

# Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

## Commons Women and Equalities Committee: Inquiry into Sexual Harassment of Women and Girls in Public Places Evidence Submission

February 2018

# **Inquiry into Sexual Harassment of Women and Girls in Public Places**

**Written evidence submitted by Dr. Lucy Betts, Rachel Harding, Dr. Sheine Peart, Dr. David Wright and Dr. Loretta Trickett, Nottingham Trent University, and Catarina Sjolin, University of Leicester**

## **1. Executive Summary**

- Our submission is based on our research in two studies:
  - One study into how young people age 11-15 and their teachers in the UK experienced street harassment of young people
  - A second study into Nottinghamshire Police's new policy of making misogyny against women in public space a hate crime
- Women and girls of all ages experience a range of distressing behaviours in the street. These are not limited to specific locale
- School staff and young people conceptualise street harassment differently
- Impacts of street harassment on young people, particularly when walking to and from school, are likely to spill over into school environments
- Adults surveyed had experienced a range of misogynistic behaviours in a variety of public places. Several respondents had experienced more than one behaviour simultaneously
- We need to capture women's and girls' views of what constitutes harassment in their own words, in order to understand how and why they experience particular forms of behaviour as harassment

## 2. Submission

Our submission is based two research projects:

The first research project was carried out with young people age 11-15 and their teachers. We explored perceptions and experiences of street harassment in the England, through surveys and focus groups with young people and interviews with senior school staff.

The second research project is an evaluation of Nottingham Police's new policy of making misogyny against women in public spaces a hate crime. Nottinghamshire Police are the first police force in the UK to do this, and it offers an additional way of dealing with these behaviours. This policy was recently considered as part of the House of Commons Select Committee's inquiry into Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences. We carried out an evaluation of the policy using surveys, focus groups and individual interviews with police officers, women who have reported to the police and male and female members of the public.

The findings provide insight in to the types of street harassment experienced by women and girls of all ages, and into their reactions to such events.

### *Understanding and types of street harassment*

Compared to other forms of harassment (including sexual harassment) that young people experience, such as school-based harassment or digital harassment, relatively little is known about their experiences of street harassment. Street harassment has been defined as any unwanted behaviour that is directed towards an individual in a public place. Previous research has suggested that over half of young people had experienced some form of street harassment.

In our research, we found that young people conceptualise street harassment differently from the school staff. The young people regarded street harassment, including sexual harassment, as random acts directed towards them from members of the public who were

typically unknown adults. Conversely, the senior school staff regarded street harassment as indicative of a broader context in which young people were deliberately targeted. Examples given by staff included young people being groomed into situations where they could be at risk of exploitation.

Most of the research examining street sexual harassment has focused on adult women, possibly because street harassment is regarded as an expression of violence against women. In our study we found that teenage girls also suffer sexualised street harassment. The young people reported experiencing a range of different forms of street harassment from adults and, less commonly, other young people. The most frequent type of street harassment, reported by approximately 4 in 10 young people, was predominately verbal. However, they also reported such things as a vehicle slowing down, being beeped at, being filmed or being stared at. Written comments from young women included:

*we were walking an two men looked at me and my friend then he took a picture of us and when we walked past him and he akwardly smiled at us*

*I was with my sister and a friend , we were sitting at the back of the bus and was stared a while after this [man] took out his camera and started videoing us we covered our faces and moved the reported his actions*

*I was followed and once tached [touched] on my boobs and so people was laughing at me, I felt scared about it. And I was scared that they would take me*

*I was walking to my friends house and I got horned at [the driver beeped his horn] and I looked and two guys (men) asked me 'how old are you babe? It made me feel completely disgusted*

*When me and my best mate was walking some man in a car went by us, turned around and came back to follow us*

*in his car. He said 'How old are you' my mate said 'why' and he said your beautiful so then I rang my mum and we tried running away*

### *Factors associated with street harassment*

Previously, it has been suggested that street harassment is more prevalent in some locales than others with it being argued that low socio-economic status areas neighbourhoods are the riskiest. However, our data suggest that teenage girls and women can experience street harassment in any area, and that this is not constrained by socio-economic status.

Both boys and girls regarded street harassment as threatening and an unwanted behaviour with many reporting negative emotions following street harassment. However, for many young people the immediate effect of the harassment was mixed and confusing – they did not know what to make of the behaviour or how to classify it for themselves. Because the speed of events meant that young people did not always have enough time to think through their responses to the street harassment. They were left with many unanswered questions which influenced their ability to concentrate. As a result, some students struggled in refocussing their attention on study and the need to engage with learning in school.

The research on adult women is not yet completed (full results will be available by the end of April 2018). However, from 500 survey responses analysed so far (75% women, 22.5 % men, 2.5% preferred not to say) misogynistic or harassing behaviours experienced included:

<b>Type of behaviour reported</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>
Whistling	306
Leering	279
Groping	230
Sexual assault	121
Being followed home	121

Mobile	79
Upskirting	32
Sexually explicit behaviour	270
Threatening or intimidating behaviour	255
Indecent exposure	129
Unwanted sexual advances	243
Online abuse	197

Several respondents had experienced more than one behaviour simultaneously.

Locations where harassing behaviours were experienced included: nightclubs (195); bars (189); restaurants (16); cinemas (10); shop (44); park (80), petrol station (11); the gym (22) an educational institution; (70); outside own home (81).

96.7% of respondents think that that the behaviour covered by the Nottinghamshire Police policy (including sexual street harassment) is a social problem and 87.2% of respondents think that treating misogyny as hate crime policy is a good idea. 41.9% think that the public need to be educated about street harassment. We will be examining these responses in more detail through focus group research in which discussions will be undertaken with the general public on how sexual street harassment should be tackled.

### *Tackling street sexual harassment*

Previous research suggests that many young people worry about neighbourhood safety and the potential risks of stranger danger, with young women twice as likely as young men to report such worries. Young women are also more likely to report a sense of unease when they are stared at by an unknown individual and when they are alone in the street at night. Therefore, ensuring that young women and girls feel safe and able to use public space as they desire is particularly important.

From a legal perspective, even where reports of street harassment fitted elements of existing offences (such as assault or public order matters), the perpetrator was almost always a stranger and even if in a vehicle, was gone before the young person could register enough information to enable identification. Although a single young person may not be able to identify a perpetrator, a repeat perpetrator might be identified from a number of reports. However, unless it is clear to women and girls which behaviours are not acceptable, incidents will go unreported. We need to examine which public interactions are criminalised, and how we police the prohibitions, particularly when those interactions are with young people. We should also aim to capture women and girls' views, in their own words, about what constitutes harassment and why they experience particular forms of behaviour as harassment.

Other attempts to tackle street harassment have focused on providing women with information concerning the relative safety of different streets. However, such interventions have the unintended consequence of creating women free spaces because of the desire to avoid high risk areas.

### **3. Recommendations**

- Capturing young women's own experiences is vital to understand street sexual harassment
- Young women need to know where to seek support from following street harassment to help them manage their reactions to the experience
- Educators need to be aware of the potential spillover from the experiences in the street to the classroom
- Educators have a key role to play in making sure young people understand what is acceptable or non-acceptable behaviour both in schools and more widely in the general domain

- The inquiry should consider what we criminalise in our interactions and how we educate individuals about what is acceptable behaviour
- Authorities should be aware when providing information about the relative safety of streets that this may bring unintended consequences such as creating women free areas
- We need to get women and girls' views of what constitutes harassment in their own words, in order to best capture how and why they view particular forms of behaviour as harassment. This will enable a better understanding of what the problem is for those who experience it, and will also help us to see how to tackle it.