

STILL NOT SAFE

Sexual Harassment in UK Public Spaces, Five Years On

November 2026

UN WOMEN UNITED KINGDOM

FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

FOREWORD

Five years ago, our research found that 71% of women in the UK had experienced sexual harassment in a public space. The response was extraordinary. Those findings travelled around the world, shaped conversations, national strategies and campaigns, and gave rise to our Safe Spaces Now programme. We hoped that by now we would be reporting progress.

We are not. Today, 76% of women tell us they have been sexually harassed in a public space. Among women aged 18 to 24, it is 93%. That is not a minority experience or an unlucky few. Behind the headline figure, the burden falls unequally. Six in ten young women have been harassed online. 95% of lesbian, bisexual and gay women have been harassed in public. Nearly eight in ten disabled women have been harassed. Ethnic minority women are twice as likely to say reporting would be too upsetting.

Some still ask why a stare, a comment or a stranger's hand on a crowded train belongs in the same conversation as violence. This week, UN Women published new figures showing that 47,000 women and girls were killed by a partner or family member in 2025. That is 129 every day. Femicide is rarely a single act. It is so often the final act in a pattern of abuse that could have been stopped. Sexual harassment sits at the almost normalised end of that continuum. It tells women that our bodies are public property, and it tells perpetrators that they can cross the line with impunity. Every time it goes unchallenged, that message gets louder. We will not end the murder of women while we treat the harassment of women as background noise.

And it is going unchallenged. Only 19% of women who were harassed reported any of it. A quarter said other people were around and nobody stepped in. More women than in 2021 now say reporting simply isn't worth the effort. Women are not failing to recognise harassment. They are telling us they no longer believe anyone will act.

This is a call to action. Women should not have to keep changing our routes, our clothes and our plans. Responsibility must shift to the people and institutions with the power to change things, and that includes men. Not all men are perpetrators, but all men have a part to play. That means calling out a friend, stepping in, challenging the misogyny spreading online and being the role model boys need.

We are calling for a national reporting and support line for sexual harassment. It would be one free, accessible route for every woman across the country, linked to the new public sexual harassment law and to specialist support. Half of women told us that confidence that action would be taken would make them more likely to report. Let's give ALL women that confidence.

Five years from now, I want to be writing a very different foreword. Whether I can depends on what we all choose to do next.

Tabitha Morton

CEO, UN Women UK
November 2026




Rights.
Justice.
Action.
We believe all survivors of violence everywhere, always.
WE MUST STAND UP, SPEAK UP, SHOW UP.
For all women and girls.
UN WOMEN UNITED KINGDOM
FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to acknowledge the work of all the charities, community groups government bodies and activists named in this report, and thank them for their contributions to making public spaces safer for women and girls.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for UN Women UK published 'Prevalence and Reporting of Sexual Harassment in UK Public Spaces'. It was released as lockdown restrictions began to ease, at a moment when society was rethinking how to build a world in which everyone feels safe. The pandemic had shown that, with coordinated action, campaigns, education and a commitment to act, society could make large-scale changes in behaviour to protect the most vulnerable. The report's groundbreaking findings received worldwide attention. It found that 71% of women in the UK had experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, rising to 86% among women aged 18–24. Compounding this, over 95% of women had not reported all of their experiences to an official organisation, with most women saying they did not think reporting would help or that the incident was not serious enough (APPG for UN Women, 2021).

The report helped drive new strategies tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), informed awareness campaigns on public transport networks and provided an evidence base for policy reform. It also laid the foundation for UN Women UK's Safe Spaces Now initiative, which works with individuals, organisations and communities to end violence against women and girls through: bystander intervention training; Same Side, a campaign and education platform tackling the rise of misogyny among men and boys; and Right to Move, which uses digital and out-of-home campaigns and active bystander toolkits to raise awareness and encourage active bystander action on a large scale.

Since 2021, the landscape has changed considerably. New laws have been introduced, including the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, which came into force in April 2026. Online spaces have become more central to daily life, bringing new forms of abuse. UN Women has warned that AI is now amplifying this abuse in scale, speed and severity, and that what begins online does not stay online.

Five years on, this new research revisits the core questions of the 2021 survey, documenting changes to the social landscape and expanding the data to include intersectional analysis, further analysis of online environments and bystander behaviour.

Respondents report a high prevalence of sexual harassment in public spaces: 76% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, compared with 71% in 2021. This rises to 93% among women aged 18–24 and 95% among lesbian, bisexual and gay women. The research also looked in more depth at online sexual harassment: 39% of women have experienced it, rising to 60% of women aged 18–24 and 70% of lesbian, bisexual and gay women. The impact is far-reaching. 85% of women have taken some kind of action/modified their behaviour to avoid sexual harassment in public, from changing the routes they take to what they wear, with young women carrying the heaviest burden.

Sexual harassment still largely goes unchallenged and unreported. Where respondents said someone else was around, only 24% of women said someone stepped in when it happened, and only 19% of those who experienced sexual harassment reported any of their experiences to an official organisation, meaning around 8 in 10 women never reported a single experience. Fewer women now say an incident wasn't serious enough to report (46%, down from 58% in 2021), but more say reporting isn't worth the effort (42%, up from 31%). Just over half said that confidence that action would be taken would make them more likely to report. Lesbian, bisexual and gay, disabled and ethnic minority women face greater barriers still.

The rise since 2021 is likely to reflect both greater recognition of sexual harassment and an online environment in which misogyny spreads more easily. Either way, levels remain alarmingly high. New laws are an important step, but they will only make a difference if women trust that reporting leads to action, and if prevention tackles the attitudes that allow harassment to flourish. This report calls for a long-term prevention programme, effective implementation of the new law, trusted reporting routes, greater responsibility from those who run public spaces and online platforms, and solutions designed with marginalised women where significant gaps in understanding exists and funding is even more limited.

Our key recommendation is a national reporting and support line for sexual harassment: a single, free and accessible route for women across the UK to report, linked to the new law and to specialist support.

With around 8 in 10 women never reporting a single experience, experiences of sexual harassment being largely consistent across the UK regions, and half saying confidence that action would be taken would make them more likely to report, women need to know where to turn and trust that something will happen when they do.

Alongside this, the report calls for effective implementation of the new law, a long-term prevention programme tackling misogyny among men and boys, a sustained national awareness campaign, greater responsibility from those who run public spaces and online platforms, solutions designed with the women most affected, and long-term funding for the specialist services that support them.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

1. Sexual harassment in public spaces remains widespread and has risen since 2021

76% of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, compared with 71% in 2021. This rises to 93% among women aged 18–24, up from 86% in 2021.

2. Some women face a greater risk of harassment

95% of women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or gay have experienced sexual harassment in a public space, significantly higher than women who do not identify as lesbian, bisexual or gay (73%).

Disabled women reported similar levels of sexual harassment to women who are not disabled (78%). However, 89% of women living with chronic pain and 78% of women with mental health conditions reported experiencing sexual harassment, significantly higher than women who are not disabled.

74% of ethnic minority women have experienced sexual harassment in a public space. While this is not statistically different from all women, further research is needed to understand the experiences of specific groups (see section 6).

Experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces are broadly consistent across the UK's nations and regions, with the exception of the South West, where women were significantly less likely to report sexual harassment in public spaces (65%).

3. Most harassment goes unchallenged by bystanders

When asked how other people reacted, 25% said other people were around but no one stepped in, 14% said one or more people stepped in and 2% said someone alerted security or staff. 4 in 10 women said no one else was around when the harassment took place.

4. Women feel unsafe in public and are changing their behaviour as a result

Women are most likely to feel unsafe in clubs, bars and pubs (60%), followed by streets and public transport (45%) and music festivals (43%). 85% of women have changed their behaviour because of concerns about sexual harassment in public. Around 6 in 10 avoid certain routes or places, or avoid going out alone after dark.

Compared with all women, women aged 18–24 are significantly more likely to change their behaviour: 77% avoid going out alone after dark (vs 61%), 63% share their live location with friends or family (vs 35%) and 38% change what they wear (vs 20%).

5. Sexual harassment online is common, particularly for young and lesbian, bisexual and gay women

39% of women have experienced sexual harassment online. This rises to 60% among women aged 18–24 and 70% among lesbian, bisexual and gay women.

The most common form of online harassment was receiving unsolicited sexual content, experienced by nearly 1 in 5 women. 59% of women have taken some kind of action or modified their behaviour due to concerns about sexual harassment online. The most common change was making social media profiles more private (40%), rising significantly to 53% among women aged 18–24.

Alarmingly, over 1 in 10 women aged 18–24 reported being threatened, coerced or pressured into sharing sexual images or engaging in sexual behaviour.

6. Most women do not report harassment, and many feel it isn't worth the effort

Only 19% of women who experienced sexual harassment reported any of their experiences to an official organisation. Nearly half did not report because they felt the incident wasn't serious enough, that reporting wouldn't help or that it wasn't worth the effort.

42% said reporting wasn't worth the hassle, a significant rise from 31% in 2021. 46% felt the incident wasn't serious enough to report, significantly down from 58% in 2021, although women aged 18–24 were the exception at 61%.

Barriers to reporting are higher for some groups. Lesbian, bisexual and gay women women were significantly more likely to think they wouldn't be believed (34% vs 15% of all women) and to worry about retaliation (18% vs 9%). Disabled women were significantly more likely to think they wouldn't be believed (22% vs 15%), rising to 28% among women with mental health conditions. Ethnic minority women were significantly more likely to say reporting felt too upsetting (15% vs 7%).

7. Lack of confidence that action will be taken is a major barrier to reporting

Half of women said being confident that action would be taken would make them more likely to report to an official organisation. 44% said more confidence in the legal system's response would help, while over a third said a convenient way to report would make them more likely to report.



1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, occurring at every level of society. The UN defines violence against women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life' (UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993).

Sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of this violence, disproportionately affecting women and girls. It sits at the most widespread and normalised end of a continuum of violence against women which, at its most extreme, is femicide. From streets to public transport, parks to online spaces, sexual harassment is a lived reality for women and girls across the UK and around the world. It undermines their fundamental rights to move freely, exist safely and participate fully in public life. This limits their opportunities and their full enjoyment of social and cultural activities.

Definitions of sexual harassment vary. This report uses the comprehensive definition developed by UN Women in 2026, set out in full in section 2.

Drawing on evidence from the past five years (2021–2026) and a new UN Women UK survey carried out by YouGov, this report builds on UN Women UK's 2021 research, 'Prevalence and Reporting of Sexual Harassment in UK Public Spaces'. It examines the current state of sexual harassment in public spaces in the UK, including how common it is, where it most often happens and the forms it most often takes, including online. It then turns to reporting: how often women report sexual harassment, what stops them, and why so many incidents still go unreported.

The survey revisits core questions from 2021 to show what has changed. It also expands the evidence to include intersectional analysis, online spaces and bystander behaviour.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research for this report was carried out from March to November 2026 using a mixed-methods approach that combined a nationally representative YouGov survey of women in the UK with a review of UK research and policy published between 2021 and 2026.

The analysis draws primarily on an online survey of 1,062 women (those who identify as female or in another way such as non-binary), conducted by YouGov between 29th October and 2nd November 2026. Figures have been weighted to be representative of all UK women / UK adults who identify as women (cis & trans) or non-binary aged 18 and over, creating a weighted sample of 1,076. The sample included 108 women aged 18–24, 91 women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay or other, 394 disabled women and 168 women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The survey repeated core questions from UN Women UK's 2021 survey, which was also conducted by YouGov with 1,089 women in January 2021, allowing changes since 2021 to be tracked. Additional questions were added on reporting, online sexual harassment and bystander behaviour.

A desk review of UK research, official statistics and policy documents published between 2021 and 2026 was undertaken to contextualise the findings within a broader evidence base.

Unless otherwise indicated, statistics throughout the report are from the 2026 YouGov survey. Questions about reporting and bystanders were asked only of women who had experienced sexual harassment (base 767) and some question bases differ due to survey routing. Differences described as 'significant' are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level.

Throughout the report we refer to several sub-groups, defined as follows:

- Women aged 18–24: those who identified as women or non-binary.
- Lesbian, bisexual and gay women: respondents who identify as lesbian, bisexual or gay.
- Disabled women: respondents who report a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting, or expected to last, 12 months or more that reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. This includes women living with chronic pain and women with mental health conditions.
- Ethnic minority women: respondents who identify as Black, Asian, Mixed or from another ethnic minority background.

Findings are based on self-reported experiences and rely on respondents' recall. Some sub-groups have small base sizes, so differences between them should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the nationally representative sample provides a robust picture of women's experiences of sexual harassment in the UK and how these have changed since 2021.

Definitions

Sexual harassment

While definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment can vary, in 2026 UN Women developed a comprehensive definition expanding on one developed by the United Nations. It takes into account diverse settings, perpetrators and forms of harassment, with the purpose of this being applied across data sources to develop representative measures of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is defined as 'any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature – whether contact or non-contact based and whether in person or online - that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause harm. These harms may include offence or humiliation; physical, psychological or emotional injury; an intimidating, hostile, threatening or offensive environment; or disruption in or impediments to day-to-day functioning, economic security or social relationships. Sexual harassment is often affected and reinforced by social and structural power imbalances based on gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic positioning, age and disability. It is also affected and reinforced by relative power imbalances between individuals or groups. In the identification of cases of sexual harassment, the perspective of the victim should be considered' (UN Women, 2026).

Technology-facilitated VAWG

Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TF VAWG) includes any act committed or amplified through digital means, leading to physical, sexual, psychological, economic, or social harm. Rooted in power imbalances, patriarchy, and misogyny, TF VAWG not only exacerbates existing forms of violence like harassment and intimate partner violence but has also led to the
emergence of new forms of abuse, especially in the rapidly digitalizing world (UN Women).

Public spaces

By 'public space' we mean any of the following: public transport (e.g. buses and trains); hospitality venues (e.g. pubs, clubs and bars); public events (e.g. concerts, sports games and festivals); and streets, parks, shops, commons and other public recreational spaces.

Online spaces

By 'online space' we mean any of the following: social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter and TikTok); messaging or chat apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Messenger and Snapchat); online gaming platforms or in-game chat; dating apps or websites; forums, comment sections or online communities (e.g. Reddit and YouTube comments); and video calling or livestreaming platforms (e.g. Twitch).

3. LEGAL CHANGES SINCE 2021

While legislation alone cannot end sexual harassment, or violence against women and girls more broadly, it is essential. The UN Secretary-General's 2026 report to the Commission on the Status of Women, whose theme was ensuring access to justice for all women and girls, notes that laws are 'a necessary part of the justice access equation', yet 'the full sum depends heavily on implementation and service delivery' (UN Secretary-General, 2026). Evidence shows that where laws exist, violence is lower. Countries with domestic violence legislation, for example, have lower rates of intimate partner violence than those without (9.5% compared with 16.1%), and rates are 2.5 times lower where comprehensive prevention and response measures are in place (UN Women, n.d.).

Since 2021, there have been significant legal developments in the UK. In England and Wales, the Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Act 2023 creates a new aggravated offence for intentionally causing harassment, alarm or distress to a person in public because of their sex. The offence covers behaviours including persistent obscene or sexual comments, uninvited touching or kissing, and group intimidation (Home Office, 2026). The Act received Royal Assent in September 2023 but did not come into force until 1 April 2026, only seven months before our survey was carried out.

This legislation directly addresses the forms of public sexual harassment that the 2021 survey found 71% of women had experienced (APPG for UN Women, 2021). In the workplace, the Worker Protection Act 2023 introduced a legal duty on employers in Great Britain to take "reasonable steps" to prevent sexual harassment (HM Government, 2025a). From April 2026, workers who report sexual harassment will be explicitly protected from detriment and unfair dismissal (HM Government, 2026).

However, implementation of laws on violence against women and girls 'continues to lag, as resources and norms fail to keep pace' (UN Secretary-General, 2026), and it is too early to determine whether these new laws have increased reporting. Barriers to reporting risk undermining their effectiveness. This makes funding, prevention and trusted reporting routes essential alongside the law, as explored in section 9 of this report.

4. FINDINGS

The following sections set out the findings of UN Women UK's 2026 survey across five themes:

- Prevalence of sexual harassment in public spaces
- Who is most at risk
- Bystanders and feelings of safety
- Online sexual harassment
- Reporting and barriers to reporting

Each section opens with what our survey found, including how results have changed since 2021, where the same questions were asked.

It then places these findings in the context of other UK research published since 2021, highlighting where the wider evidence supports, adds to or differs from our results. Unless otherwise stated, UN Women UK YouGov figures refer to all women surveyed, and differences described as 'significant' are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.



UN Women UK Community taking part in UN Commission on the Status of Women UK Event on Rights, Justice, Action

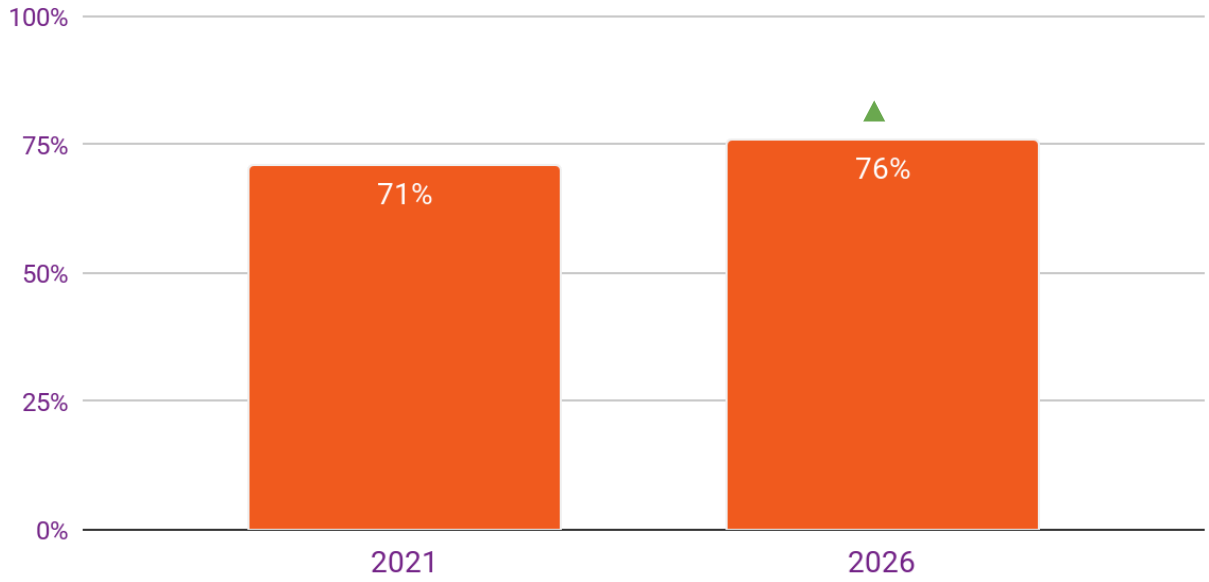
5. PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC SPACES

What our survey found

76% of women of all ages have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, up from 71% in 2021 (statistically significant). Among women aged 18–24, this rises to 93%, up from 86% in 2021. Both increases are statistically significant. Experiences are broadly consistent across the UK's nations and regions, with the exception of the South West, where women were significantly less likely to report sexual harassment in public spaces (65%).

FIGURE 1

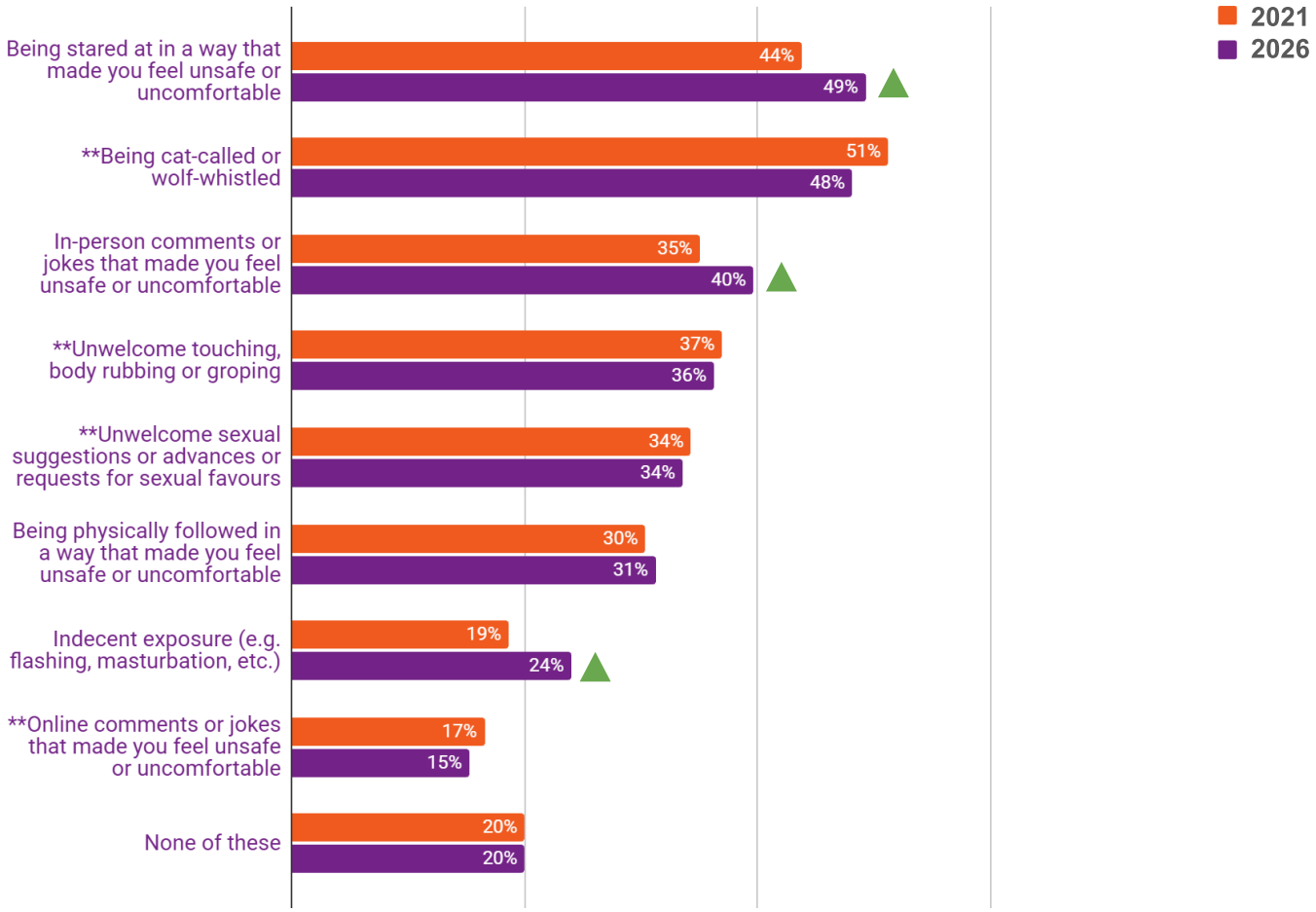
Women who have experienced sexual harassment in a public space (January 2021 vs November 2026)



When looking at the types of sexual harassment women experience in public spaces, nearly half of women have experienced being stared at (49%) or catcalled and over a third (34%) have experienced unwelcome close contact, touching, body rubbing, or groping. 34% experienced unwelcome sexual suggestions or advances, or requests for sexual favours. Almost 1 in 4 (24%) reported experiencing indecent exposure, a significant increase on our 2021 findings (19%), and being touched sexually without their consent.

FIGURE 2

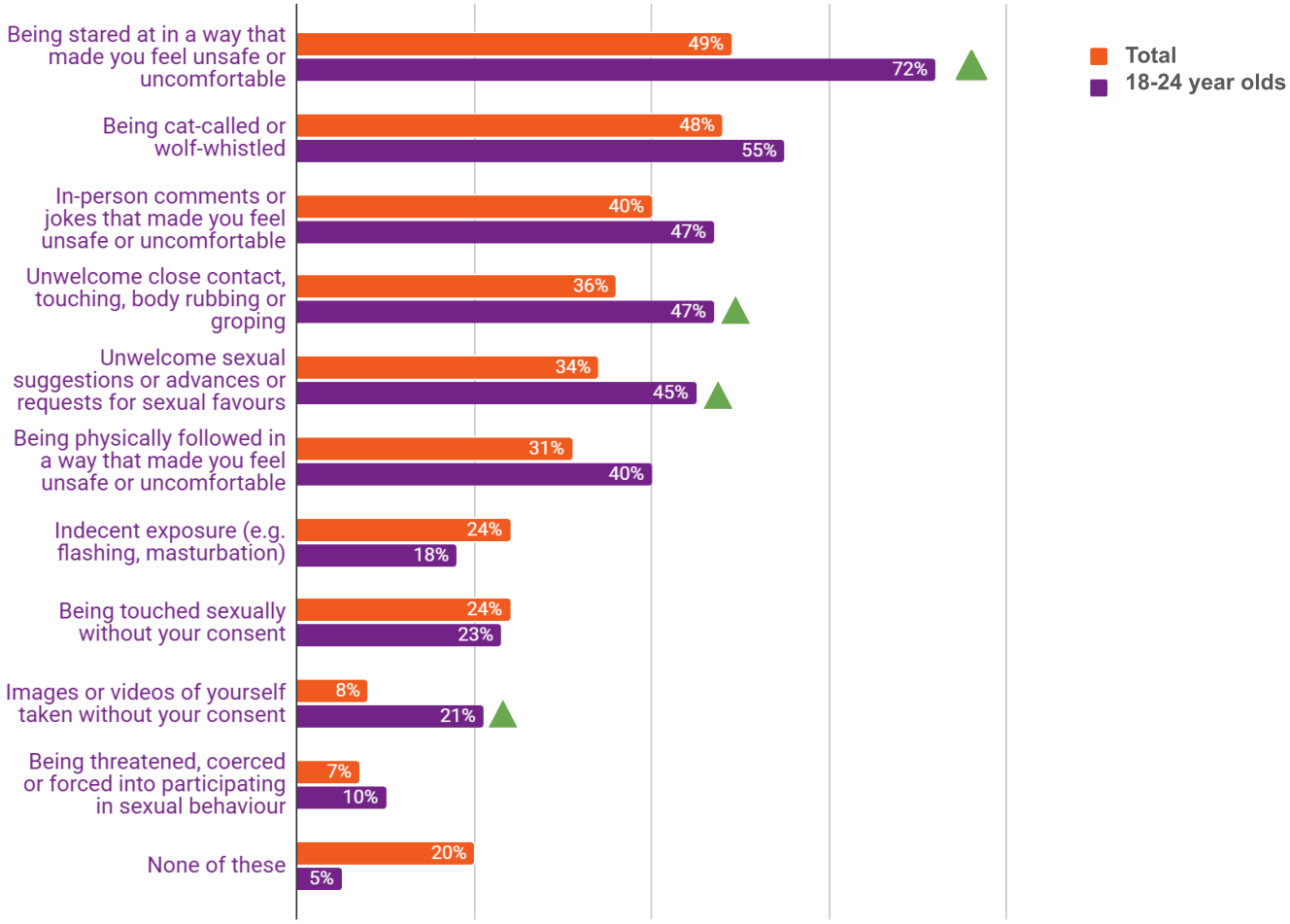
Which, if any, of the following have you ever personally experienced in a public space?



Women aged 18–24 were significantly more likely than all women to experience four of the types of sexual harassment asked about, most notably 'being stared at in a way that made you feel unsafe or uncomfortable' (72% vs 49%) and 'Images or videos of yourself taken without your consent' (21% vs 8%).

FIGURE 3

Which, if any, of the following have you ever personally experienced in a public space?



Women aged 18–24 were significantly more likely than all women to experience four of the types of sexual harassment asked about, most notably 'being stared at in a way that made you feel unsafe or uncomfortable' (72% vs 49%) and 'Images or videos of yourself taken without your consent' (21% vs 8%).

What other research shows

In line with UN Women UK's 2026 survey, UK research published since 2021 suggests that prevalence of sexual harassment in public spaces has not declined.

A survey conducted by Welsh Women's Aid in 2025 found that 92% of women in Wales had experienced public sexual harassment at some point in their lives, with most cases occurring on public transport, on streets and in nightlife venues. Incidents occurred during both the day and at night, challenging the myth that sexual harassment is primarily a night-time issue (Welsh Women's Aid, 2025).

Girlguiding's annual survey (2024) showed that this experience is also shared by girls and younger women. Of over 2,500 girls surveyed, 59% of girls aged 13–21 had seen or experienced sexual harassment, and more than one in five girls aged 7–10 had seen rude images online, a figure that has doubled since 2021 (Girlguiding, 2024).

A University of Suffolk study with over 1,800 UK residents provides detailed evidence on the prevalence and impacts of public sexual harassment (University of Suffolk, 2023). Among female participants, the most commonly reported unwanted behaviours included people standing too close (96.3%), questions about their sex life or relationships (78.1%), unwanted staring (66.9%) and comments on appearance (66.4%). Nearly half (43.8%) had experienced unwanted touching, and almost a quarter (23.5%) had experienced indecent exposure. Most participants first experienced unwanted behaviours between the ages of 11 and 16 (60.3%), with 16.8% aged 10 or younger.

Official data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales offers a different perspective, measuring harassment in the past 12 months rather than over a lifetime. It found that 8% of women aged 16 and over had experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months, compared with 3% of men (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Prevalence was highest among young women, with 23% of women aged 16–24 and 16% of women aged 25–34 experiencing harassment in the past year. Three-quarters of harassment occurred in person, and 73% of that took place in public spaces. In 71% of cases the perpetrator was a stranger. These are experimental statistics and should be treated with caution (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

Research on specific public spaces is consistent with UN Women UK's 2026 survey adding to our understanding of how harassment plays out in different environments. The first UK study of sexual violence at music festivals found that women described groping as particularly common, alongside verbal sexual harassment and catcalling, illustrating how normalised sexual harassment is in these environments (Bows, Day and Dhir, 2024). A 2024 randomised controlled trial across 51 UK train stations found that nearly half of women and a third of men reported experiencing unwanted sexual behaviours on trains or at stations, highlighting the prevalence of harassment on public transport (Ariel et al., 2025).

What this means: why might levels have changed since 2021?

UN Women UK's 2026 research shows a statistically significant rise in the proportion of women who say they have experienced sexual harassment in a public space since 2021. This is an important finding that also raises a key question: does this reflect more harassment, greater recognition of harassment, or both? Several factors may have shaped how women understand and report their experiences over the past five years. At the same time, we have seen a shift in how sexual harassment is perpetrated with an increase in the use of technology and AI among the general public, against a backdrop of a general global rollback on women's rights (in 2024, nearly a quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash on women's rights; UN Women, 2025a5).

We consider these below before drawing conclusions about what this increase means.

As was reported in UN Women UK's 2021 APPG report, there is evidence to suggest that greater public awareness and media attention may help women recognise and name sexual harassment, and in some cases report it. Following #MeToo, 53% of people in Britain said views on what behaviour is acceptable had changed, rising among 18–24 year-olds (Fawcett Society, 2018). The ONS has linked rises in police-recorded sexual offences to 'high-profile incidents, media coverage, and campaigns' encouraging victims to come forward, with recorded offences reaching a record high in the year ending March 2022 while survey-measured victimisation showed no significant change (ONS, 2022).

Research suggests that social media activism has played a significant role in this shift. The strongest evidence comes from large-scale quantitative studies using international datasets. Following #MeToo, Google searches in the US about sexual harassment and assault were 86% higher than expected, with searches about reporting up 30% (Ayers et al., 2018). Across 31 OECD countries, covering 88% of the OECD population, the movement increased reporting of sex crimes to the police by around 10%, an effect the authors attribute to victims coming to see sexual misconduct as a more serious problem. The authors conclude that social movements can have a significant and lasting impact on reporting, with effects persisting 15–27 months after the movement started (Levy and Mattsson, 2023).

In the UK, the evidence is largely qualitative. In-depth studies with young people found that the online sharing of testimonies through initiatives like 'Everyone's Invited' on popular social media platforms contributed to rising awareness of sexual violence (Horeck et al., 2023). These testimonies also prompted a government-commissioned Ofsted review, which found that sexual harassment had become 'normalised' in schools and colleges, with 92% of girls saying sexist name-calling happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes' to them or their peers (Ofsted, 2021).

A review of #MeToo research found that hashtags helped the movement "spread, connect people and groups, and start dialogues", however, the authors also caution against overestimating the potential of social media to unify survivors and create lasting social impact (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). While these studies offer valuable insight into how and why awareness might shift, their smaller sample sizes mean they cannot measure the scale of change across the UK population. Further large-scale UK research is needed to establish whether social media activism and media coverage of gender-based violence has increased recognition and reporting of sexual harassment nationally.

At the same time, the online environment has changed significantly since 2021. Social media algorithms and, increasingly, AI are amplifying misogyny, and there is growing evidence that it does not stay online.

In the UK, misogynistic content on TikTok was found to increase fourfold within five days, with researchers observing these ideas ‘moving off screens and into schoolyards’ (Regehr et al., 2024), and 76% of secondary school teachers report being extremely concerned about the influence of online misogyny on their pupils (Over et al., 2025). The UK’s largest study of online violence against women found that 13% of women in England who experienced online violence said it progressed to offline violence (The Open University, 2023y 2023). Among women in public life globally, 42% of women journalists and media workers now link offline harm to online violence, more than double the rate in 2020, and nearly a quarter of women surveyed said the online violence they experienced involved AI (UN Women, 2025b5).

The rise in reported sexual harassment since 2021 is therefore likely to reflect several factors, including greater awareness and recognition, and an online environment in which misogyny spreads more easily. While we cannot say with certainty whether the increase reflects more harassment, greater recognition of it, or both, what is clear is that levels of sexual harassment remain alarmingly high, and that the online and offline worlds can no longer be treated separately in efforts to address it.



UN Women UK Community taking part in the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

6. WHO IS MOST AT RISK

UN Women UK's 2021 survey noted that intersectional factors such as ethnicity and sexual orientation can play a role in women's experiences of sexual harassment, but it did not collect enough data to analyse these patterns (APPG for UN Women, 2021, p.10). The 2026 survey addresses this gap.

What our survey found

Lesbian, bisexual and gay women: 95% of women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or gay have experienced sexual harassment in a public space, significantly higher than women who do not identify as lesbian, bisexual or gay (71%).

Disabled women: disabled women reported similar levels of sexual harassment to women who are not disabled (78%). However, 88% of women living with chronic pain and 78% of women with mental health conditions reported experiencing sexual harassment, significantly higher than women without these conditions.

Ethnic minority women: 74% of ethnic minority women have experienced sexual harassment in a public space. This is not statistically different from all women, but the research below shows why further study of specific groups is needed.

Older women (65+): were significantly less likely to say they had experienced sexual harassment in a public space (60%, compared with 76% of all women).

What other research shows

In line with UN Women UK's 2026 survey, research published since 2021 reveals concerning differences in how different groups of women experience and report sexual harassment.

Research by FORWARD on young women's experiences in London found that 83% had experienced sexual harassment or assault in the preceding two years (FORWARD, 2024). Over half (54%) of minoritised ethnic young women reported experiencing racially targeted sexual harassment. Participants described how comments that initially appeared flattering became hostile and racialised when their advances were rejected. The study also revealed stark reporting disparities, with only 49% of minoritised ethnic young women feeling believed by police or authorities when reporting, compared with 66% of white women (FORWARD, 2024).

Qualitative research by Plan International UK found that experiences of public sexual harassment are "racialised on top" of gender-based harassment (Plan International UK, 2022). Mixed race girls were significantly more likely to have experienced unwanted touching, being filmed without consent and sexual gestures than other ethnic groups.

Barriers to reporting included distrust of the police, particularly among Muslim and South Asian girls who feared they would not be believed, and shame within families, with South Asian girls particularly concerned about bringing shame to their families and affecting marriage prospects (Plan International UK, 2022).

While research into sexual harassment experienced by Black women is limited, HERSANA, a Black-led community interest company, surveyed 110 Black women and femmes in the UK and found that misogynoir – the specific combination of racism and sexism directed at Black women – is 'central to Black Femmes experiences of everyday life', shaping both their vulnerability to gender-based violence and the responses they receive. More than a quarter of participants had experienced 15 or more incidents of gender-based violence in their lifetime, despite most being under 35. Four in five described their experience of engaging with the police as negative, and over half (54%) said they blamed themselves, which the report links to harmful stereotypes such as the 'strong and angry Black woman' (HERSANA, 2026).

The intersection of gender and LGBTQ+ identity also shapes experiences of harassment on public transport. Research by London TravelWatch and Galop found that 18% of LGBTQ+ respondents had experienced unwanted sexual comments, 15% unwanted sexual harassment and 7% unwanted sexual contact on public transport in the past year (London TravelWatch and Galop, 2023). Cis lesbian and bisexual women reported significantly higher safety concerns than cis gay and bisexual men, with 87% feeling unsafe at night compared with 43% of men.

Many participants said their experiences of harassment were a result of their gender rather than their sexual orientation. Reporting rates were extremely low (84% did not report), with barriers including feeling they would not be taken seriously (50%) and distrust of police (49%) (London TravelWatch and Galop, 2023).

Trans women face particular risks. TransActual's survey of more than 4,000 trans people in the UK found that nearly 2,000 respondents said they had faced transphobic comments or harassment while using public transport (TransActual, 2025). London TravelWatch and Galop also found heightened safety concerns among trans people using London's transport network (London TravelWatch and Galop, 2023). These surveys were not designed to measure prevalence across the population, but they show how sexual harassment and transphobia can combine in public spaces.

Research shows that disabled women face an elevated risk of sexual harassment. The TUC surveyed 1,162 disabled women and found that 68% had experienced sexual harassment at work, significantly higher than the 52% of women in general and rising to 78% for disabled women under 35 (TUC, 2021). Over half (54%) had experienced two or more types of harassing behaviour. Reporting rates were extremely low, with 66% not reporting. The most common barrier was the belief that they would not be taken seriously (39%). Among those who did report, 53% said their complaint was not dealt with satisfactorily. The impacts were severe with 34% reporting negative mental health effects, and 12% left their job as a result (TUC, 2021).

There is very little UK research on older women's experiences of sexual harassment. Polling suggests that age is the biggest factor in whether people see a behaviour as sexual harassment. In 2023, 75% of 18–24-year-olds said wolf whistling was sexual harassment, compared with 25% of those aged over 65, and older people's views were changing more slowly (YouGov, 2023). This may mean that some older women do not name their experiences as harassment.However, research on sexual violence more broadly has found that older women are largely invisible in research and policy, and national surveys have historically excluded them. Until 2017, the Crime Survey for England and Wales did not ask women over 59 about domestic abuse, sexual assault or stalking, and the upper age limit was only removed entirely in October 2021 (Bows and Westmarland, 2017; ONS, 2024).

What this means

Sexual harassment is not experienced equally. Lesbian, bisexual and gay women stand out across this report: they are more likely to experience harassment in public spaces, and more likely to face barriers when reporting it. For disabled women, the overall figure masks significant differences, with women living with chronic pain or mental health conditions at greater risk. This shows the value of looking beyond broad categories.

The wider evidence suggests that trans women face harassment that is both sexual and transphobic, often in public spaces such as transport, and have little confidence that reporting will help. Dedicated funding for research that captures trans women's experiences in relation to sexual harassment in public spaces is needed to fill this gap and implement evidence-based solutions.

Our survey did not find a statistically significant difference for ethnic minority women overall. However, the wider evidence shows that harassment is racialised. UK wide investment is needed in research that captures the experiences of minoritised women. Underinvestment in this research, for sexual harassment and violence against women and girls more broadly, risks failing those most affected (see Recommendation 8).

Similarly research into older women's experiences of gender-based violence remains very limited, and further research is needed to understand this.


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7. BYSTANDERS AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

What our survey found

Bystanders: when asked how other people reacted, 4 in 10 women said no one else was around when the harassment took place. 25% said other people were around but no one stepped in. 14% said one or more people stepped in and 2% said someone alerted security or staff.

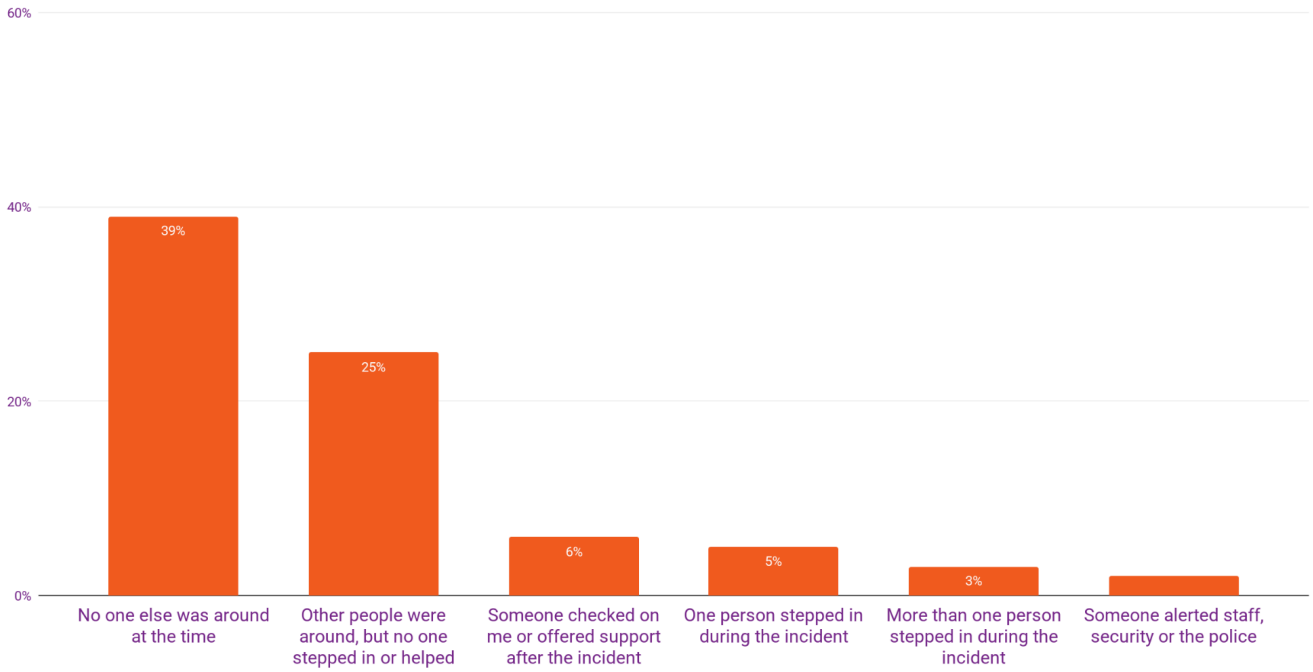
Lesbian, bisexual and gay women were more likely than heterosexual women to say other people were around but no one stepped in (35% vs 24%) but also more likely than heterosexual respondents to say that someone checked in on them after the incident (11% vs 5%).

Disabled respondents were more likely than non-disabled respondents to say that other people were around but no one stepped in or helped (30% vs 22%).
White respondents were more likely than minority ethnic respondents to say no one else was around at the time (28% vs 41%).

White respondents were more likely than minority ethnic respondents to say no one else was around at the time (41% vs 28%).

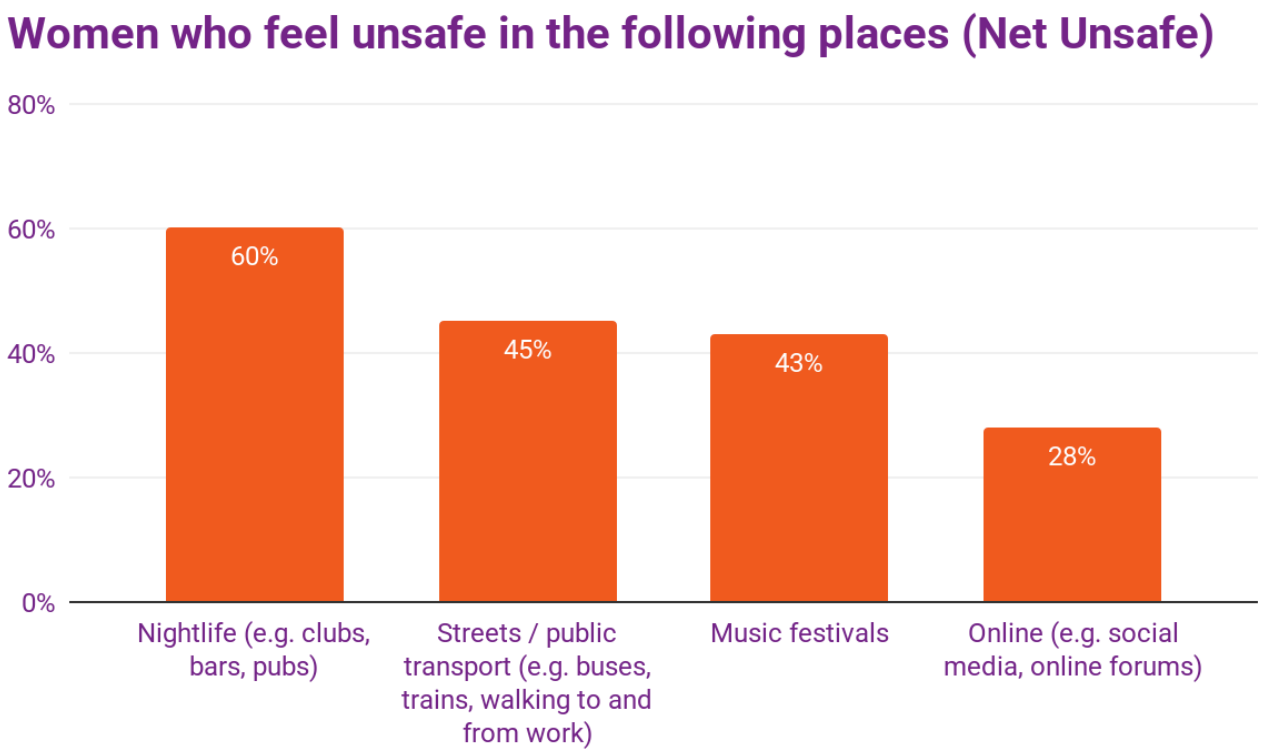
FIGURE 4

Thinking about your most recent experience of sexual harassment in a public space, how did the people around you react?



Feeling unsafe: women were most likely to feel unsafe in clubs, bars and pubs (60%), followed by streets and public transport (45%) and music festivals (43%).

FIGURE 5

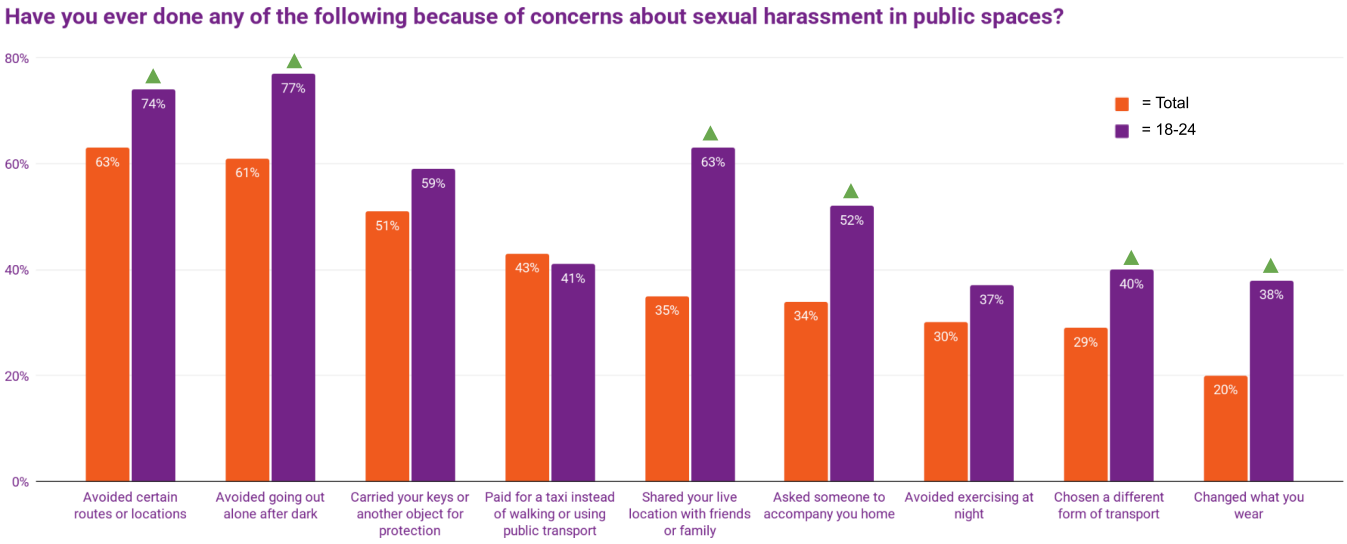


Changing behaviour: 85% of women have changed their behaviour because of concerns about sexual harassment in public. Around 6 in 10 avoid certain routes or places, or avoid going out alone after dark.

Women aged 18–24 are significantly more likely than all women to change their behaviour: 77% avoid going out alone after dark (vs 61%), 63% share their live location with friends or family (vs 35%) and 38% change what they wear (vs 20%).

Lesbian, bisexual and gay women are also significantly more likely to change their behaviour when compared to heterosexual women (97% vs 84%).

FIGURE 6



What other research shows

Plan International UK's survey of nearly 3,000 girls and young women found that only 5% of girls feel completely safe in public spaces, and just 9% feel completely safe online. 62% of girls have avoided activities such as exercising, socialising or travelling because of experiencing or worrying about public sexual harassment (Plan International UK, 2024).

Consistent with UN Women UK's 2026 findings, a study by the University of Suffolk found that women routinely modify their daily activities to avoid victimisation, exchanging freedom for safety (University of Suffolk, 2023; APPG for UN Women, 2021). At music festivals, women adopted extensive safety strategies such as avoiding certain spaces, staying with friends and reducing alcohol consumption to avoid the risk of harassment (Bows, Day and Dhir, 2024). Other research echoes our findings on bystanders.

International research by Ipsos for L'Oréal Paris found that only 25% of women who had experienced sexual harassment in public spaces said someone helped (L'Oréal Paris and Ipsos, 2021 and 2023), and qualitative research for Transport Scotland found women described a general absence of bystander intervention, with other passengers averting their gaze or moving away (Transport Scotland). Our finding that 14% of women said someone stepped in sits within this range: most women experience harassment without anyone intervening. The setting may matter, however. A British Transport Police survey found that 51% of women victims of sexual harassment on trains or the Tube said other passengers intervened (British Transport Police, 2023).

Where people do act, it makes a difference. In the aforementioned L'Oreal/Ipsos study, 86% of UK witnesses who had intervened said their action improved the situation, yet 86% of people say there is a lack of training on how to intervene (L'Oréal Paris and Ipsos).

There is promising UK evidence that bystander training can change attitudes and confidence. An evaluation of The Intervention Initiative, a bystander programme commissioned by Public Health England for English universities, found significant reductions in rape myth acceptance and significant increases in participants' confidence, readiness and intent to help, with no backlash identified (Fenton and Mott, 2018). A community-based version addressing domestic abuse showed similarly promising results (Gainsbury, Fenton and Jones, 2020). In South Wales, #SafeToSay campaigns run in 2021 and 2022 encouraged bystanders to respond to sexual harassment witnessed on a night out (Barton, Parry and Snowdon, 2025). However, most evaluations measure changes in attitudes and intentions rather than what people actually do when they witness harassment, and much of the evidence comes from universities.

Further research is needed on what works to increase safe intervention in public spaces such as transport, streets and venues.

What this means

Sexual harassment often happens in front of other people, yet bystanders rarely step in, and staff or security are rarely alerted. When harassment goes unchallenged in public, it sends a message that it is acceptable. This points to a clear opportunity: equipping the public, and staff in venues, on transport and at events, to recognise harassment and respond safely.

At the same time, the burden of staying safe falls overwhelmingly on women. The vast majority change how they live their lives, from the routes they take to what they wear, and young women carry the heaviest burden. This restricts women's right to move freely and safely and to take part fully in public life. A society-wide approach to preventing sexual harassment that encompasses prevention and education on effective bystander intervention strategies is needed to ensure that this responsibility no longer sits with women (see Recommendations 5 and 6).



8. ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

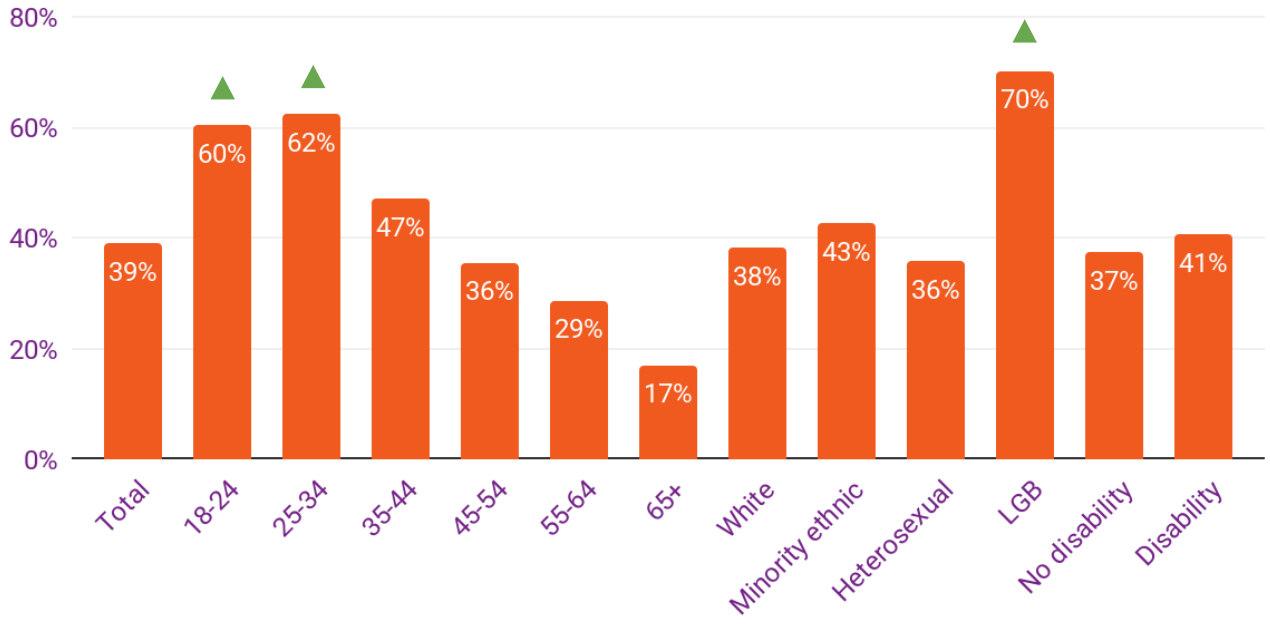
What our survey found

39% of women have experienced sexual harassment online, rising to 60% among women aged 18–24 and 70% among lesbian, bisexual and gay women.

UN Women UK's 2021 survey found that 17% of women had experienced online comments or jokes that made them feel unsafe, and 14% had been sent suggestive, indecent or unsolicited content (APPG for UN Women, 2021).

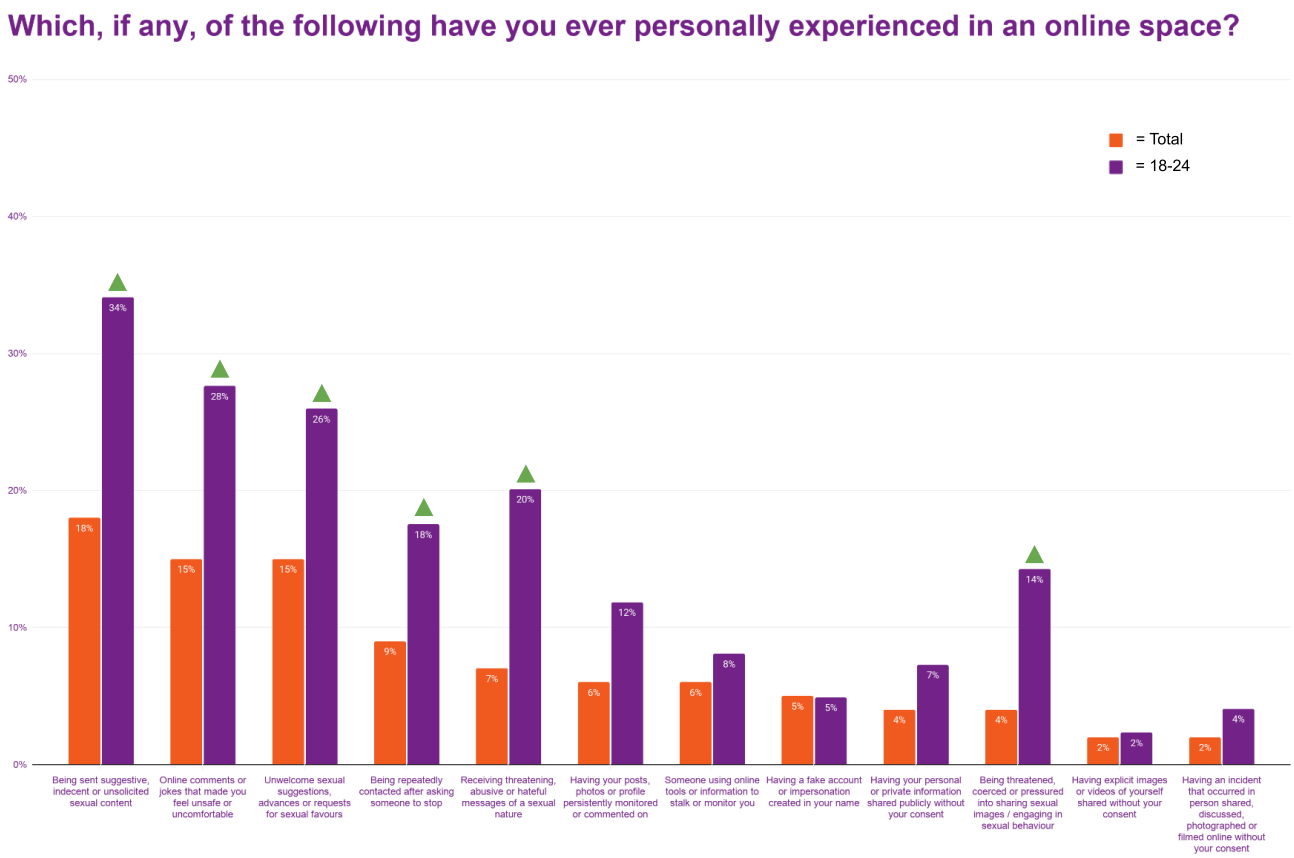
FIGURE 7

Women who have experienced any kind of sexual harassment online



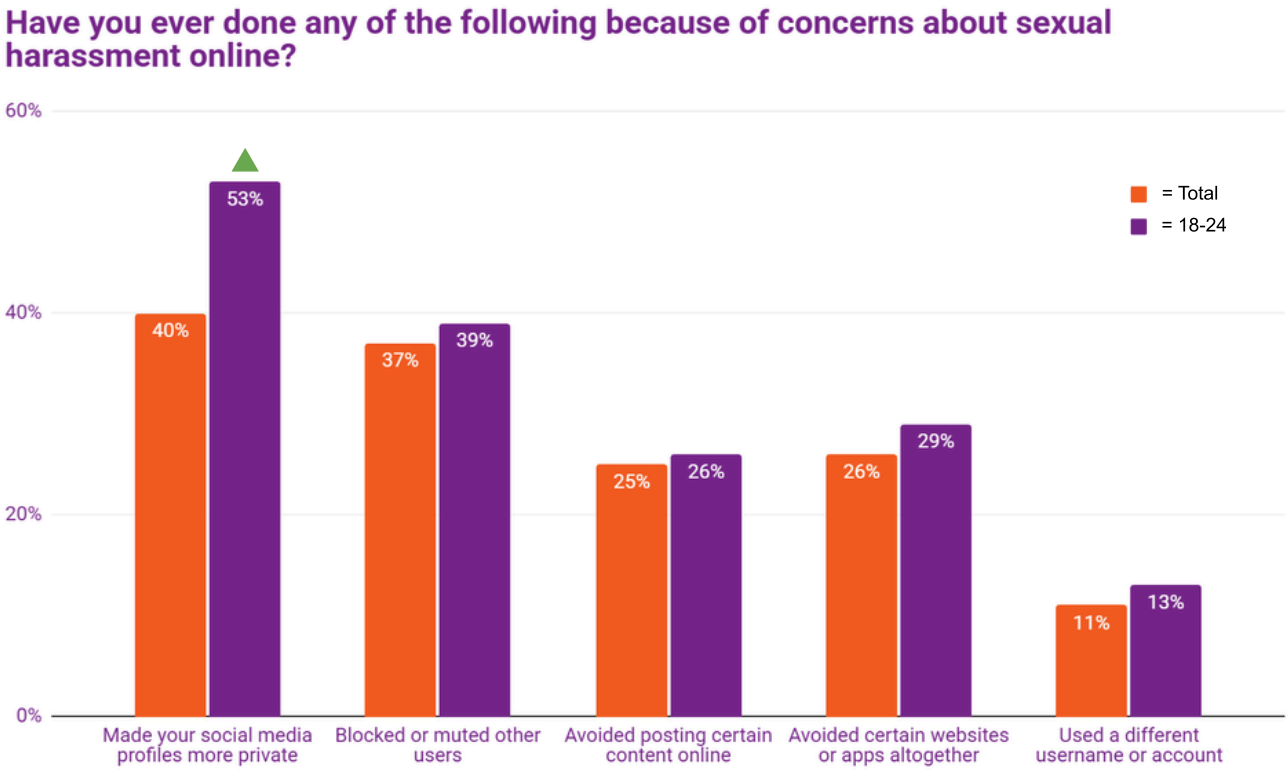
The most common form of online harassment was receiving unsolicited sexual content, experienced by nearly 1 in 5 women (18%) rising to nearly 1 in 3 (34%) for 18-24 year olds. Over 1 in 10 (14%) of women aged 18–24 reported being threatened, coerced or pressured into sharing sexual images or engaging in sexual behaviour, a stark difference from all women (4%).

FIGURE 8



59% of women have taken some kind of action/modified their behaviour online because of concerns about sexual harassment, with the most common change being making their social media profiles more private (40%). This figure rose significantly for those aged 18-24 with 53% having taken this action.

FIGURE 9



What other research shows

Research since 2021 suggests that online sexual harassment has become increasingly common and is now recognised as a widespread issue in its own right.

The most recent UK evidence comes from Refuge and the End Violence Against Women Coalition's Dangerous by Design report, based on a nationally representative Opinium survey of 2,000 UK women aged 16 and over, carried out in April and May 2026 (Refuge and EVAW, 2026). It found that 36% of women had experienced some form of online violence, rising to 47% of women aged 16–24, 47% of disabled women and 65% of LGBTQIA+ women.

Nearly one in five (18%) had experienced image-based sexual abuse, rising to 31% of women aged 16–24 and 42% of LGBTQIA+ women, and 13% had been sent unsolicited sexual images (cyberflashing).

Ofcom, the UK's online safety regulator, has acknowledged that under-reporting is likely across all online gender-based harms. Barriers include social stigma and lack of trust in reporting systems (Ofcom, 2025). Ofcom also recognises that multiple characteristics such as race, ethnicity and gender identity can overlap to increase a person's vulnerability to harm, though quantitative research cannot always capture these intersecting patterns because of sample size limitations (Ofcom, 2025).

Research commissioned by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology found that reporting rates for online VAWG are extremely low, with only one in four women reporting abuse to platforms (PUBLIC/DSIT, 2023). The most common reason for not reporting was that women did not think it would make a difference, mirroring UN Women UK's 2021 survey (APPG for UN Women, 2021; PUBLIC/DSIT, 2023). The report also found significant disparities in reporting outcomes: 84% of women who reported online abuse felt their complaint was not properly addressed, rising to 94% for Black and minority ethnic women (PUBLIC/DSIT, 2023).

Data from the Revenge Porn Helpline's 2024 annual report highlights the gendered nature of intimate image abuse (Revenge Porn Helpline, 2024). Of the 15,518 images reported for removal, 96.9% depicted women. Women experienced an average of 9.19 images shared per case compared with 0.38 for men, meaning that for every image of a man shared, approximately 24 images of women were distributed without consent. Young adults were disproportionately affected, with 308 cases in the 18–24 age group compared with 239 in the 25–34 age group (Revenge Porn Helpline, 2024).

What this means

Online sexual harassment is now part of everyday life for many women, particularly young women and lesbian, bisexual and gay women. Our findings and the wider evidence point in the same direction: the same behaviours, attitudes and harms move between online and offline settings. Online harassment cannot be treated separately from harassment in physical public spaces. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that AI tools and technology have exacerbated existing forms of sexual harassment (UN Women and Everyday Sexism Project, 2025). As in public spaces, women are changing their behaviour to protect themselves, for example by making their profiles private, which limits their participation in online public life.

The pressure on young women to share sexual images is particularly concerning, as is the gendered nature of intimate image abuse. Reporting to platforms remains low, and many women who do report feel their complaint was not dealt with. The Online Safety Act 2023 creates new duties for platforms, but its effectiveness will depend on a willingness of tech providers to implement solutions, such as effective reporting mechanisms, strong enforcement from the regulator and on women having confidence that reporting online abuse will in fact lead to action (see Recommendation 7).


PAUSE
REFLECT
ACT

9. REPORTING AND BARRIERS TO REPORTING

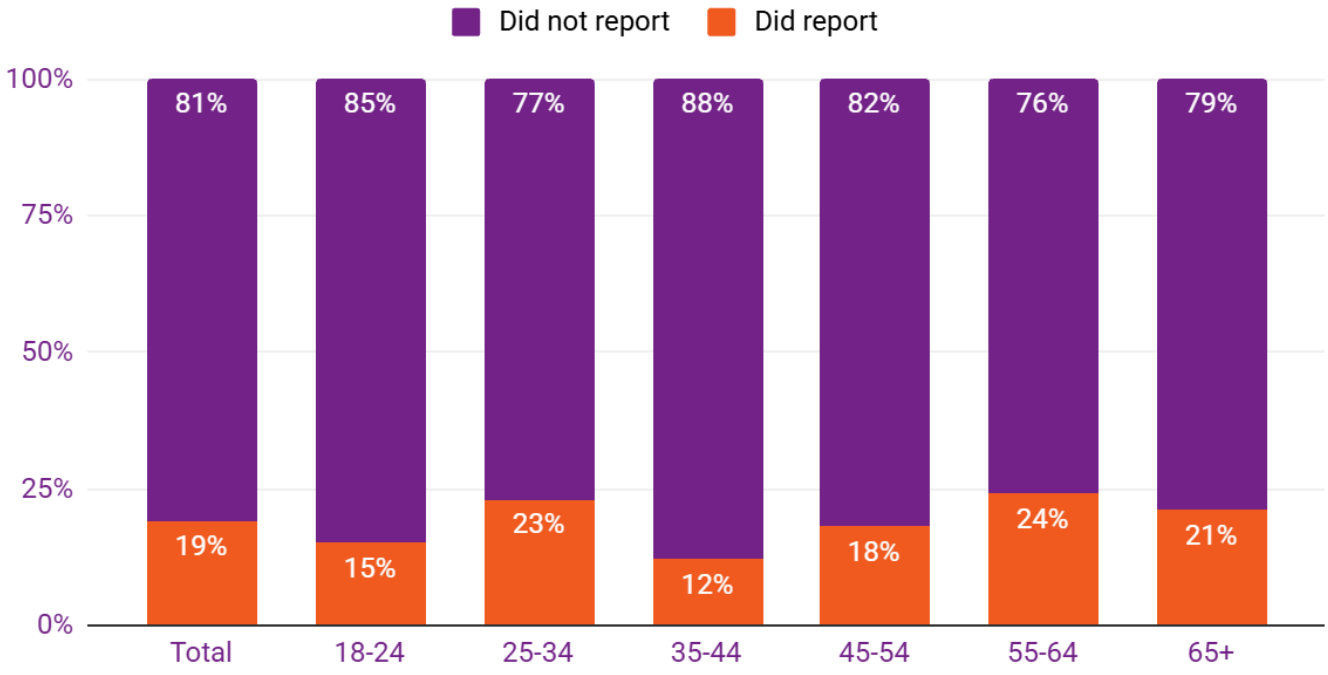
What our survey found

Only 19% of women who experienced sexual harassment reported any of their experiences to an official organisation, such as the police, a transport operator or venue staff. In other words, around 8 in 10 women never reported a single experience. In UN Women UK's 2021 survey, women were not asked this directly; instead, they were asked why they had not reported their experiences, with the option to say they had reported all of them.

Over 95% did not choose this option, meaning they had not reported every experience to an official organisation. The 2026 survey asked women directly whether they reported any experiences of sexual harassment. Because the question asks about any experience rather than all of them, it sets the lowest possible bar for reporting, which makes this finding all the more concerning. Despite these differences, both figures point to the same conclusion: the vast majority of sexual harassment goes unreported.

FIGURE 10

Women who reported at least one instance of sexual harassment in a public space, by age

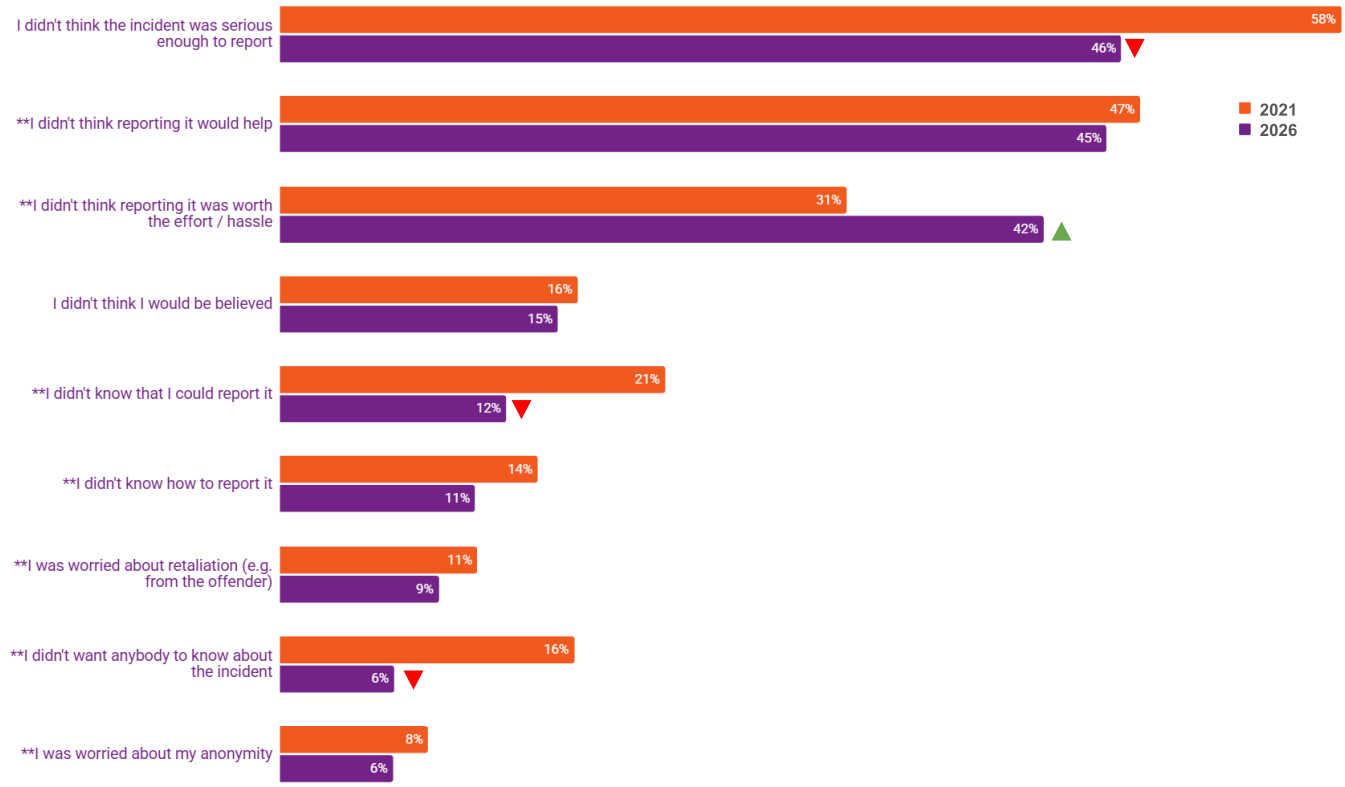


When it comes to the reasons for not reporting, 46% of women said they did not believe the incident was serious enough (61% for 18-24 year olds), 45% said they did not think reporting would help, and 42% said they didn't think reporting it was worth the effort/hassle (52% for 18-24 year olds).

This varies significantly when compared to our 2021 survey where 58% of all women said they didn't report because they felt the incident wasn't serious enough, and 31% said they didn't think reporting was worth the effort/hassle. Of note, 12% of women said they did not report because they didn't know they could, a statistically significant fall from 21% in 2021.

FIGURE 11

Reasons did not report to an official organisation (among those with unreported experiences)



Barriers to reporting are significantly higher for some groups:

- Lesbian, bisexual and gay women were significantly more likely to think they wouldn't be believed (34% vs 15% of all women) and to worry about retaliation (18% vs 9%).
- Disabled women were significantly more likely to think they wouldn't be believed (22% vs 15%), rising to 28% among women with mental health conditions.
- Ethnic minority women were significantly more likely to say reporting felt too upsetting (15% vs 7%).

What would help: 1 in 2 women said being confident that action would be taken would make them more likely to report to an official organisation. 44% said more confidence in the legal system's response would help, and 36% said a convenient way to report would make them more likely to report.

What other research shows

Research published since 2021 supports these findings. In 2025, Welsh Women's Aid found that 77% of respondents did not report their experiences, citing fears of not being believed, concerns about retaliation and a lack of trust in institutional responses (Welsh Women's Aid, 2025). Even among those sexually harassed at music festivals, only 2% of victims reported to the police and only 7% to festival staff (Bows, Day and Dhir, 2024).

Low levels of trust in authorities were further evidenced by Plan International UK's survey of nearly 3,000 girls and young women. One in five do not trust the police at all to help them if in difficulty, rising to 24% among 17–21-year-olds, and 25% of girls of colour share this distrust (Plan International UK, 2024).

Trust in reporting systems remains a critical barrier. The Metropolitan Police's own review identified 1,636 serving officers or staff with allegations of domestic abuse or sexual incidents between 2012 and 2022, with 62 dismissed following gross misconduct hearings (Metropolitan Police, 2025). These institutional failures undermine victims' confidence in reporting, reinforcing our 2026 finding that 45% of women did not report because they did not think it would help.

Research into young people's responses to online harassment reveals a preference for informal over formal action. Internet Matters found that among teenagers who received an unwanted nude image, the most common response was to block the perpetrator (58%), while only 34% reported to the platform and 23% to the police (Internet Matters, 2023).

Our survey did not ask women specifically about reporting online sexual harassment, but recent UK evidence suggests the same barriers apply online, and in some cases more sharply. Refuge and the End Violence Against Women Coalition's 2026 survey of 2,000 UK women found that only 29% of women who experienced online violence reported it to the platform, and 58% of those who did were dissatisfied with the outcome.

The most common reasons for not reporting were believing the platform would not take it seriously (37%) or would not act (26%). Just 12% reported to the police; 17% of these reports were not investigated at all, and around one in three women were dissatisfied with the investigation. Over one in five (21%) told no one, reported nothing and sought no support. Even where intimate image offences are recorded by police, only 4.5% led to a charge in 2024/25 (Refuge and EVAW, 2026). As online and offline harassment become increasingly connected, reporting routes and responses need to work across both.

Young people's reluctance to report sexual harassment is reinforced by poor institutional responses. Ringrose and Regehr (2023) found that one school responded to the non-consensual sharing of a sexual video by projecting blurred screenshots of the video in a whole-school assembly. Participants described the assembly as harmful and traumatising, showing how well-intentioned but misguided responses can re-traumatise victims and discourage future reporting (Ringrose and Regehr, 2023).

Research on women's experiences once they do report points to why confidence may be so low. The Victims' Commissioner's survey of over 3,000 victims of crime found that 73% were not confident that reporting a crime would lead to justice (Victims' Commissioner, 2024), and her 2024 survey of 6,581 victims found that 41% of rape and sexual assault victims did not report the incident (Victims' Commissioner, 2025).

Surveys of more than 3,000 rape and sexual assault survivors for Operation Soteria found that police investigations harmed many survivors' mental health, with some saying the experience was so poor they would never contact the police again, although experiences have improved for those reporting since 2021 (Hohl et al., 2023; Hohl et al., 2024). For sexual offences in public spaces specifically, the Angiolini Inquiry found that no one could say how many women nationally report sexually motivated crimes in public, that 26% of police forces had no specialist policy for investigating sexual offences including indecent exposure, and that only an estimated 45% of officers had completed training on indecent exposure (Angiolini Inquiry, 2025).

Most research on reporting experiences focuses on more serious sexual offences. Far less is known about what happens when women report sexual harassment in public spaces, despite this being one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence.

What this means

Most sexual harassment still goes unreported, but the reasons are shifting. Fewer women now say an incident wasn't serious enough to report, which suggests growing recognition that harassment is unacceptable (see section 5). At the same time, more women say reporting isn't worth the effort. The barrier is increasingly not whether women recognise harassment, but whether they believe anything will be done about it. This is reinforced by a significant fall in the proportion of women who did not report because they didn't know they could (12%, down from 21% in 2021).

More women now recognise harassment and know that they can report it, yet reporting remains low. This suggests that, five years on from our 2021 report, the solutions that matter most for women overall should not be centred on awareness, but on building confidence that reporting will be taken seriously and lead to action. Further evidence is needed to understand whether this is also true for minoritised women, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds and other marginalised groups.

Our findings suggest that the main barriers lie with the system rather than with individual fears. Relatively few women cited fear of retaliation (9%), while far more said reporting wasn't worth the effort (42%), and half said that confidence that action would be taken would make them more likely to report.

The wider evidence supports this: confidence in the justice system is low, reporting can itself be distressing, and there is no reliable national picture of how reports of sexual offences in public spaces are handled. Compounding this, each report that does not lead to justice is likely to make women less willing to report again.

Minority ethnic women were twice as likely as women overall to say that reporting felt too upsetting (15% vs 7%). Our survey does not tell us why, but the wider evidence suggests several possible reasons. Black and minoritised girls and young women describe sexual harassment that is 'racialised on top' of gender-based harassment, affecting their mental health, self-esteem and sense of identity, and some fear bringing shame on their families (Plan International UK, 2022).

Research with ethnic minority women in Wales also identifies shame as a barrier to reporting, and shows how racial discrimination can shape both the harassment itself and the response when women report it (Welsh Government, 2025). Where harassment is both sexual and racist, reporting may mean reliving both, to institutions that minoritised women are less likely to trust. Only 49% of minoritised ethnic young women felt believed by police or authorities when reporting, compared with 66% of white women (FORWARD, 2024). Furthermore, specialist 'by and for' organisations highlight the toll that violence, trauma and systemic failures take on minoritised women's mental health (Thiara, Roy and Thomas, 2024). More research is needed to understand these experiences, but they point to the need for reporting routes and support that are trauma-informed and culturally informed, including specialist services led by and for Black, Asian and other minoritised women, including religious minorities.

This lack of trust is sharper for lesbian, bisexual and gay women, disabled and ethnic minority women, who are more likely to fear not being believed, retaliation or the distress of reporting. In our survey, women told us clearly what would make a difference: confidence that action will be taken, confidence in the legal system and a convenient way to report. Tackling the systemic barriers that prevent survivors from reporting would not only help hold perpetrators to account, but also give a fuller picture of the true scale of sexual harassment. New laws (see section 3) will only be effective if women trust the systems that enforce them (see Recommendations 1 and 3).


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10. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Five years on from UN Women UK's 2021 research, sexual harassment in public spaces remains a near-universal experience for women in the UK. Three quarters of women (76%) have experienced it, rising to 93% of women aged 18–24 and 95% of lesbian, bisexual and gay women. Online sexual harassment is now common too, affecting 39% of women and 60% of young women. As so much of daily life now takes place online, any line that once existed between online and offline harm is increasingly blurred.

Much has changed since 2021. Women appear more able to recognise and name sexual harassment, with fewer saying an incident wasn't serious enough to report. Since April 2026, public sexual harassment has been a criminal offence in England and Wales, and the Government's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, Freedom from Violence and Abuse (2025), commits to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. But awareness and new laws are not enough on their own. According to our findings, around 8 in 10 women who experience sexual harassment never report it, and more now say reporting isn't worth the effort. Until women trust that reporting will lead to action, the true scale of sexual harassment will remain hidden and perpetrators will go unchallenged.

Laws and reporting systems respond to harm after it has happened. The UK Government's strategy to halve violence against women and girls in a decade requires getting to the root causes - the attitudes that normalise harassment and stops the violence before it starts. These are increasingly shaped online, where algorithms amplify misogynistic content and the 'manosphere' reaches boys and young men at scale. Prevention must start early, engage boys and men as part of the solution, and tackle online misogyny directly, as UN Women UK's Same Side campaign seeks to do by offering positive, healthy alternatives to the misogynistic and sexist content spread by the manosphere. It works with athletes as role models who challenge these ideas; provides a toolkit to help parents and caregivers have difficult conversations with the young people in their lives; and offers education toolkits for schools, sports clubs and youth clubs, giving teachers, coaches and other trusted adults the skills and knowledge to tackle harmful narratives.

This is happening amidst a backdrop of global backlash on women's rights (UN Women, 2025a) and continued pressure on the specialist services that support survivors. Research by Rosa, the UK-wide fund for women and girls, found that 91% of women and girls' organisations had seen demand for their services rise over the past year, yet just 1.8% of charitable funding goes to organisations run by and for women and girls. Over half (53%) of the sector is made up of small organisations with fewer than ten employees, which struggle to compete for government grants and contracts that favour larger, generalist providers. In addition, Black and minoritised organisations are among the hardest hit (Rosa and Pro Bono Economics, 2025).

Responses must also recognise that sexual harassment is not experienced equally. The evidence suggests that lesbian, bisexual and gay women, disabled women and women from minority ethnic groups face greater risks and greater barriers to reporting, and one-size-fits-all solutions will fail them. In the same vein, research is needed into the prevalence of sexual harassment amongst older women and their experiences.

Finally, responsibility for women's safety must shift away from women themselves. 85% of women change how they live to avoid harassment, while bystanders rarely step in and staff are rarely alerted. Women feel least safe in clubs, bars and pubs (60%), and the businesses that run night-time venues, transport and events have a central role to play in changing this.

Recommendations

1. Establish a national reporting line for sexual harassment.

Establish a national reporting and support line for sexual harassment. Only 19% of women who experienced sexual harassment reported any of their experiences to an official organisation, meaning around 8 in 10 never reported a single experience. Half said confidence that action would be taken would make them more likely to report, and 1 in 4 said a convenient way to report would help (section 9). Routes to report are currently fragmented across police forces, transport operators and venues. Experiences of harassment are broadly consistent across the UK's nations and regions, and the support women receive should not depend on where they live (section 5). Government should fund a single, nationally recognised reporting line for sexual harassment, linked to the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, that:

- is free and accessible by phone, text and online, including anonymous reporting
- connects women to the police where they choose, and to specialist support and guidance where they don't
- keeps women informed about what happens next
- produces national data on sexual harassment in public spaces, filling the gap identified by the Angiolini Inquiry (2025)
- it should be backed by a sustained national awareness campaign so that women know it exists and what it is for (see Recommendation 6).

2. Make the new law work for women.

Three in four women (76%) have experienced sexual harassment in a public space, yet 1 in 4 said more confidence in the legal system's response would make them more likely to report (sections 5 and 9). Government and police should monitor and publish data on the use of the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, including reports, charges and outcomes, and ensure officers are trained to respond to public sexual harassment (sections 3 and 9). Government should also raise public awareness of the new offence: knowing the law exists helps survivors recognise that what happened to them is a crime, and can act as a deterrent to perpetrators.

3. Rebuild trust in reporting.

More women now say reporting isn't worth the effort (42%, up from 31% in 2021), even though fewer say they didn't know they could report (12%, down from 21%). Yet no national data exist on how many women report sexual offences in public spaces, and 26% of police forces have no specialist policy for investigating sexual offences (Angiolini Inquiry, 2025). Alongside a national reporting and support line (Recommendation 1), police, transport operators and venues should offer simple, accessible ways to report, keep women informed about what happens next and ensure reports lead to action, with staff trained to respond in ways that are trauma-informed and culturally aware. Government should collect and publish national data on sexual offences in public spaces, as the Angiolini Inquiry recommends (sections 6 and 9).

4. Make prevention the priority.

Sexual harassment has become part of growing up for young women: 93% of women aged 18–24 have experienced it in a public space and 60% online, and young women are significantly more likely to change how they live to stay safe (sections 5, 7 and 8). The UK Government has committed to halving violence against women and girls within a decade, and its VAWG Strategy places welcome emphasis on prevention, including a revised Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum and dedicated funding to tackle misogyny in schools. However, specialist organisations warn that this funding falls far short of what is needed (EVAW, 2026), and that the education commitments do not specifically address technology-facilitated abuse (Refuge, 2025). Government should centre funding on a long-term, whole-society prevention programme that goes beyond schools to reach adults, workplaces, the night-time economy and online spaces; tackles online misogyny and the manosphere; and engages boys and men as part of the solution (sections 5 and 8).

5. Ensure those who run public spaces are also responsible for safety.

Women feel least safe in clubs, bars and pubs (60%), followed by streets and public transport (45%) and music festivals (43%), yet only 2% of women who were harassed said someone alerted security or staff (sections 5 and 7). While there are examples of initiatives to address this in major cities, these often rely on limited funding and volunteer support. Furthermore, women's experiences of sexual harassment are broadly consistent across the UK's nations and regions, so a nationwide approach is needed to avoid a 'postcode lottery' when it comes to ensuring justice for survivors. Licensing authorities, transport operators and night-time economy businesses should train staff to recognise and respond to sexual harassment, make it easy for women to ask staff for help, and prioritise clubs, bars, pubs, festivals and public transport (sections 5 and 7).

6. Equip the public to intervene safely.

A quarter of women (25%) said other people were around when they were harassed but no one stepped in, and only 14% said someone intervened. Lesbian, bisexual and gay women (35%) and disabled respondents (30%) were more likely to say others were present but did nothing (section 7). Public campaigns can shift attitudes and behaviour, particularly when combined with the law. Awareness campaigns in the 1970s promoted seatbelt use, yet wearing rates never exceeded 40%. When wearing became compulsory in 1983, the rate rose to around 95% almost immediately (Hansard, 1986).

Decades of THINK! campaigns alongside police enforcement helped make drink driving socially unacceptable: drink-drive deaths fell by 88% between 1979 and 2015 (Department for Transport, 2017), and 92% of people said they would feel ashamed to drink and drive (Department for Transport, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic showed again that society can adopt large-scale changes in behaviour to protect others. There is evidence that this approach can work for sexual harassment too. After Transport for London and the police began a joint effort to tackle unwanted sexual behaviour, including the 'Report It to Stop It' campaign, annual reports on London's transport network doubled, from 1,023 in 2012/13 to 2,087 in 2015/16, and arrests rose by 36% in a single year (TfL, 2017). UN Women UK's Right to Move campaign seeks to shift attitudes through a coordinated campaign when the clocks go back and the nights get darker, but this needs to be built into a broader, sustained national strategy funded by Government to promote the national reporting and support line (Recommendation 1). This should sit alongside evidence-based bystander intervention training that builds on existing programmes such as UN Women UK's Safe Spaces Now, with evaluation of what works in public spaces (sections 3 and 7).

7. Hold tech companies to account.

39% of women have experienced sexual harassment online, rising to 60% of women aged 18–24 and 70% of lesbian, bisexual and gay women. Over 1 in 10 women aged 18–24 have been threatened, coerced or pressured into sharing sexual images or engaging in sexual behaviour, and 59% of women have changed their behaviour online to protect themselves (section 8). Other countries show that stronger action is possible. Australia's eSafety Commissioner, an independent regulator with legal powers to order platforms to remove image-based abuse, succeeds in having up to 98% of reported material taken down (eSafety Commissioner). The EU's 2024 Directive on combating violence against women requires every member state to criminalise the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, including deepfakes, as well as cyberstalking and cyber harassment such as cyberflashing, by 2027 (European Commission). South Korea has made it a crime to possess, buy, save or view sexually explicit deepfakes, punishable by up to three years in prison, and increased the maximum sentence for creating and distributing them to seven years (CBS News, 2024). Ofcom's guidance on online violence against women and girls should become an enforceable code of practice, platforms should offer reporting routes that lead to action, AI tools should be regulated to prevent their use in abusing women, and Government should consider an independent body, like Australia's eSafety Commissioner, with powers to act on women's individual complaints and order content to be removed (sections 5 and 8).

8. Design solutions with those most affected.

95% of lesbian, bisexual and gay women have experienced sexual harassment in a public space, as have 88% of women living with chronic pain, and both groups face greater barriers to reporting. Ethnic minority women were twice as likely as women overall to say reporting felt too upsetting (15% vs 7%), and wider evidence shows that broad categories can hide the experiences of specific groups, including Black women and trans women (sections 6 and 9). Young women are significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment: 93% of women aged 18–24 have experienced it in a public space and 60% online. They are also the only group in which most still say an incident wasn't serious enough to report (61% vs 46% of all women), suggesting harassment has become normalised as part of growing up (sections 5, 8 and 9). At the other end of the age range, older women were significantly less likely to say they had experienced sexual harassment (60% vs 76%). Yet older women have long been overlooked in research and national data (section 6). Solutions that are not built on the experiences of all women risk leaving significant gaps in justice. Evidence from domestic abuse services shows the difference that designing support with the women it serves can make: 78% of Black and minoritised survivors felt safer after accessing a specialist 'by and for' service, compared with 48% of those who used another kind of service. Yet 'by and for' services are six times less likely to receive statutory funding, and only 7% of disabled survivors who wanted this kind of support were able to access it (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022).

Solutions to tackle sexual harassment must therefore be designed with all those affected, across all ages. That starts with robust evidence and data to understand the scale and unique complexities of different women's experiences, and continues through sustained funding for specialist 'by and for' services and solutions that are built to work for everyone (sections 6 and 9).

9. Fund specialist support.

Around 8 in 10 women who experience sexual harassment never report it to an official organisation (section 9), making specialist services a vital source of support outside the justice system. Yet 91% of women and girls' organisations have seen demand rise, while just 1.8% of charitable funding reaches organisations run by and for women and girls (Rosa and Pro Bono Economics, 2025). This funding should be seen not as a cost but as an investment in ending sexual harassment. The UN Secretary-General's 2026 report finds that 'adequate and sustained government funding is an underlying driver of women's and girls' access to justice', and that 'investment shortfalls often translate into weak rights protection and limited accountability'.

It warns that failing to fund support such as legal aid can create a 'false economy', and notes that strong, independent women's movements are 'statistically the most consistent predictor of government action to address violence against women' (UN Secretary-General, 2026).

Specialist women's organisations do not only support survivors: they reach women who will never go to the police, build the evidence base, and drive the change in policy and attitudes needed to prevent harassment in the first place. Government should provide long-term, ringfenced funding for specialist services that support survivors of sexual harassment and violence, including 'by and for' services, to deliver lasting change (sections 6 and 9).

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