

**Written submission from Dr. Sara Bragg, Professor Emma Renold,  
Professor Jessica Ringrose and Professor Carolyn Jackson (SPP0083)**

**Author expertise**

Sara Bragg works at the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth at the University of Sussex. She has researched in the areas of youth cultures, gender, popular media and schools for 25 years. Her most recent publication is *Researching Everyday Childhoods: time, technology and documentation in a digital age* (2018, with R Thomson and L Berriman). Contact: sara.bragg@sussex.ac.uk

Emma Renold is Professor of Childhood Studies at the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. Her research investigates how gender and sexuality come to matter in children and young people's everyday lives across diverse sites, spaces and locales. Current projects (see [www.productivemargins.ac.uk](http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk)) explore what it means to engage social and political change with young people on gendered and sexual violence in schools, online and in public places (see [www.agenda.wales](http://www.agenda.wales)). Contact: renold@cf.ac.uk

Jessica Ringrose is Professor of Sociology of Gender and Education at the UCL Institute of Education and co-chair of the [International Gender and Education Association](http://www.internationalgenderandeducation.org). Her research focuses on transforming gendered and sexualized media cultures and gender and sexual equity in schools. Her latest book is *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight back against Rape Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2018 with Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessalynn Keller). Contact: J.Ringrose@ucl.ac.uk

Carolyn Jackson is Professor of Gender and Education in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, where she is also Co-Director of the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education. She has researched and published on various aspects of gender and education, including gender and fear, and constructions and performances of 'laddish' masculinities and femininities in schools and universities. Contact: c.jackson@lancaster.ac.uk

**Primary Research Evidence Base: Girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public places (age 12-14)**

*FOCUS:* Our contribution focuses on research findings about girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public places. It draws on data from the project, "How Gender Matters to Children and Young People Living in England". This project was conducted in 2015-6 for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England. Please note that the information and views in this submission are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Office for the Children's Commissioner for England.

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*SAMPLE* - the research involved both qualitative and quantitative elements.

The qualitative research took place in five locations in England, including rural, urban, and coastal sites. Most of this work took place in schools with approximately 100 young people aged 12–14 years, with a focus on accessing the voices of minority groups (in schools, defined particularly in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, and young people in care). Research was also conducted with LGBTQ youth groups outside schools, covering a wider age range. We conducted two-hour group workshops and some one-hour follow-up individual narrative interviews. Of particular importance to our submission is a photo-elicitation task that invited young people to explore what it means for gendered bodies to navigate different spaces and places, and at different times of the day. This task generated data on gender-based and sexual harassment and violence in public places.

Quantitative: We also undertook an online survey that explored participants' views about gender, how gender affects their lives, and what they want to change. Our analyses of the qualitative data informed the design of the survey and the questions included. The survey was live for 8 days and generated over 500 responses. Although the survey invited young people aged 13-18 to respond, the majority of respondents were 16-18 years old (71%) with only 15% being 13 or 14 years old. A majority of respondents defined themselves as girls (58%).

## **1. Executive summary**

### *Nature, impact and understanding*

- Survey data suggest that the street is THE place where most respondents felt unsafe because of their gender.
- Gender-based sexual harassment and unwanted sexualised 'banter' towards children and young people is widespread and needs to be seen in the context of how gender norms and expectations continue to regulate young people's experiences of their body, appearance, objects, social activities and friendship and relationship cultures.

- Girls in particular reported feeling at risk of judgement based on gendered norms around the body and appearance; pressures around heterosexual relationship cultures and heterosexual double standards were also common.
- Many girls described entrenched sexism, heterosexism, and (hetero)sexual harassment in public places which impacted negatively on their well-being, freedom of movement and sexual agency.
- Girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public places needs to be understood within the context of sexual harassment in school (e.g. classrooms and corridors) and online (e.g. social media).
- Many girls critiqued the widely held gender bias that girls'/'feminine' clothing indicates something about their sexual availability and morality – challenging the idea that girls who wear something that 'reveals' the body are 'asking for it'.
- Many young people who reported experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces, in school and online, sometimes felt unsupported by schools or parents in dealing with these issues. For some young people, online publics (e.g. social media) were the safest public spaces to socialise.

*Prevention and Intervention: the role of education*

- New developments in statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England are timely insofar as they can integrate girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public places (from public transport to street and parks) via whole school approaches to healthy relationships (see Renold and McGeeney 2017, AVA, Women's Aid).
- Schools can become key sites for critical and creative pedagogies in this field, from supporting school-based gender equality and feminist youth groups (Ringrose and Renold 2016) to awareness raising resources addressing gender-based and sexual violence (see, for example [www.agenda.wales](http://www.agenda.wales)).
- Teacher training opportunities, curricula materials and dedicated RSE lessons need to ensure that they situate girls' and women's experiences of sexual harassment in public places within a broad context and understanding of socio-structural and thus intersectional gender and sexual power relations.
- Any strategies must be experience-close, and directly involve Children and Young People in their design and delivery in order to mitigate against binary victim-blaming or perpetrator-shaming, or prevention programmes that are not fully inclusive of gender identity and expression.

## 2. Understanding the impact and nature of girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public space

### 2.1 Survey data suggest that the street is *THE* place where most respondents felt unsafe because of their gender

2.1.1 56% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Because of my gender I sometimes feel unsafe in the street'; proportions were considerably lower for other places: online (27%), public toilets (24%) school/college (10%) and home (5%).

Because of my gender I sometimes feel unsafe in the following places	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Unsure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
In the street	18	38	7	17	20
At my school/college	2	8	7	36	47
At home	2	3	4	29	62
In public toilets	6	18	8	31	37
Online	6	21	12	26	35

2.1.2 In the open text qualitative responses to the survey, we received the following comments in response to the question "if you could change one thing about gender, what would it be?"

*"That women are not so targeted in the streets and that feminist views had less of a stigma"*

*"That women shouldn't feel threatened or worried if they go anywhere For example going down a street at dark"*

And in our final open ended question, “Anything to add” we received the following comments:

*“People may be more likely to feel threatened by me (as in walking down the street at night etc)”*

*“Gender stereotypes make me think about certain things before I actually do something, eg I tend to shave my legs the day before PE or volleyball practice. I also take care about what I wear, so I don’t provoke a reaction from anyone in the street, and other boys/men don’t see me as an invitation to do or say what they like”*

This headline finding and comments are explored further in the sections below, where we explore girls’ experiences of sexual harassment in public places.

## ***2.2 Gender-based sexual harassment and unwanted sexualised ‘banter’ towards children and young people is widespread and needs to be seen in the context of how gender norms and expectations continue to regulate young people’s experiences of their body, appearance, objects, social activities and friendship and relationship cultures.***

2.2.1 It is important to note that gender-based harassment affected all young people: our interviewees commonly feared failing to live up to contemporary gender norms (Bragg et al. 2018). Just over one third (35%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced sexual harassment because of their gender. Indeed, when young people did not conform to heteronormative identity constructions or fixed ideas about gender they could be subject to various forms of harassment, attacks or unwelcome regulatory sexual banter.

## ***2.3. Girls especially reported feeling at risk of judgement based on gendered norms around the body and appearance; pressures around heterosexual relationship cultures and heterosexual double standards were also common***

2.3.1 Depending on context, many girls talked about what it meant to live with a pervasive sense of risk, judgement and scrutiny about bodily norms and appearance:

*I always feel like really nervous, like people are going to judge me and that, I'm going to, like people are just going to stare at me and stuff.... everyone just stares at you and you're just like, oh I don't know what they're staring at, what's wrong? you just feel like people are watching you. They might not be, but you just feel it, you just feel uncomfortable. (Georgia, age 14)*

This sense of being judged was described far more often by girls than by boys, suggesting that it related to the gendered body and gender norms around their appearance. A persistent and ubiquitous feature of girls' experiences was concern about being looked at.

2.3.2 Girls were specifically concerned about some boys' sense of entitlement to judge and comment upon their looks and bodies. Some girls described how this gaze felt extremely uncomfortable, was unfair and was different from how girls treat boys:

*Boys seem to think that if you don't have the perfect figure or, you're too skinny or you're too fat or you're like, even if you're normal ...they'll always find something wrong about you. (Taneisha, age 13)*

*Molly: I know a lot of girls with anxiety ... Girls get anxiety a lot at like things like parties....*

*INT: What were they panicking over?*

*Molly: Boys were looking at them, boys thought they were ugly, that they were fat and like everything really.*

*INT: And what did you think about that? How did you respond to that?*

*Molly: Um, well, I thought, I don't feel that way, and whenever I get like self-conscious I just like, kind of like, bury it inside me. (Molly, age 12)*

*They'll always find something wrong about you (...) if you're self-confident about something, about your body, then people will say it's vain, but then we feel it's just like self-confidence (...) (boys) go up to you and they're like, oh, your arse is too big, or, or I can see your boobs (...) like they'll always find something, they'll find something about it to, like, to take the piss out of. (Harriet, age13)*

*Millie: Some boys are really, like, disgusting. They're just talking about, like girls, and like their bums and... It's disgusting.*

*Alexis: I don't feel comfortable about it actually.*

*Millie: And then it's kind of like...we're not just there to be 'looked' at. We are 'people'.*

*Alexis: Yeah. And we don't do it to boys...*

*Millie: No! It's just like, we never say stuff like that.*

*(both age 14)*

2.3.3. Some girls were also concerned about boys' sense of entitlement to look at and comment upon girls' appearance and moods, which they said was 'sexist':

*Katherine: Yeah. You can't, you're not allowed to be moody really, unless, you're on your period. And then if you say no, they're like, 'you obviously are, don't lie'. But if you say, 'yeah', they're like 'oh she's on her period', and like, they tell like everyone.*

*Ester: And they'll take the mick out of you.*

*Katherine: Um, they can be, like, quite sexist recently.*

*(all age 13)*

2.3.4 Some girls talked about the cultural specificity of sexual objectification from boys. For these girls, "big bums" signified a perfect body. In this context, "skinny" would be an insult:

Violet: It's just what boys like.

Efie: And they, they like, you're from the Caribbean they picture you to be a certain way.

Trissa: You're from Spain; they picture you to be a certain way.

Violet: So, just because I'm a girl from the Caribbean I'm supposed to have big bum?

Efie: Mmm yeah.

(Violet, age 12, Trissa and Efie, age 13)

2.3.5 Girls in particular felt that heterosexual pairing up was a pressure and could lead to sexual objectification. Some recounted name-calling, such as being called a 'sket' if they had several friends that were boys:

Efie: I had so many boy-slash-friends (in primary school). I still have them.

Anele: I didn't get along with the girls in my primary school so where we was, I was. I was only friends with the boys. But now it's like I have to be friends with some girls in this school because if I'm always hanging out with the boys I'll be called like a sket or something like that.

Violet: Yeah .

INT: A sket, what's a sket?

Efie: A person who goes out with many different boys.

(Violet, age 12, Efie and Anele, age 13)

2.3.6 However, as the following discussion between a Year 8 mixed-gender friendship group illustrates, it was not only the platonic friendships of boys and girls that were sexualized: Mary Lou, the ambiguously gendered girl in the group, was also teased for being in a sexual relationship with her friends Marie and Andrea at their local park:



Mary Lou: Because there's more girls in the group than boys and they just take the piss out of Vic for hanging round with us.

Andrea: Because we were hanging out once together and like me (...) she thought we were going out.

...

Leo: Some people go 'Vic and Marie sitting in a tree, I know what they're doing, S-E-X in the tree' and that's what like loads of people say, and then like other people go, Marie and Leo or Andrea and Vic...

Mary Lou: Or Mary-Lou and Marie - one person asked me straight up.

Andrea: Yes and then when you weren't here one day, someone said me and you (Mary Lou).

Mary Lou: And that's just wrong, they just take the piss out of us.

Leo: I know, it's annoying.

Andrea: I don't like it.

(all age 13)

#### ***2.4. Many girls described entrenched sexism, heterosexism, and (hetero)sexual harassment in public places which impacted negatively on their freedom of movement and sexual agency.***

2.4.1 Experiences of girls' sexual harassment in public places took the form of unwanted sexual comments and 'cat-calling' in public on the street or on public transport, as well as physical groping or 'touching-up' and grabbing of girls by boys;

Anela: There's these little kids on the bus (...) pointing at me saying 'Oh that girl has big tits' (age 13)

Fiona: Like boys older me like whistle at you and like stare at you and like wink at you and like shout, 'oi, you over there' or something. (age 13)

2.4.2 Other examples include Honey, a 12 year old girl in foster care, who described how she had to be driven to school due to the harassment she experienced from male drivers when waiting at a bus stop early in the morning on a busy road. Her social media use was being heavily monitored by her foster carers following an incident involving, in her words, an older man 'perving' on her. Two 15 year old girls described worrying continuously about men staring at them from cars as they walked along a particular street. Their solution was to find or create safe spaces, such as hanging out on 'their' patch of grass where they felt much more confident. Shamira (age 14) also worried about being judged and looked at by older men in the street, but didn't have the same freedoms: she talked about how her parents do not want her 'out on the streets' and ensure that as soon as school ends she returns home.

2.4.3 Some girls discussed feeling unsafe in a range of places including their neighbourhood, shopping malls, parks and the school yard, particularly at night:

INT: Are there any of these spaces that you wouldn't go at night?

Khaz: The park ... you'd get raped. (age 14)

Mia: I always worry about someone getting a ladder and climbing into my window but that just frightens me. (age 14)

Sometimes the threat was specifically sexual, sometimes more nebulous or possibly class-based. Some young people were highly aware of an apparent attempt at abduction, and an actual case of kidnapping. Woods, pubs and side streets were described as places they would be worried to go, especially after dark.

2.4.4 Both verbal and physical heterosexual harassment was commonly linked to appearance and clothing.

Fiona: Like boys older me like whistle at you and like stare at you and like wink at you and like shout, 'oi, you over there' or something.

INT: Do you find it's worse in your uniform or in your regular clothes?

Fiona: In my regular clothes. (age 13)

2.4.5 Girls also faced pressure from schools and parents around sexually 'appropriate' clothing:

Tirzah: My parents say don't wear anything inappropriate like short mini skirts that show your bum and crop tops that go up to your boob, but they let me have a fashion ... they don't say you can't wear something that's red or something that's green.

2.4.6 By contrast, many boys reported the uniform being an easy part of their routine, a relief that they didn't have to worry about in the same way as dressing for out of school activities on the weekend, for instance.

***2.5. Girls' experiences of sexual harassment in public places needs to be understood within the context of sexual harassment in school (e.g. classrooms and corridors) and online (e.g. social media).***

2.5.1 Girls' experiences of sexual harassment out on the street, is part of a wider assemblage of sexual harassment experienced in schools, online, in playgrounds and corridors.

Faith: Oh God. The other day someone I was meeting Lanie on the street and someone did it to us and I started having a go at them. We were like "That's disgusting you're a man. How are you doing that?" and he was like "I wasn't doing it to you" and I was like "Still that's not my idea of a compliment".

INT: Mmm.

Faith: Yeah people usually just like go though. Like a lot in school people just like....

Melanie: Yeah it happens every day.

Faith: Like I was walking on the way here and someone just touched me there and just like winked me and I was like ... (age 14)

***2.6 Many girls critiqued the widely held gender bias that girls' clothing indicates something about their sexual availability and morality – challenging the idea that girls who wear something that 'reveals' the body are 'asking for it'.***

2.6.1 Some young people were highly critical of the heterosexual double standards around girls' and women's bodies, particularly around nudity both online and offline. Fernanda for example argues that girls should be able to wear short skirts without fear, judgment or abuse, and women's nudity should be seen as a sign of strength:

Fernanda: like girls should be able to wear short skirts and not be told like you're asking for someone to do something to you, it's not fair, you know like when people roll their skirts up [...]

I think it's great like for women to be naked and to be like confident with themselves as long as they're showing it as a strong thing and I think there are, you know like sometimes you might have a woman naked showing herself as really weak and so that's something that makes her vulnerable and I feel like it shouldn't be something that makes you vulnerable it should be something that makes you stronger. It's kind of ridiculous there are legal boobs and illegal boobs, like men can go down the street topless and women can't it's like ... well how is that fair you know ... (both age 13)

***2.7 Many young people reporting experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces, in school and online, sometimes felt unsupported by schools or parents in dealing with these issues.***

2.7.1 Although, and perhaps because verbal and physical forms of sexual harassment towards girls were widespread, they were largely unreported to school staff, parents or law enforcement agencies. However, but there were cases of young people disclosing to their parents. Khaz explains how her mother stepped in to defend her after sexual harassment had continued at length in primary school:

Khaz: (a boy in primary school) was always sexually harassing me ... and touching me and everything. Then, like, every time he saw me, he just came closer ... and then, I had enough, so once I started crying cos it was every single day, non-stop ... and it had been going on for, like, so long and I told my mum and my mum was so angry cos the first time it ever happened to me ... I told her how long it was going on for and she went to his house cos I know where he lived. She went to his house [...] shouted in his face, telling him to leave me alone otherwise bad things are gonna happen. Then next day in school, he didn't do anything, he stopped.

( age 14)

2.7.2 Others described not knowing whether or not to report incidents in secondary school, indicating a lack of adequate awareness or responsiveness at school:

Tirzah: The boy was chasing her ... it was this year and basically this boy was trying to put his hand up her skirt and you know I just remember her saying it.

INT: And was it resolved?

Tirzah: I think the person had been dared to do it, so she wasn't sure whether to report it or not.

Fernanda: I told her to report it ...

Tirza: I said to her that if it happens again to report it. (age 13)

2.7.3 Some boys openly discussed the problem of 'touching up' and were very critical of the limited options girls have for dealing with sexual assault:

Troy: They always get touched up by boys when they don't want to, no, they actually don't want to and then they don't like tell the school, or their parents, 'cause they'll get beaten up ...by the person that was touching them up

Dillon: They'll get more touched up ...the school wouldn't do anything about it, the school just stirred it up, the school's rubbish

Troy: Yeah, but who, if you don't know who to speak to, about that issue, then who would you speak to about that issue? do you get what I mean? (all age 14)

2.7.4 It is not then a surprising finding that some young people described their phone as the safest place to be, particularly those living in areas where local public spaces were off-limits and described as dangerous, violent, risky etc.

### **3. Prevention, intervention and the role of education**

*"I'd like to change the amount of cat calling there still is on the streets and I'd love to be able to go out at night as a young female and not feel vulnerable"*

*(survey response)*

3.1 New developments regarding statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England should consider how to integrate addressing and understanding girls' and women's experiences of sexual harassment in public places via holistic and gender equity informed whole school approaches to healthy relationships (see Renold and McGeeney 2017, and resources on the [AVA](#) and [Women's Aid](#) websites). For example, a project exploring the regulation of gendered clothing or women's movement in public space through history and across different cultures (e.g. a project on 'skirts' or 'public toilets') could enable a rich exploration of how girls' and women's bodies have been objectified, sexualised and commodified, as public property and always under surveillance. This could be complimented by a fact-finding project on organisations and movements which have addressed 'street harassment' (e.g. [Hollaback](#), see Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018).

3.2 Schools need proactively to find ways to address and advance gender *and* sexual equity. This could include, for example, providing resources and commitment to youth

led feminist and LGBTQ+groups (Ringrose and Renold 2016; Bragg et al., 2018, [Gender and Equalities Leadership in Schools](#)' (GELS) case studies; see also, Ringrose 2017-8 UCL GASES 'Gender and Sexual Equity in School' project) and using existing or co-creating new youth activist resources and curricula that situates sexual harassment in public places within a wide range of gender-based and sexual violence (see, for example Renold 2016 [www.agenda.wales](http://www.agenda.wales), Renold 2018).

3.3 An intersectional and local and global understanding of power relations around girls and women's bodies, and understanding the nature and impact of sexual harassment across public, institutional *and* private spaces need to be prioritized in teacher training, curricula materials and dedicated RSE lessons.

3.4 Children and Young People's own understandings and experiences must be prioritized in the design and delivery of resources, strategies and prevention programmes in order to be relevant and experience-close. They must be affirmative in their approach, and mitigate against potential binary victim-blaming or perpetrator-shaming and in ways that are inclusive of all gender identity and expression.

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