



Fear and injustice: the harrowing reality of sexual harassment and assault for young women in London

- **Alarming prevalence:** eight out of ten young women in London have faced sexual harassment or assault in the last two years, with nearly one in ten reporting being coerced into sexual acts over that period.
- **Pervasive fear:** the majority of young women worry about being harassed, with 87% considering sexual harassment to be a problem in London.
- **Racial injustice:** over half of minoritised ethnic young women have endured racially targeted sexual harassment, compounding their ordeal with an additional layer of discrimination.
- **Reporting disparities:** minoritised ethnic young women are less likely than their white counterparts to feel that their reports of sexual harassment or assault are taken seriously, with less than half feeling satisfied with the outcome of reporting these incidents to the police.

LONDON [October 2024] – today, [FORWARD](#), the leading African women-led organisation working to end violence against women and girls, unveils ground-breaking new data on the concerning levels of sexual harassment and assault in public spaces across London.

The new research, funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and The National Lottery Community Fund, has revealed that over eight in ten young women aged 16-34 have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment or assault in a public space in London in the last two years, including inappropriate bodily rubbing or brushing (25%), and nearly one in ten (7%) reported having been forced to engage in sexual behaviour.

For minoritised ethnic young women, the report reveals distressing incidents of racialised sexual harassment and assault, embodying a double burden of injustice. Over the past two years, more than half (54%) of the minoritised ethnic young women surveyed have experienced sexual harassment or assault specifically related to their racial or ethnic identity.

They share harrowing accounts of experiences related to their racial identity, including fetishisation or stereotyping of their ethnicity, body or skin colour. One 26-year-old black woman reported, "I received many sexual comments regarding my race, which usually involve sexual stereotypes to imply promiscuity."

Almost a fifth of minoritised ethnic young women (18%) also reported receiving racial insults or slurs after rejecting sexual comments or advances. One 26-year-old woman explains: "Comments that they deem to be nice and flattering [...] when their advance is being denied or rejected, the tables are instantly turned, and my skin colour and features are instantly named and spoken about in a negative, vulgar way."

For these women, issues of racial injustice extend beyond sexual harassment and assault into the reporting of incidents to authorities. The research finds that many minoritised ethnic young women in London are significantly

less likely to feel believed and taken seriously when reporting sexual harassment or assault to police or authorities, compared to their white counterparts (49% vs. 66%).

One 20-year-old Asian woman explained, “going to the police and reporting was not easy, as they dismissed it and gave me unwelcome comments about my appearance and race. They believed [the verbal remarks of my harasser] to be true and said that it's a waste of [my] time to report.”

Amy Abdelshahid, FORWARD's Head of Evidence said: *“It is appalling that such a large majority of young women in London have been sexually assaulted or harassed in the past two years. These figures are sadly unsurprising and show us just how far we still have to go towards instilling a culture of intolerance towards male sexual violence against women.*

The experiences of black and minoritised ethnic young women in particular often intersect with racism and discrimination. Not only are they suffering racially charged sexual harassment but, all the more troubling in a city as diverse as London, they are more likely to feel dismissed when reporting these crimes to the authorities.

All young women deserve to feel safe in public spaces and be taken seriously by those who are in positions of authority. We hope this report will prompt authorities to closely examine their practices and foster a stronger culture of vigilance and support for all women. It is also a reminder to the new government that they must uphold their Labour Manifesto promise to remain committed to tackling sexual harassment as a top priority.”

With findings also revealing that the majority (79%) of young women worry about experiencing sexual harassment or assault in public spaces, more needs to be done to ensure young women feel safe on the streets of London.

Public campaigns which aim to empower victims and witnesses of sexual harassment in public spaces to provide or seek support, such as TFL's [active bystander campaign](#) and [Ask for Angela](#), set up by the Metropolitan Police, the Mayor of London and Safer Sounds should be extended to amplify the impact of these campaigns.

Sophie Linden, London's Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime said: *“This report confirms what women and girls know only too well from their own experiences. The Mayor and I are determined to ensure that ending violence against women and girls is treated with the utmost urgency by our police and society as a whole.*

We know that public sexual harassment is the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls. These numbers are completely unacceptable, and this report is a stark reminder of the urgent need for more action to protect and support women and girls, not only in London but across the UK.

We remain fully committed to tackling these issues head-on with a public health approach. This includes working with the Met Police, Government and key partners, like FORWARD, across the capital to create a safer environment for women, ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences are taken seriously.”

In an effort to drive positive change, FORWARD hopes that the findings of this survey serve as a reminder to government and authorities of the importance of prioritising the safety of women and girls.

Rebecca Hitchen, Head of Policy & Campaigns at the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) said: *“FORWARD's research gives important and necessary insight into the realities of sexual harassment for women and girls in our capital. It details the significant impacts on wellbeing, and how much women and girls worry about it when going about their day to day lives.*

Crucially this research emphasises the specific and disproportionate ways sexual harassment impacts on Black and minoritised women and girls. We know Black young women and others who are marginalised are at the sharp edge

of this abuse, with racism and other forms of discrimination compounding the abuse they face. All women and girls have the right to live free from fear of harassment and violence.

With 83% of women and girls experiencing harassment in the last two years, it is clear how much more needs to be done for that to become a reality. We need to see targeted prevention, particularly given that this research demonstrates men who commit this harassment feel more emboldened in public spaces at nighttime.

While this research is unique to London, we know it echoes experiences of women and girls throughout the UK and speak to the necessity of MOPAC and wider government dedicating more research and funding into the prevention of racialised sexual harassment.”

The topline report can be downloaded [here](#), with further detailed findings to be released later in the year.

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About the study

This quantitative survey examines the incidence of sexual harassment and assault in public spaces in London among young women. The research particularly aims to better understand how young women of different ethnic backgrounds experience sexual harassment, and how their experiences may differ. The study used an online survey among a representative sample of 1,314 young women aged 16-34, living in London, including 521 minoritised ethnic young women. The participants were recruited via the Survation online panel. Data was collected between 4th April and 5th May 2023. Data were weighted by age, ethnicity, and region according to the ONS profile of all adults in London aged 18+. This research was funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and The National Lottery Community Fund. The study was led and designed by FORWARD. Members of the study's Project Advisory Group included representatives of the End Violence Against Women Coalition and FORWARD's Young Women's Advisory Council. This study obtained a favourable ethical opinion from the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science in February 2023.

This report reveals the following data about young women in London surveyed: 83% have faced sexual harassment or assault in the last two years; 79% are either 'very worried' or 'fairly worried' about experiencing sexual harassment; 87% consider sexual harassment in London public spaces to be a problem; 25% have experienced inappropriate bodily rubbing or brushing; 7% reported having been forced to engage in a sexual behaviour; 64% of young women have not seen, heard or read any recent publicity or campaign in relation to sexual harassment in London.

The following data was collected from minoritised ethnic young women: 54% have experienced sexual harassment or assault specifically related to their racial or ethnic identity in the past two years; 18% reported receiving racial insults or slurs after rejecting sexual comments or advance; 49% minoritised ethnic young women felt believed and taken seriously when reporting incidents of sexual harassment or assault to police or authorities compared with 66% of white women.

About FORWARD

FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development) is the leading African women-led organisation working to end violence against women and girls. FORWARD is working for the day when African girls and women will live in dignity, are healthy, have choices and enjoy equal rights free from fear of violence. From female genital mutilation and child marriage to domestic and sexual violence, FORWARD tackles abuse and discrimination – enabling African women and girls to have the dignity, health and equality they deserve. For over 40 years, FORWARD has been speaking with one voice to safeguard the rights and dignity of African women and girls, wherever they live.

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