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Girlguiding response to the Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places

About Girlguiding

- i. Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with over 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run Rainbows (5-7 years), Brownies (7-10 years), Guides (10-14 years) and The Senior Section (14-25 years). Registered Charity No 306016. www.girlguiding.org.uk

Key messages

- We are for all girls
- We give girls their own space
- We give girls a voice
- We change as the lives of girls change

About our evidence

- ii. Girlguiding's submission focuses on evidence from our annual Girls' Attitudes Survey - the largest survey of girls and young women in the UK - which gathers the views and opinions of over 1,600 girls and young women throughout the country aged 7 to 21, from inside and outside guiding. For more information and data on the latest and previous reports please see www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes
- iii. Girlguiding's response is also influenced by the [Girls Matter campaign](#) - Girlguiding's member-led campaign that profiles girls' and young women's calls for change
- iv. In addition, our response includes quotes from members of our Girlguiding Advocate panel - a platform for girls to use their voices and seek change at the highest levels. Our Advocates are a group of 18 Girlguiding members aged 14 to 25 who lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research.

Overview

- v. Girlguiding welcomes the Women and Equalities Select Committee's continuing focus on the important issue of sexual harassment. Girls and young women responding to our annual Girls' Attitudes Surveys tell us they regularly experience unacceptable harassment and abuse in public places, such as on the street, on public transport and in nightclubs. It's also important to note that many girls and young women may think that the abuse they



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suffer online should be covered by this inquiry, as it is a public space that they regularly inhabit.

Although we know this is a problem affecting women of all ages, as the leading charity for girls and young women (aged up to 25), our response will focus particularly on the experiences of this group.

vi. Consultation questions

1. How widespread is sexual harassment of women and girls in public places and what form does it take? Do we know whether this has increased or decreased over time?

The majority of girls responding to questions on sexual harassment in public places in our 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey had experienced this in some form, with many feeling unsafe to go out on their own as a result and changing their behaviour to avoid it:

- 79% of girls aged 11 to 21 (and 85% aged 17 to 21) feel unsafe when they are out on their own. 32% felt this 'most of the time' or 'often'. 67% of these say they change their behaviour to avoid this.
- 63% aged 13-21 have experienced intimidation from groups of boys. 23% had experienced this often. 55% of these change their behaviour to avoid this.
- 49% aged 11 to 21 (and 57% aged 17 to 21) have experienced unwanted sexual comments directed at them (18% often). 45% of these change their behaviour to avoid this.
- 50% aged 11 to 21 (and 63% aged 17 to 21) had experienced street harassment (16% often). 44% of these change their behaviour to avoid this
- 17% of girls aged 13 to 21 had experienced unwanted touching on public transport. 31% of these change their behaviour to avoid this.
- 41% of girls aged 18 to 21 had experienced unwanted touching at a nightclub. 51% of these change their behaviour to avoid this.



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Even the youngest girls, aged 7 to 10, want to see change on this issue. When asked the most important ways to improve girls' and women's lives, 50% said 'make sure girls are safe'. Of girls aged 11 to 21, 31% chose 'stopping sexual harassment', 27% chose 'tackling violence against women and girls' and 25% chose 'tackling the sexist objectification of women in society'.

'All girls should feel safe and they can do anything.' (Girl aged 7 to 10)

'Some people are ashamed to open up about being harassed and they need to know that it isn't their fault.' (Girl aged 13 to 16)

'If women feel safe in their environment they will feel freer to express themselves - say, do, wear what they want!' (Young woman aged 17 to 21)

As the Committee knows, we have also done extensive research on the sexual harassment and abuse that girls experience in school and submitted a response to the Committee's 2016 inquiry on this issue. Our 2017 Survey shows that this is a continuing, and even growing, issue with 64% of girls aged 13-21 saying they'd experienced sexual harassment in the past year compared to 59% in 2014. Girls and young women aged 13 to 21 told us what they had experienced in the past year:

- 41% had experienced jokes or taunts of a sexual nature (compared to 37% in 2014)
- 36% had experienced sexist comments on social media (compared to 15% in 2014)
- 22% had seen obscene graffiti about girls or women (compared to 18% in 2014)
- 24% had seen unwanted sexually explicit pictures or videos (compared to 25% in 2014)
- 19% had experienced unwanted sexual touching (compared to 19% in 2014)
- 19% had experienced frequent unwanted attention (compared to 14% in 2014)
- Just 28% had experienced none of these (compared to 26% in 2014)
- 64% had experienced at least one of these (compared to 59% in 2014)

Girls aged 11 to 21 told us that they'd experienced in the past week:

- 39% had had their bra straps pulled by boys
- 27% had had their skirts pulled up by boys

2. Who are the perpetrators and the victims, and how does it happen?

As described above, girls and young women tell us they are regularly the victims of boys and men when it comes to harassment in public places.

As described in our response to the previous question, girls and young women have told us they have experienced harassment and abuse in a variety of public places, including on



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transport, in the street and in nightclubs. This took various forms, including intimidation, unwanted sexual comments and unwanted sexual touching.

Our research on sexual harassment in schools further describes the kinds of unacceptable behaviour girls and young women have experienced from boys and men. Please refer to our response to the Committee's inquiry on this specific issue for more information.

3. What is the impact of sexual harassment on the lives of women and girls? Are there other effects, such as on bystanders, or on society in general?

As described above, the harassment and abuse experienced by girls and young women is predominantly perpetrated by boys and men and the frequent threats to girls' personal safety cause many to change their behaviour to try to avoid them.

In addition, our 2015 Survey showed that 75% of girls aged 11 to 21 said anxiety about experiencing sexual harassment (at school or in public places) affects their lives in some way:

- 51% said it affects what they wear
- 49% said it affects their body confidence
- 43% said it affects whether they go places alone
- 37% said it affects their general confidence
- 31% said it affects where they go

4. What gaps exist in the evidence about sexual harassment in public places?

As the leading UK charity for girls and young women, we listen to what girls tell us about their lives and experiences and will continue to do this through our yearly Girls' Attitudes Survey. However, more research is needed to understand why so many boys and men perpetrate this unacceptable behaviour.

In addition, further research needs to ensure that girls understand what sexual harassment is as, for many, unacceptable behaviours such as sexual comments or touching have become a normalised part of their everyday lives. Our future research will look into this issue further, including other forms of harassment, such as stalking and up-skirting.

We know from our research with girls that online harassment and abuse is widespread. However, more evidence is needed on the impact of this.

In our 2015 Girls Matter campaign, we called for change in a number of areas to make life better for girls and tackle the unacceptable pressures they face:



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- Decision-makers to listen to girls and young women, take them seriously and make sure their voices count
- Schools to take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual bullying and harassment. We were delighted when the government updated bullying guidance to include sexism and sexual harassment and created guidance for schools on tackling peer on peer abuse in schools and colleges
- All schools to teach body confidence and gender equality - we continue to call for the government to make PSHE statutory now that it has taken the power to do so
- Decision-makers to make girls' rights a priority in the UK's approach to international development
- Children's exposure to harmful sexualised content in the media to be stopped. It was a fantastic win when the Digital Economy Act brought in age-verification for online pornography.
- Girls to be empowered to speak out and be heard on the impact of media sexism and stereotyping
- Guarantee that women will be equally represented in parliament
- Sex and Relationships Education to be modernised so all young people can make informed decisions and stay safe. We were delighted when the government made RSE a statutory requirement and have responded to the consultation on what it should include.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) should focus on tackling the unacceptable behaviours that girls and young women regularly experience - through teaching aspects such as gender equality and sexual consent - so that all young people can be well-informed and stay safe.

5. What are the factors (including social and cultural factors) that lead to sexual harassment of women and girls in public places?

The frequent examples of 'everyday sexism' that girls and young women experience from boys and men (such as sexist taunts, jokes and online comments) contribute to a culture in which unacceptable behaviour towards girls and women is normalised. In our 2014 Survey, 52% of girls aged 11 to 16 told us that when they reported harassment to teachers it was often dismissed as 'a bit of banter'. Such 'boys will be boys' thinking is extremely damaging - both in terms of how boys learn to behave and what girls start to believe they are expected to cope with.

In our 2015 Girls' Attitudes Survey, girls aged 11 to 21 told us what they'd seen in the past week:

- 81% had seen or experienced some form of everyday sexism



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- 52% had seen women pictures in newspapers/magazines in a sexualised way that made them feel uncomfortable
- 53% had heard a joke/remark that belittled or degraded a girl/women in a film or on TV. 58% had heard this type of joke first-hand.
- 55% had seen the media talk about women's appearance before their achievements
- 42% had read something in the media that trivialised violence/abuse against women
- 42% had questions/comments made to them about their sex life (ages 17-21)
- 39% had had demeaning comments made to them about the way they look

In 2015, the percentage of girls who thought girls and women are portrayed unfairly in the media had almost doubled since five years previously from 27% to 48%.

The majority of girls think everyday sexism and gender inequality negatively affect how women are treated in society. Girls aged 11 to 21 thought the following things lead to girls and women being treated less fairly than men:

- Sexist jokes - 82%
- Suggestions women are to blame for rape/sexual violence if they're drunk - 80% (13-21)
- Having fewer female politicians than male politicians - 75%
- Female politicians being judged by what they wear, not what they say - 74%
- Little media coverage of women's sport - 74% (13-21)
- Sexually explicit pictures of women in the media - 73%

42% aged 11 to 21 had read something in the media in the past week that trivialised violence or abuse towards women.

6. How do men and boys learn what is acceptable behaviour?

Girls and young women tell us they feel boys and men are influenced by unhealthy examples of how to treat women - such as through watching violent or degrading pornography (see question 8). RSE and PSHE should teach them - and all young people - about gender equality and how to recognise and have safe, respectful, consensual relationships.

8. What evidence, if any, is there of links between harmful attitudes and other behaviours such as paying for sex or using pornography?

Our research shows that girls and young women believe pornography can have a harmful impact on how they are perceived and treated in society:



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In 2015, 73% of girls aged 13 to 21 felt that pornography was damaging young people's views of what sexual relationships are like. Girls aged 17 to 21 told us they felt pornography encourages sexist, stereotypical and harmful views:

- 70% felt that the rise in online pornography contributes to women being treated less fairly
- 87% felt that it creates unrealistic expectations of what women's bodies are like
- 80% thought that it encourages society to view women as sex objects
- 78% felt that it encourages gender stereotyping of girls/women and boys/men
- 71% thought that it normalises aggressive or violent behaviour towards women
- 71% thought that it gives confusing messages about sexual consent
- 65% thought that it increases hateful language used about/to women
- 53% felt it coerced girls into sex acts because boys are copying what they see in pornography.

9. How can negative attitudes and behaviours be changed?

As discussed, we believe negative attitudes and behaviours must be tackled through quality RSE and PSHE that teach aspects including gender equality and sexual consent to ensure all young people are well-informed and stay safe. A stronger emphasis should be placed on tackling unacceptable behaviours and their perpetrators as it's not right that girls and young women feel they have to change their behaviour to avoid harassment and abuse. The implementation of age-verification for online pornography will also be vital.

It's also important that girls can see positive and diverse representations of girls and women in the media, something 95% of girls aged 11 to 21 said they wanted to see in our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey. Girls should also have the opportunity to see women role models in a range of occupations - e.g. politics, sport and STEM - and women in power and leadership positions. Our 2014 Survey showed that 55% of girls aged 11 to 21 think there aren't enough positive female role models in the media.

Our 2016 Survey showed that:

- 55% of girls aged 7 to 21 would like to be leaders in their chosen profession
- 66% of girls aged 11 to 21 feel that there are not enough women in leadership positions in the UK
- 63% of girls aged 11 to 21 think that more female leaders would mean a better deal for women in general
- The lack of women in leadership positions has a mixed effect - 54% of girls aged 11 to 21 say it makes them feel put off, whereas 46% say it makes them feel more determined

10. How should the Government tackle sexual harassment in public places?



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Recommendations

- **Quality PSHE and RSE** - We believe the curriculum must be updated to include sexual consent, online safety, tackling violence against women and girls and healthy relationships and were pleased to hear that PSHE will become statutory in the future. Please see our [response to the government's RSE and PSHE](#) consultation for more details. As part of the whole school approach, we call for the introduction of PSHE which includes lessons on gender equality and body confidence. This would provide girls with an education that enables them to better challenge inequality, gender stereotypes and incidents of VAWG when they encounter them as well as tackling these unacceptable behaviours by seeking to prevent those who may perpetrate them from doing so.
- **Refer to and adapt existing guidelines**, such as the recently updated bullying guidelines, guidance on sexual violence and harassment between children in schools and colleges and the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)'s guidelines to prevent VAWG, to apply to situations of street harassment. Within their guidance, EVAW identified key aspects of work that schools can do to prevent VAWG which includes:
 - a. guidance, ongoing training and support to staff to identify the signs of all forms of VAWG, including how to respond to disclosures and harmful behaviour;
 - b. tackling all forms of VAWG and gender inequality through the curriculum;
 - c. Specialist support for students and staff who experience VAWG, whether current, recent or historic - regardless of whether they report to police;
 - d. School policies on behaviour, bullying and safeguarding that specifically address VAWG.”¹
- **Promptly implemented age-verification of online pornography** - We support age-verification of online pornography and believes it is a vital step towards preventing the scale of exposure to pornography young people experience today. We also support greater regulation of social media sites, and were pleased to see both age verification and a code designed to help site providers tackle online abuse included within the Digital Economy Bill.
- **Implement and apply the Istanbul Convention** - Girlguiding is a proud supporter of the IC Change campaign and was delighted when the Istanbul Convention Bill passed, meaning a much stronger framework of laws on violence against women and girls will come into force when the Istanbul Convention is ratified. This should be applied to help tackle harassment and abuse in public places.

For more information please contact Alex Webber, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Alex.Webber@girlguiding.org.uk

¹ <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/data/files/resources/71/EVAW-Coalition-Schools-Guide.pdf> (p.15)