

Introduction to the violence against women and girls toolkit

This toolkit sets out existing offences that can be considered by police responders.

First published 15 December 2021

Introduction

In July 2021, the government launched its [**Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy**](#). Evidence presented in the strategy suggests that some forms of violence against women and girls are so commonplace that many women and girls don't even think they are worth reporting. This is the case for experiences like being grabbed, touched and/or threatened by strangers.

The strategy presents evidence that describes how many victims experience these forms of violence and harassment, highlighting concerns about women and girls' safety in public places. The evidence includes a survey conducted by Plan International UK in 2018, which showed that as many as 38% of the young girls surveyed aged 14 to 21 have experienced verbal harassment, including sexual comments in public places, at least once a month (Plan International UK, 2018). The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey June 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021) found that from a sample of 16,112 adults aged 16 years and over in Great Britain, two out of three women aged 16 to 34 years had experienced one form of harassment in the previous 12 months. In total, 44% of women aged 16 to 34 years had experienced catcalls, whistles, unwanted sexual comments or jokes in the previous 12 months, while 29% had felt like they were being followed.

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data shows that 31% of women felt unsafe walking alone after dark (in comparison to 13% of men)(Office for National Statistics, 2021). Since its inception in June 2020, the [**Everyone's Invited**](#) website has received thousands of testimonies of rape culture in schools, universities and other organisations across the UK. This has provided an insight into the prevalence and widespread nature of the problem experienced by young girls and women.

In addition to harassment and violence in physical public spaces, women and girls are also at risk of harassment and abuse in the online space. Crimes that take place online can have additional considerations – for example, it may be easier for the perpetrator to remain unknown or for them to

carry out their abuse from any location.

In 2017, Amnesty International and Ipsos Mori conducted a survey relating to online abuse or harassment of women aged 18-55 years in the UK, US, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Denmark. It found that in the UK, 21% of respondents had experienced abuse or harassment online at least once. The average was 23% across the countries, ranging from 17% to 30%. A further breakdown of results shows that 18% of these women said that they had received abuse or harassment from a current or former partner, while 59% said that they had received abuse from someone who they did not know personally at all (Amnesty International, 2017).

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found that girls are more likely than boys to be victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse (Chahal C-M and others, 2018).

Policing is committed to addressing public sexual harassment so that women and girls feel safe in our public spaces, whether they're online or on the streets.

The recent focus on safety of women and girls has led to concerns about the need for new offences to address misogyny. The College of Policing has produced this advice for police officers to set out offences that currently exist that can be considered by police responders.

In particular, there are existing offences that can deal with harassment that happens in the street, such as name calling or making lewd comments.

The advice does not include every possible offence because for the more serious types of incidents, such as rape, police responders will be aware of the offences under which they can be charged. In addition, it is important to note that girls under 18 who are victims may be appropriately protected through specific child safeguarding powers, such as police protection under s46, Children Act, 1989 or emergency protection orders.

The intention is to point responders to existing laws that might be appropriate to address certain behaviours that might otherwise be thought not to be an offence.

This guide also contains links to resources that can help to ensure that proper use is consistently made of protective tools, such as stalking protection orders.

References

Plan International UK. (2018). [**Street harassment: it's not ok**](#) [internet]. [Accessed November 2021]

Office for National Statistics. (2021). [**Perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment, Great Britain: 2 to 27 June 2021**](#) [internet]. [Accessed November 2021]

Office for National Statistics. (2021). [**Estimates of proportions for how safe people feel walking alone after dark, by respondent sex, Crime Survey for England and Wales, year ending March 2020**](#) [internet]. [Accessed November 2021]

Amnesty International. (2017). [**Unsocial media: the real toll of online abuse against women**](#) [internet]. [Accessed November 2021]

Chahal C-M and others. (2018). [**Rapid evidence assessment: Characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation**](#) [internet]. Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. [Accessed November 2021]

Tags

Violence against women and girls