

IS 2025 THE SCARIEST TIME TO BE A GIRL?

From unrealistic beauty standards to an ever growing tide of harassment and misogyny, are we failing girls? *Stylist* spoke to students across the country to get a true picture of what it means to be a girl in 2025

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CONTENT NOTE:
THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS
DESCRIPTIONS OF
SEXUAL HARASSMENT
THAT READERS MAY
FIND UPSETTING

It's 7.16am. You reach for your phone and start browsing social media. A video begins: "The problem with 'pick me' girls is...". You scroll on. The next 15 videos include clips of men explaining what a woman's "ideal body count" is, "high protein, low calorie recipes" for fat-burning and a friend talking about what happened when a man approached her at the bus stop last night. You lock your phone when it serves you a pop-up ad for porn. You apply your seven-step skincare routine, look in your illuminated mirror and wonder whether you should just stay at home today (you don't like going out when you're having a bad skin day). You check your direct messages: a random man is asking if he can "send you pictures". You block him. You open the wardrobe and pull out your school uniform because you are only 13 years old.

What is it like to be a girl in 2025? Is it better for them than it was for us? Have years of progress for women shielded the next generation from sexism, misogyny and impossible standards? Or, as was our biggest fear, is it actually getting worse to grow up as a girl in the UK? These are the questions we set out to answer in this month's *Stylist*. Over the past eight weeks, we've travelled up and down the country talking to girls mainly aged between nine and 17. The above scenario was constructed from the testimonies of the girls we spoke to – testimonies which paint a stark picture of a generation buckling under unprecedented pressures.

According to a study by Girlguiding UK, the proportion of girls who feel "unsafe" because of sexism has more than doubled in the past 10 years to 47%, while the action group End Violence Against Women found that a third of girls think schools wouldn't take them seriously if they reported sexual harassment.

"Sexual harassment in, and outside of, schools is rife," says Ellie Softley, head of education and interim CEO of young people's charity Everyone's Invited. "The girls we work with experience 'casual' misogyny both from fellow students and teachers; many report incidents that are much more serious. On a broader level, girls increasingly feel



like there are categories they have to fit into and standards they have to align with that are limiting their idea of what they can be."

Last month, Ofcom warned that "misogynistic influencers" were being rewarded with greater reach by social media algorithms. Greater reach means concepts that would once have been the preserve of a niche corner of the internet now have a foothold in girls' real lives. One 16-year-old girl told *Stylist* that "what starts as [boys] watching a video at the weekend turns into them coming into school on Monday and shouting at you".

Becca Dean, co-founder of The Girls' Network, a charity that mentors girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, sees the toxic offline impact this digital environment creates first-hand. "Our girls tell us that social media used to be somewhere to find your tribe. Now, for many teenage girls, it's become a place of constant judgement, comparison and abuse."

Sexism isn't new but in 2025 girls get no respite: misogyny and toxic standards online repeat themselves in real life, and vice versa, until girls feel, as one 14-year-old told *Stylist*, "like we're playing a game we can never win".

Worryingly, in a YouGov poll in 2023, only a third of people in Britain answered "Yes" when asked whether they were a feminist. In an Ipsos survey conducted last year, nearly one in two people in Britain said that, when it comes to gender equality, things have gone far enough. If our findings show anything it's that we owe it to girls to stand firmer than ever. Feminism hasn't done its job if girls are drowning in an ever-rising tide of misogynistic standards.

In response to the results of our focus groups, Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, told *Stylist*: "These findings are very troubling. Each and every young girl in this country deserves to feel safe and respected. We are treating tackling violence against women and girls as a national emergency and will do everything in our power to achieve this."

We owe it to them to make sure being a girl gets easier with every generation. The first step towards change is to listen.



PHOTOS POSED BY MODEL
ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

RECENTLY, A BOY AT SCHOOL SAID TO ME: "YOU HAVE THE BODY OF A 20-YEAR-OLD AND THE FACE OF A 10-YEAR OLD." I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO FEEL AFTER THAT.

Abi, 12, loves *South Park* and watching anime. Cats are her favourite animal and she loves spending time with them.

Dionne*, 15, loves dancing and wants to perform on stage when she's older.

A boy filmed up my skirt at school. It was last year as I was coming out of a lesson and about to go outside for break. The corridor was really crowded; there were loads of people around. I didn't know he was doing it, I just heard him and his friends laughing and running away. The next day my friend told me he'd put it on social media and showed me the video. I think by the end of that week, my whole year had ended up seeing it. I felt so ashamed. But what can I do? It's still out there and I don't want to bring it up to teachers because I don't want to make it into a bigger thing than it already is. I just don't know why he thought he had the right to do that.

THE BOYS IN MY CLASS COMPARE WOMEN AND MEN TO EACH OTHER ALL THE TIME, SAYING MEN ARE STRONGER AND BETTER.

Basia, 9, is either at the playground with friends or drawing. She doesn't know what she wants to do when she's older.

Siobhan, 13, loves reading. She wants to be an author of fiction books for women when she's older.

Sometimes, I look at comments on a girl's social media post and it's full of people being so mean. I've seen people telling girls to kill themselves. I saw someone sexualising a young girl dressed as a bunny. I see girls filming themselves doing things like drawing and blurring out their faces because they don't like the way they look when they're concentrating. It makes me sad.

Hazel, 10, loves cooking when she gets home from school. Her favourite thing to make for herself is chicken noodles.

A phone is like a child to us. They're our babies, we adore them. At our school, we have to put them in a box at the start of the day: it makes me feel like crying. I've got anxiety around friendships, so I get very shaky around people sometimes. I feel safe when I'm on my phone instead.



*FOR LEGAL REASONS, THIS IS A FICTIONALISED ACCOUNT BASED ON THE REAL STORIES OF MULTIPLE GIRLS. *STYLIST* SPOKE TO

Fatima, 10, loves playing with her new puppy and hopes to work with animals when she grows up.

In my school, there was a game that the whole class started playing because it stopped the boys from getting too rough and hurting us. There would be a boys' team and a girls' team, and the aim of the game was that the girls had to chase the boys and put them in jail. This way, nobody gets hurt. It feels much better to be chasing the boys than being chased.

Anna, 16, is either studying, sleeping or scrolling on Pinterest. She wants to work in marketing one day.

If I get an Uber I always ask them to drop me right outside my door. If I'm walking even a short distance in the dark, I'm constantly looking behind me. I walk with my keys in my hand. I think about things like, if someone tries to kidnap me, I'll scratch them or spit at them so my DNA will be on them. I pre-plan these things.

Poppy, 16, loves music. She studies classical guitar and piano and is in a choir. She also loves English and history, and wants to be a teacher when she grows up.

I know that the male loneliness epidemic is a really big issue, but I don't understand why they have to take it out on girls. I'll go online and look at who the boys in my year repost, and it's just Andrew Tate, Donald Trump, Andrew Tate, Donald Trump, football. Even if they don't say it, you know that they're thinking it, and it makes you feel really unsafe. As we're getting older and they've been surrounded by their peers who think this stuff is acceptable, they've become more comfortable with saying it. What started as just watching a video at the weekend or speaking to one friend about it turns into them coming into school on Monday and shouting at you.

Carla, 14, loves acting, singing and reading. When she's older, she wants to be a broadcast journalist and appear on TV.

When you think about having kids, it feels like it'll be more of an issue than it will for boys. Say you wanted to be a politician or a doctor or an engineer, it seems to be so hard to be a mother and do that. Sometimes, it feels like you aren't taken as seriously if you say you want to be a mother, because it's as if you have to choose between a family life and a big career. It's definitely not the same for boys. I worry about it a lot.

I like to play video games but I learnt very quickly not to turn my mic on and speak. If they hear that I'm a girl, it's bullying and literal death threats.

Gina, 16, loves playing video games and hanging out with her cat. She would like a job working with young people.



We get our emotions dismissed because grown-ups say it's just hormones. That never happens to boys. It makes me so angry.

Phoebe, 13, loves listening to My Chemical Romance, Linkin Park and Green Day. Her dream is to meet her favourite musicians one day.

Shantae, 17, loves her natural hair but hates wash day. She wants to become a youth support worker one day, because she believes "there's always a deeper reason a child is behaving badly".

On Snapchat, the weirdest people will find you and message you and you don't even know how they got your number. One man I've never met messaged me on my birthday saying, "Can I send you money?" Another man messaged and asked how old I was. I said, "I'm 17", and he said, "I'm 35: is that OK for you?" Nowhere's safe. I heard that girls should be wary of walking alone with our hair in a ponytail because someone could grab you from behind. I've imagined that scenario; I think about it when I'm doing my hair. My friends ask me, why do you walk so aggressively? If I walk like that, somebody might think twice about trying to kidnap me.



Carys, 16, loves musicals, especially *Wicked*, and is studying childcare at college.

The other week, a girl in my class told the teacher that she needed to go to the toilet, and the teacher told her she had to wait until the end of the lesson. She said, "I really need to go," and then he made her empty her pockets in front of the whole class before she could go. She pulled out a tampon, and all of the boys laughed. She was so embarrassed. I felt for her.

Anne-Marie*, 14, enjoys painting and is currently knitting her own jumper. She loves Formula 1 and wants to learn how to drive one day.

Somebody wrote "slut" on my locker at school last year. I don't know who it was, but there were rumours going round my year that I was dating this boy. He was just my friend and we weren't dating, and I've never done anything like that, so I don't know why they wrote that. It made me feel too awkward to be his friend after that.

Leena, 13, is homeschooled and enjoys crafting, crochet and cross stitch. She'd love to do it professionally when she's older and "make a living out of yarn".

You get judged all the time: on the length of your skirt, the length of your hair, how much make-up you're wearing, whether you're clever or not. You haven't even said a word, and they've already decided whether you're prey or not.

Femi, 17, loves having her hair, nails and lashes done. She hopes to open her own salon.

When I go out for dinner with my friends, I wear make-up and wigs, and tend to look older than I am – but I'm still a teenager. Grown men will approach me asking for my number, and when I tell them my age they'll just ask, "When are you 18?" I've had a lot of instances like that, even if I'm just going to the shop. Social media is even worse. Men don't take no for an answer. My block list is crazy, like hundreds of accounts, because of the constant creepy messages asking to send pictures and meet up.

PEOPLE THINK GIRLS GROW UP QUICKER THAN BOYS; THAT WE'RE MORE MATURE. BUT THEY NEED TO REMEMBER THAT WE'RE STILL CHILDREN, TOO.

Maeve, 14, likes gymnastics and entering trampolining competitions. She wants to become an MP when she's older so people can "come to [her] for help".



Helena, 14, loves watching make-up tutorials on YouTube after school and enjoys drawing. She likes to recreate the looks she sees on her own face and "be creative with make-up".

Boys don't get how stressful it is to have to have a hair routine and a make-up routine and a good outfit. I have to have a 17-step routine. I like doing it, because it feels relaxing and I like to feel fresh, but it can also feel like pressure. If I don't like my hair or make-up or I'm having a bad skin day, I skip lessons. I don't like being seen in school without make-up. Sometimes boys tell me I should go to the gym, but you can never win, really. If a girl's slim, boys will say she's too thin. But if she's bigger they'll say, "Oh, she's too fat for me." What do they want us to do?

Jada, 12, loves drawing because she's "really good at it". She hopes to be an artist when she's older.

I'm not allowed to walk home from school alone, not because my parents don't trust me, but because they don't trust other people. I'm pretty sure every girl feels like she has to watch her back, because some men act innocent when they're not.

The boys can leave school in their PE kit, but the girls have to get changed into a full tracksuit to go home because they made our PE kit too revealing and school doesn't feel comfortable with us walking home in it.

Aimee, 14, plays netball and badminton and loves being part of a team. She hopes to be an engineer when she's older.

Sadie, 12, loves catching up with her friends online after school and is "obsessed with cats".

Nobody wants to be a 'pick me girl'. A 'pick me' is someone who tries to be one of the boys, but at the same time puts lots of effort into looking nice – they're overconfident. I got called a 'pick me' once. I'd straightened my hair and thought it looked nice. I haven't done that again, because I'd never want people to think I was a 'pick me'.

Mary-Rose, 13, likes clothes and makes Pinterest boards to plan her outfits. She used to want to be a model but thinks it's "too much pressure to look perfect".

There are a lot of standards for being a girl. You've always got to look pretty, you can't be too much, you can't be a 'pick me', you can't be fat and you can't be skinny. Pornography comes up on my phone when I haven't searched for it. Even if I wanted to ignore this stuff, I don't think I could. It's everywhere. Us girls learn about what body-shaming means and why it's bad from influencers, but I don't think boys learn about that. I've seen what they look at online and it's nothing good.

Naz, 17, loves swimming at her local pool. She's studying for her A levels and hopes to become a marine biologist.

It's going to be so hard to find a partner who has the right mindset about women and isn't misogynistic. Men who don't say degrading things are rare, because social media is brainwashing everyone.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

ENGAGE

Ellie Softley from charity Everyone's Invited suggests using social media as a way in to discussing the pressures young people face. "Leaning into it can help you challenge the messages they're absorbing," she says. To start, say, "Let's go through your For You page together."

TALK

For parents of, or those close to, a young person who may want to talk about sexism or sexual harassment, listen carefully, ask open questions and provide a safe space for them to open up. Affirm that what they've experienced isn't their fault and contact the NSPCC helpline on 0800 800 5000 if you need expert advice.

MENTOR

The Girls' Network connects girls from the UK's least advantaged communities with professional women who can act as their mentors. If you can spare an hour a month, consider signing up.

SUPPORT

Charities such as Girls Friendly Society, Beyond Equality and Everyone's Invited provide education and support to young people in the UK while Glitch campaigns for tech companies and the government to protect women and girls from digital abuse. Donate to or follow them on social media to help their work continue.

