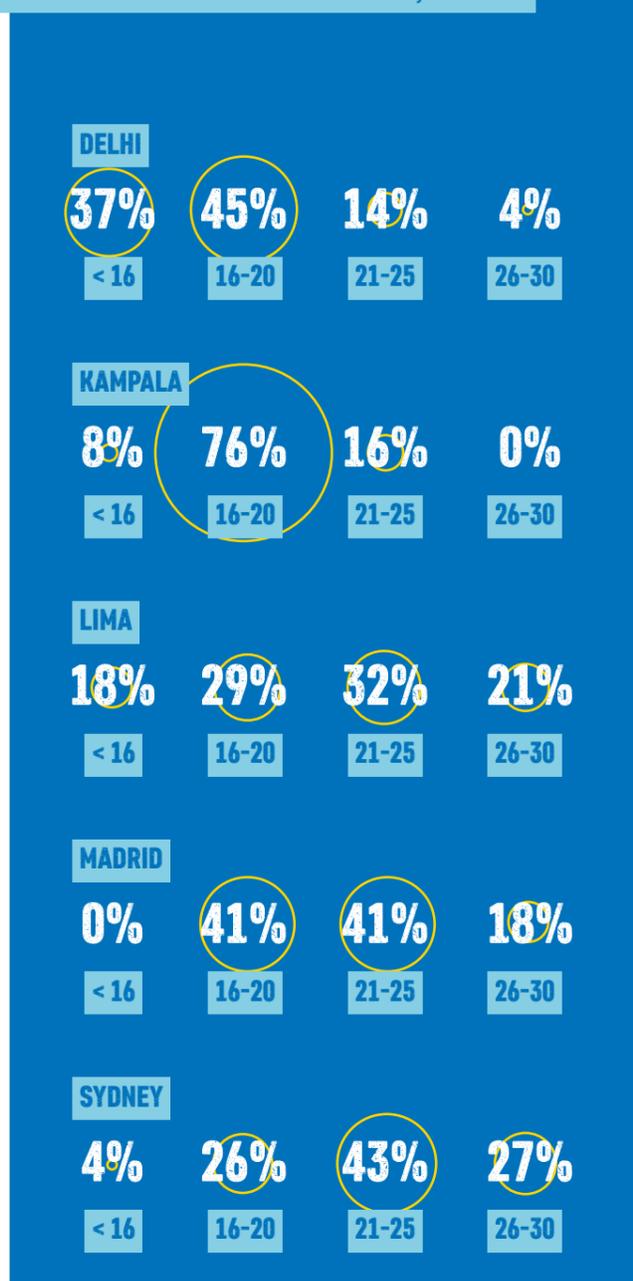
“The men naturally harass women because they feel stronger than them.” YOUNG WOMAN, 19, KAMPALA

#### 3.3.1 AGE

*Free to Be* participants who reported group harassment were often young. Across the five cities, 55% of those who provided a comment on group harassment were aged 20 or younger. Figure 5 provides a breakdown of age of all respondents as a proportion of those reporting group harassment from each city. It shows that, taking all cities into account, the 16-20-year-old group was most likely to report group harassment. Further, some comments from older participants described incidents which had occurred when they were younger.

This suggests that, of the *Free to Be* participants, younger women and adolescent girls were more often recipients of group harassment. This finding is in line with previous research that also suggests that women typically begin to experience street harassment when they are in adolescence, even during its early stages.<sup>28</sup> Comments also referred to the power imbalance caused by age difference, with the implication that girls and young women found group harassment more frightening the younger they were.

FIGURE 5: AVERAGE AGE OF PARTICIPANTS AS % OF THOSE REPORTING GROUP HARASSMENT, BY CITY



“When I was 13-years-old I was on my way to school and I was the only one in the train carriage. Two guys got on and sat down opposite. For the whole train trip, they stared and talked about me. As a thirteen-year-old girl I was terrified and when I reached my stop, I ran off the train.” YOUNG WOMAN, 18, SYDNEY

“I live very close to this place and from the age of 12 some guys who live in the passage always bothered me, they whistled at me and looked as if they wanted to touch me or do something to me. This made me stop going through that place and always try to go out with my parents. I still fear them but not as much as before.” YOUNG WOMAN, 19, LIMA

“Walking home from the shops in the afternoon, followed by older teenagers. They started running and calling out to me and to each other, I ran into a neighbour’s house and my friend’s mum walked me home when they’d gone. I was 14.” GIRL, 14, SYDNEY

Young women and girls reflected on how much more vulnerable they were when they were alone.

“They raped and stole [from] my friend from here because there are few people during the night and the bad people come in groups so no one can help you.” GIRL, 17, KAMPALA

“I had a really bad experience last week [...] there was like this group of men and they pretty much just kept talking to me, they were, like, ‘Hey you’re cute, you’re sexy’ and I was, like, ‘Stop, stop.’ And I was alone and, if I was with someone else, I don’t think they would have approached me, or I don’t think they would have had the courage to say anything. And I would have been, like, ‘Shut up’ as opposed to ‘I’m scared’.” YOUNG WOMEN, REFLECTION WORKSHOP, SYDNEY

Interestingly, one participant described how the behaviour changed when the perpetrators realised there were men in their group.

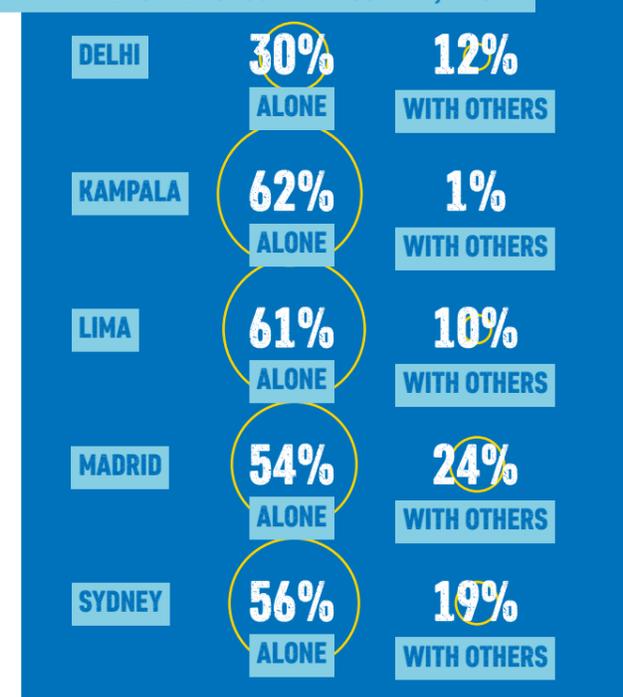
“I was coming back from shopping with some friends and at the gas station some boys passed by in a car shouting their mouths off. When one of my (male) friends answered them, they fell silent. I guess because they had not seen that we were not just girls.” YOUNG WOMAN, 21, MADRID

The silencing of the harassers when they realised there were men in the group alludes to the highly gendered nature of this kind of harassment – it was directed at girls and young women, not boys or men. These experiences also reflect forms of masculinity that promote men’s ownership of women, so that women who are with other men in public are usually seen as ‘off limits’ – though it is worth noting that previous research has indicated that even the presence of other men is not always sufficient to deter harassers.<sup>30</sup>

#### 3.3.2 COMPANY AND ISOLATION

Many respondents (35%) did not specify whether they were alone or with others when they were harassed. However, for those that did, in all five cities, they were more likely to be alone when an incident happened (see Figure 6), again aligning with findings from previous research.<sup>29</sup>

FIGURE 6: RESPONDENTS ALONE OR WITH OTHERS WHEN GROUP HARASSMENT TOOK PLACE, AS % OF ALL THAT REPORTED GROUP HARASSMENT, BY CITY



#### TARGETING THE MOST VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

- Power imbalances between men and women are amplified when men and boys gather and act in larger groups: men and boys exploited these power imbalances, often by targeting the most vulnerable – girls or very young women on their own.
- Being young and alone made these incidents particularly frightening: they felt powerless to stop the harassment or prevent it from escalating.



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## 3.4 GROUP NORMS AND BEHAVIOURS

In this section the behaviours exhibited by perpetrators acting in groups are examined. As outlined in the introduction, men's peer support and group membership can work to condone, excuse and normalise different forms of gender-based violence. There is evidence to suggest that groups of young men, particularly when 'out on the town,' use some forms of sexual harassment in what might be best described as a ritualistic manner, in order to bond as a group<sup>31</sup>: a form of "group performances of masculinity" which perpetuates traditional views of masculinity. Similarly, it has been argued that the practice of 'girl watching' by men operates to "build shared masculine identities and social relations," with these acts simultaneously functioning as an expression of gender-based power.<sup>32</sup> The same study further argues that engaging in this practice requires men to suppress empathy towards women.

### 3.4.1 COMPOSITION OF GROUPS

Group harassment seems to have occurred most often in groups of three or more: 77% of reported incidents were perpetrated by presumed groups<sup>i</sup> or groups of three or more, whereas just 11% of incidents were perpetrated by a pair of harassers. Twelve percent of comments did not specify the number of perpetrators.

"Coming home at night, two men grabbed me and cornered me against a wall and started to touch me. I managed to get away from them and run." **YOUNG WOMAN, 23, MADRID**

"On a bus, a group of 10-15 young males describing women in inhumane, misogynistic and sexist ways. Was so terrified for my own safety as well as safety of all women on bus and the women they were about to meet up with." **YOUNG WOMAN, 20, SYDNEY**

### 3.4.2 BEHAVIOURS OF GROUPS

Table 4 outlines some of the behaviour categories identified from comments on group harassment. Being 'under the influence' of drugs and alcohol was specifically noted in 12% of all group harassment incidents across the five cities, suggesting that drugs and alcohol were likely to play a role in enhancing perpetrators' harassing behaviour.

"There are always drunk men or in a group here, annoying the women who pass by. It is very uncomfortable because they are in a group and it is impossible not to be pestered by them." **YOUNG WOMAN, 25, LIMA**

"I was going home alone at dawn, I came across a group of drunken guys who started to follow me and shout things like 'I'm going to pound your ass'... They were so drunk that in the end they were lying on a bench, but I was very afraid." **YOUNG WOMAN, 19, MADRID**

Other studies have also found that alcohol is linked to men's 'risky' sexual behaviour and sexual aggression and may increase group bonding.<sup>33</sup>

Peers encouraging or defending each other's actions, or laughing, were the next most frequent behaviours referenced, examined in more detail in the next section.

TABLE 4: BEHAVIOURS OF GROUP PERPETRATORS, AS % OF ALL THAT REPORTED GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS, BY CITY

	Delhi	Kampala	Lima	Madrid	Sydney	Total from all cities
Under the influence of alcohol or drugs	12 %	18%	9%	13%	12%	12%
Encouragement or defending of actions	1%	1%	13%	16%	15%	10%
Laughing	1%	1%	3%	10%	8%	5%
Halted on threat of repercussions	-	-	1%	10%	7%	3%
Rowdy/ Hooligan (incl. gang references)	-	1%	4%	-	3%	2%
Waiting till young women are alone or hiding before they approach	-	-	1%	-	2%	1%
Opportunistic use of crowd	1%	1%	1%	-	-	1%
No explicit behaviour mentioned	28%	65%	29%	17%	15%	27%

### 3.4.3 GROUP SANCTIONS AND ENCOURAGEMENT

In Sydney, Madrid and Lima, comments often referred to members of the group encouraging or 'egging on' the harassment by one of their number. This included defending their actions.

"Ass grabbed under my skirt by one guy whilst walking past a group of males on my way home. His friends defended him when I got in his face." **YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SYDNEY**

"The workers of this polleria [poultry shop] harass me whenever I pass by. I complained to their boss and he did nothing about it, nor did he even want me to make a formal complaint. It happens every day. It's so exasperating that I avoid going through there whenever I can." **YOUNG WOMAN, 22, LIMA**

What this kind of behaviour illustrates is a phenomenon of group behaviour where members will do things that they might not do as an individual, in order to be seen or accepted as one of the group. Forming any group means creating an 'in-group' and an 'out-group', and this can lead to diminished personal responsibility in order to preserve the collective identity.<sup>34</sup> For groups of men specifically, this can work to normalise the use of street harassment as a means of achieving group identity. In addition, evidence suggests that environments which are tolerant of harassment support other forms of sexual violence, making it possible that men who are involved in harassment as a group might feel more entitled to harass individually.<sup>35</sup>

In many cases, incidents of group harassment appeared to be entertaining or 'fun' to the perpetrators. Actions range from catcalling and propositioning, to groping and the reactions of the women and girls often contributed to the 'entertainment' value for the men.

"I left work and a group of young people saw fit to follow me to the train laughing and they said 'Let's go, now that we have already made her feel uncomfortable for a while.'" **YOUNG WOMAN, 28, MADRID**

"A group of men began to verbally harass me and one of them dared to touch me, the rest just laughed." **YOUNG WOMAN, 19, LIMA**

"I was walking to the bus stop at about 6pm where ahead I could see a group of intoxicated middle-aged men walking towards me. As they came closer, they jeered at me: 'Take a look at this one's...' etc and came quite close into my face. When I mumbled 'F\*\*\* off', they laughed and one exclaimed 'We've got a live one here boys!'" **YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SYDNEY**

Laughing at the target as a response to harassment is another way of bonding as a group, and, in deepening her trauma or humiliation, illustrates the absence of any empathy towards the girl or young woman being harassed.<sup>36</sup> Girls and women can be viewed as minor, albeit necessary, catalysts in a greater game, that of competitive bonding between men: she is incidental, and her level of fear is irrelevant.

"Last week returning from having a drink with some friends, not too late, some drunken dudes began to yell all sorts of stuff at us. At the end they said 'Well, let's watch out, in case they report us' and they started to laugh in our faces. We did not even answer them because they scared us. I don't even want to imagine what would have happened if I was alone." **GIRL, 17, MADRID**

i 'Presumed groups' refers to comments where a plural was used in relation to the perpetrator, for example, "they harassed me and my partner" were coded as presumed groups.

“I went down this street to go to my friend’s house a couple of blocks away, when four men started saying ‘What a nice ass’, ‘She’s tasty’, ‘Do not get nervous’ while one of them leaned towards me, which made me think I was going to be touched or attacked. I got very nervous and started walking faster while listening to them laughing.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 25, LIMA**

The perpetrators’ laughter may also represent gender differences in the way street harassment is perceived and understood and this again relates to the suppression of empathy towards women required for men and boys to engage in this behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Whilst perpetrators might see street harassment as a ‘joke’ or ‘a bit of fun between men’, for women and girls, it is frightening and can have serious consequences on their lives, causing them to alter their own behaviour to try to ensure their safety.

Another aspect to group encouragement is peer group pressure: not joining in might result in becoming a target for the rest of the group. This highlights how certain constructions of masculinity can be damaging to men too, forcing them to behave in certain ways that they would not otherwise choose.

“I was beaten by a group of drug addicts. Being idle and peer pressure, because I heard one of the boys tell them that if they didn’t do it they will be sent away from the group.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 20, KAMPALA**

### 3.4.4 CHALLENGING PERPETRATORS

Threading through some of the stories are accounts of girls and women challenging group harassment. This was greeted in a variety of ways: with laughter, threats, further abuse or just completely ignored.

“Was walking past two men when they commented ‘Looking sexy’, I scoffed and kept walking and they turned around, one coming very close and telling me ‘I should be f\*\*\*ing grateful for the attention.’” **YOUNG WOMAN, 29, SYDNEY**

“Boys give comments and I ignored them once or twice, but we couldn’t handle it. We had a fight. We hit each other. They are in 12th [grade]. They threatened me that when I leave school, they will hit me. Sometimes they say something very bad and we can’t handle it any more. I told my parents and teachers.” **GIRL, 17, DELHI**

It has been argued that “all-male groups encourage, justify, and support the abuse of women by their members to repair ‘damaged patriarchal masculinity’.”<sup>38</sup> This kind of masculinity requires, amongst other things, control and domination over women. In answering back to the perpetrators, these young women and girls have challenged a particular masculine identity, and the men’s behaviour escalates in order to reaffirm their toughness in front of male peers.

### 3.4.5 BYSTANDER INTERVENTIONS

Bystanders are individuals who witness a particular incident occurring (street harassment, for the purposes of this report), and who do nothing, or take action that either helps or exacerbates the situation.<sup>39</sup>

*Free to Be* participants who were the target of group incidents were more likely to note that bystanders did nothing rather than record any active intervention: of the 37 incidents which recorded the presence of bystanders, almost three quarters noted bystander inactivity. Although this data is limited, it is nonetheless consistent with previous research on bystander intervention for street harassment, which suggests that intervention is not common.<sup>40</sup>

“Two friends and I rode the night bus and guys were saying things to us for the whole journey and the worst was that the bus was full of people and nobody said anything, even hearing that they threatened us saying they were going to get off at our stop.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 25, MADRID**

“Was chased down the street by 2 young men on push bikes, being catcalled and harassed as I walked home with hands full of shopping bags. Stopped outside a cafe, male worker saw me being harassed and did nothing.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 29, SYDNEY**

“I got on a public transport bus and a couple of guys made a comment about my butt, I confronted them but nobody in the bus supported me.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 22, LIMA**

Other members of a group can also be classified as bystanders, but there were no reports from *Free to Be* participants of group members holding each other back. Indeed (as discussed in 3.4.1), group members may face, or fear facing, negative repercussions and ostracisation for intervening in their friends’ behaviour.

In some incidents, bystanders sided with the harassing group: either through dismissing the issue or blaming the target for the situation.

“Some people tried to physically harass me and nobody came [to] help, and on top of that perceived me to be in the wrong.” **GIRL, 14, DELHI**

“One time, when I was returning from school, some boys passed comments at me and followed me. One of my brother’s friends saw me and complained to my brother that I was spending time with these boys.” **GIRL, 15, DELHI**

The phenomenon of groups laughing at targets extended in some cases to bystanders who joined in the laughter.

“Once they put their hands on me while I went to the pharmacy. Everyone who passed by, including women, just laughed.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 25, LIMA**

In a couple of instances, participants noted a lack of, or an insufficient intervention from, authority figures, particularly security personnel. As one participant in the Lima reflection workshop noted “security is only applied for accidents, but not so much for harassment.”

“Was sitting with my female friend in a booth at the bank and some guys came up to us. We had a stressful night, so asked them politely to please let us chat alone. They became abusive, calling us ‘c\*\*\*s’ and telling us we were ugly anyway. They eventually left. Security did nothing.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 24, SYDNEY**

In one case the group harassment was from police. When incidents such as these occur, it can erode the trust young women and girls have in authority figures and makes it much less likely that they will report harassment.

“Policemen in a patrol car whistled at me when I was waiting at the bus stop.” **GIRL, 16, LIMA**

Where there was bystander activity, it was often led by women and participants themselves reported intervening to help other young women who were being harassed or abused.

“The serenazgo [police] of the place and two men wanted to abuse me and two companions. If a woman had not defended us, they would have achieved their goal.” **GIRL, 16, LIMA**

“I went to work in the morning about 10am, and there was another girl walking around. Two men began to say ‘Come here’ to the girl and other obscene things. I approached her so she would feel accompanied... I wondered if something else had happened to her when she was alone... And it was only 10 o’clock in the morning.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 27, MADRID**

“Saw two men try and force a young woman into a car, whilst she was waiting for a bus. Yelled at them from my window to stop, they drove off. My boyfriend went to wait with her until the bus came.” **YOUNG WOMAN, 24, SYDNEY**

**“TWO MEN SAT NEXT TO ME, LEGS TOUCHING, ASKING WHAT I WAS DOING AND WHEN I ASKED THEM TO LEAVE, THEY ABUSED ME AND CALLED ME A SLUT. I TOLD THE POLICE NEARBY AND THEY DID ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 24, SYDNEY**



Some comments suggested an attempt at group harassment being halted by the presence of others in the general vicinity who might potentially intervene, or at least take notice of what was happening. This was sometimes enough to deter perpetrators from continuing their harassment or it helped young women and girls to stand up to the harassers.

“At the bus stop there are a series of itinerant men (jaladores, bill collectors, vendors) who harass me every day. They tell me obscene things and they are always in a group so I am afraid to confront them because they are 3 or more men. Sometimes I have stood up to them because I feel that there are people nearby who can help me if something happens, but not always.” YOUNG WOMAN, 21, LIMA

“Catcalled with sexually explicit profanity about what they’d like to do to me. They waited till the street was empty but I yelled out what they said to me so passers-by could hear. The catcaller was glared at by businessmen, including one who stopped and pointedly looked at him. He left shortly after. This happened when I was 22.” YOUNG WOMAN, 25, SYDNEY

“I was waiting for my best friend leaning against the wall. Two men approached me and asked me what I was doing there. They cornered me in broad daylight. I confronted them. I shouted to them: leave me alone, you are sleazeballs, what are you saying? When people looked at them, they walked off insulting me as they went. I kept shouting until I lost sight of them.” YOUNG WOMAN, 25, LIMA

### THE EFFECT OF GROUP NORMS AND BEHAVIOURS

- Some boys and men encouraged and endorsed harassing behaviour in groups, often with negative repercussions for any group member speaking out against it.
- Group harassment was often seen as a form of entertainment and amusement, with little or no thought for the target of the abuse.
- Participants who answered back reported anger, escalation or laughter from the perpetrators.
- Bystanders were unlikely to intervene, and in some cases actually encouraged the bad behaviour of groups.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



## 4.1 CONCLUSIONS

“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...so it’s a whole cyclic effect which begins and starts with the culture of gender-based street harassment, toxic masculinity and lack of education on that.” YOUNG WOMAN, SYDNEY, REFLECTION WORKSHOP

The findings presented in this report demonstrate how group harassment in particular links to and feeds off a culture of “toxic masculinity”, a masculinity that is nevertheless normalised and tolerated. The motivations behind group harassment are likely to be different from the motivations behind harassment perpetrated by individuals - with group dynamics, expectations and male bonding a predominant factor. Much of the abuse of girls and young women appears to have been performed primarily to entertain other members of the group and/or to reassert masculine status amongst that group. Norms established within groups of men can work to condone, minimise and normalise the perpetration of gender-based violence, resulting in a lack of consideration or empathy for the women and girls targeted - although it might be hoped that they would not condone such behaviour towards their own sisters, mothers and partners. Group membership seems to prevent men from speaking out or challenging their peers’ behaviour, and in fact group members tend to condone, encourage or defend each other’s behaviour.

### TARGETING THE MOST VULNERABLE

Given that men appear to harass as a way to reassert masculinity within a group, it is disturbing that, in general, they target the most vulnerable: girls or very young women, usually by themselves. Gender-based street harassment is always about exploiting power imbalances, and our findings suggest that the wider this imbalance is, the more likely men are to exploit it. Further, girls and women reported feeling much more frightened when they were younger: older

women may have developed the strategies, and the resilience, to cope.<sup>41</sup> Girls and women also said that they felt more at risk and less likely to challenge group harassers when they were alone. The mere presence of bystanders, even if they did nothing to intervene, was often reassuring, sometimes deterring harassers and sometimes empowering girls and women to challenge the attackers. But not always, with some cases showing that bystanders actually encouraged the behaviour of the perpetrators.

### GROUP HARASSMENT IS SYSTEMATIC, FREQUENT AND FRIGHTENING

The data suggests that group harassment can be systematic and frequent. Many girls and young women report almost daily incidences of harassment, at the same place and same time, often on their journeys to or around schools and work. Such repetitive incidents increase fear, as well as creating a sense of the inevitability of harassment. Equally frightening were incidents that were ‘short and sharp’ – men catching girls and women off-guard by calling out to them and then disappearing. Some girls and young women described how incidents were protracted over several stages across a period of time, increasing in intensity at every stage and making the girls or women feel that they could not escape. Verbal harassment and abuse was the most common form of street harassment perpetrated by groups, but this could be combined with being followed, threatened, or actual physical contact to increase the levels of fear.

Broadly, these incidents of group harassment and the fear they inspired were apparent in every city, with variations in the intensity, the levels of incident or behaviour types. It is likely that the varying consequences of group harassment look quite different by context, but overall result in girls and young women everywhere modifying their behaviour and their movements which in turn impinges on their rights and the opportunities available to them.<sup>42</sup> In Delhi, for example, the repetitive harassment of girls on their way to or from schools is likely to have a direct effect on their attendance and educational progress.

## 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow, based on the findings from this report, are built on the experiences and priorities of women and girls:

### BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

It is everyone’s responsibility to condemn harassment and violence against all girls and women in all their diversity. More specifically men and boys need to recognise that sexist 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. Women and girls report just how frightening and disempowering street harassment is - and uniquely so when it is perpetrated by men and boys operating in groups. They are forced into changing their own behaviour to keep safe when it is male behaviour that needs to change.

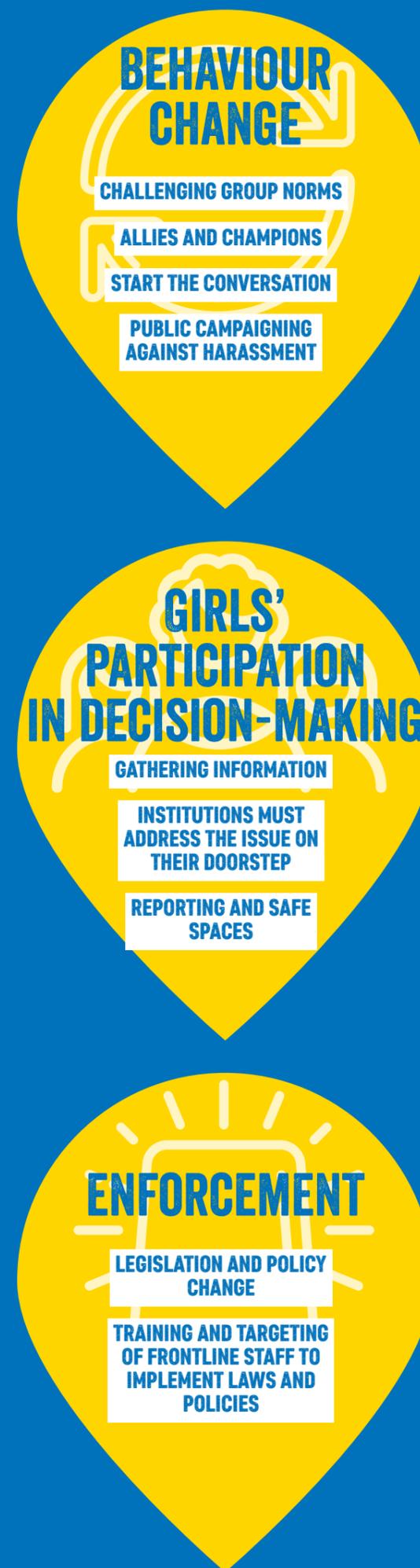
### CHALLENGING GROUP NORMS

Findings from this research show that men and boys tend to prioritise their acceptance in a group over consideration of how harassment affects women and girls: perpetrators may remain willfully ignorant of the ways in which their actions have a negative impact on the lives of women and girls – especially if harassment is seen as a ‘joke’ or a ‘bit of fun’.<sup>43</sup>

- Individuals must recognise that doing nothing does harm and that they have a responsibility to intervene and challenge their male peers. The more that men and boys stand up against sexism and gender-based violence, the more the ‘norm’ within groups will shift from accepting and perpetrating harassment to respecting women and girls as equals.<sup>44</sup>

Whilst **individuals** will be required to alter their behaviour, **institutions** also have an important role to play in shifting group norms:

- Governments, civil society, local councils and institutions need to provide the space for men and boys to learn together, to reflect on their own



behaviour and attitudes and to engage among themselves, but also with women and girls, in conversations around respect.

- Schools and youth clubs should implement gender-awareness trainings, focusing on the negative impacts of harassment and encouraging young men and boys to empathise with how young women and girls feel and how harassment can affect their lives.
- Some evidence suggests that men overestimate the extent to which their male peers actually condone harassment<sup>45</sup>, and institutions need to amplify this message and communicate it to groups of men and boys.

### ALLIES AND CHAMPIONS

Changing behaviour and accepted social attitudes requires everyday acts of courage and kindness from us all but especially from leaders: those whose words and behaviour in society influence others in the public sphere. The work cannot be left to girls and young women alone: girls do not need protectors but they want people to stand beside them.

- Active bystander campaigns need to encourage a 'call it out' culture, helping everyone to challenge and call out 'toxic masculinities' and group culture and emphasising that "if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem."
- Recruiting and celebrating champions, who have listened to and taken seriously the experiences of girls and young women is also important. They may be politicians, celebrities from media, sport and culture, business women and men, headteachers or football managers.

### START THE CONVERSATION

Through *Free to Be*, women and girls have shared powerful stories which shed light on the intolerable harassment perpetrated by groups of men and boys in their cities.

- Everyone, at different levels in society, needs to start talking to each other about girls' and women's experiences and the unacceptable, toxic culture of masculinity that pervades sexist group behaviour.
- In particular, men and boys need to talk to the women and girls in their lives about their experiences of street harassment. This will make it quite clear that behaviour they may see as 'joke' or 'a bit of fun'<sup>46</sup> is in fact, relentless, frightening, and has serious consequences for girls' and young women's lives.<sup>47</sup>

### PUBLIC CAMPAIGNING AGAINST GROUP HARASSMENT

Street and sexual harassment of young women and girls should be treated with the same seriousness and the same commitment as the campaigns to ban drunk driving or to stop smoking.

- Local government, private sector, donor and civil society organisations can all play a part in funding and publicising effective public campaigns against harassment and abuse, ensuring the issues are prominent across print, radio, television and online. These campaigns must clearly link to legislation, city authorities and police and emphasise that street harassment is unacceptable and that there will be serious consequences for the perpetrators.
- Findings from this research show that groups of men and boys tend to target the most vulnerable – girls or young women, usually by themselves. Campaigns need to clearly call out this disturbing and harmful behaviour. This harsher approach should work alongside behaviour change campaigns, which encourage men's empathy.

### GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Those in authority and positions of power, at all levels, must listen to and work with girls and young women, respect their experiences and recommendations, and involve them in co-designing the provision of services and the policies that govern their cities.

### GATHERING INFORMATION

To fully understand and tackle the problem of street harassment, including that perpetrated by groups, the extent of the problem must be determined.

- City authorities should prioritise data collection – disaggregated by gender, age and intersectional data like disability – in order to properly quantify abuse levels. They need to work with girls, community leaders, transport staff and police to use this information to design policies and oversee procedures that will address the harassment that girls and young women are subjected to by groups of men and boys.

### INSTITUTIONS MUST ADDRESS THE ISSUE ON THEIR DOORSTEPS

Findings from this research show that a concerning amount of group harassment happens in and around, or on the way to, institutions like school, college and work.

- Institutions and local councils must recognise where this harassment is occurring and the impact it has

on girls' and young women's ability to participate and move freely in and around their city.

- Schools and workplaces must listen to girls' and young women's needs and experiences, including their recommendations for tackling the issue, and put in place protection policies that respond to harassment and demonstrate that it is taken seriously.

### REPORTING AND SAFE SPACES

Girls and young women need to be part of the solution in tackling group harassment.

- Given the lack of protection that is evident in this report, girls and young women need to be involved in designing methods for reporting abuse that will meet their needs – harnessing the use of technology, such as social media.
- Decision-makers need to take into account women and girls' practical experience of group harassment and their knowledge and ideas on what would work to help stop it. This might include establishing safe spaces in the heart of their cities where girls can go, both to report harassment and escape from it. These spaces not only provide shelter but also signal that the issue of sexual harassment is taken seriously as girls and young women would like it to be – these must be highly visible and well publicised.

### ENFORCEMENT

Governments, both municipal and national, must adopt and implement laws and policies that criminalise all forms of gender-based violence, including street and sexual harassment, and send a clear signal that the abuse of girls and women will not be tolerated and that there will be serious repercussions.

### LEGISLATION AND POLICY CHANGE

The sense of anonymity provided by a group can lead to more uninhibited, selfish and aggressive behaviour by individuals<sup>48</sup>, something which might be reinforced when it is well known that there are no serious repercussions for street harassment and abuse.

- Many aspects of sexual and street harassment are not covered by current legislation and so 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 against women and girls, tackling areas where alcohol and drug taking facilitates and enhances harassing behaviour by providing more properly trained security personnel and reviewing licensing laws.
- Legislation must be publicised within the community, recognising that the value of anti-street harassment laws is often in the strong signal they can send around such behaviour not being acceptable.

### TRAINING AND TARGETING OF FRONTLINE STAFF TO IMPLEMENT LAWS AND POLICIES

Police, transport staff, security companies and local government officials of all kinds need to take this issue seriously.

- They 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.
- They also need specific training on how to listen to complaints of harassment and in what action can be taken.
- Anti-street harassment legislation needs to be actively clarified and communicated with frontline staff and the broader community, and training should be conducted on how to enforce and use this legislation to protect the rights of women and girls and respond to reports.
- Frontline staff must be properly trained to ensure that legislation is used for its intended purpose and not to further marginalise already vulnerable groups.
- Anti-street harassment training for frontline staff should include awareness of the differences between individual and group harassment and the different responses required.

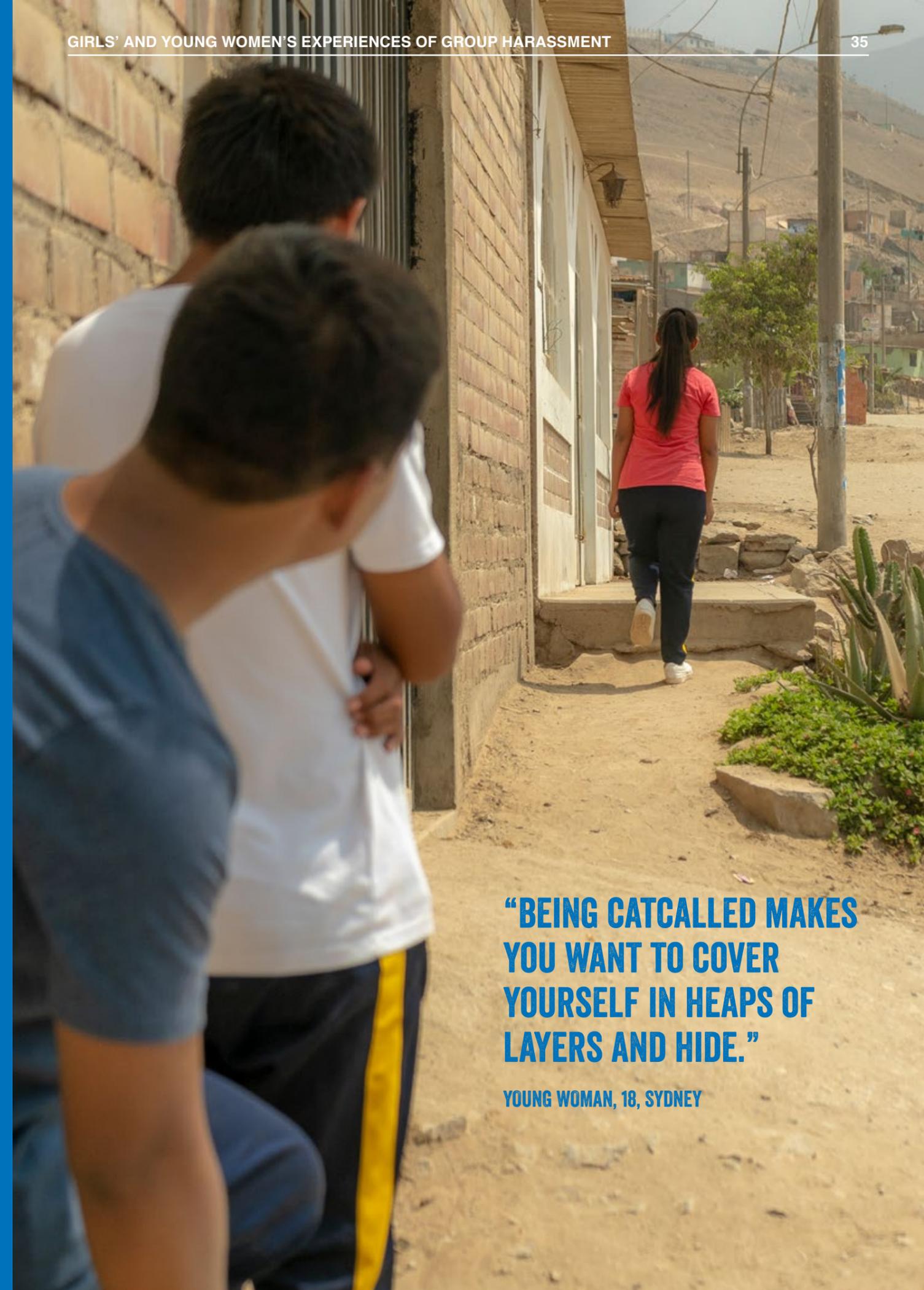
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## ANNEX

## TYPES OF GROUP HARASSMENT, AS % OF ALL GROUP HARASSMENT COMMENTS IN EACH CITY

		DELHI	KAMPALA	LIMA	MADRID	SYDNEY
Verbal	Catcalling/ Lewd Comments	42%	22%	54%	49%	32%
	Verbal Threat/ Proposition	4%	32%	12%	25%	34%
Non-verbal, non-touch	Stare/Leer	8%	0%	4%	17%	11%
	Lewd gestures	2%	0%	1%	4%	1%
	Surreptitious Photography	0%	0%	0%	2%	2%
	Flashing / Public masturbation	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Physical intimidation	Following	15%	2%	4%	29%	16%
	Way blocked/ Approached	1%	0%	3%	6%	6%
	Chasing	0%	0%	1%	4%	5%
	Circling/ Surrounded	2%	0%	0%	1%	4%
	Stalking	3%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Physical contact	Touch (Sexual)	3%	12%	10%	6%	3%
	Physical Threat/ Assault	1%	4%	6%	6%	5%
	Rape/ penetration	0%	12%	2%	1%	0%
	Creepy Contact	0%	0%	2%	0%	1%
Not specific		38%	11%	22%	5%	4%



**“BEING CATCALLED MAKES YOU WANT TO COVER YOURSELF IN HEAPS OF LAYERS AND HIDE.”**

**YOUNG WOMAN, 18, SYDNEY**



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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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Published in 2019.

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