



Topline Summary Report

# Sexual harassment and assault in London public spaces

A survey among young women

**FORWARD**

# Background and methodology

This quantitative study examines the incidence of sexual harassment and assault faced by young women in public spaces <sup>1</sup> in London. 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 is based on an online survey among a representative sample of 1,314 young women, aged 16-34 and living in Greater London. Participants were recruited via the [Survation](#) online panel. Data was collected between 4th April - 5th May 2023. Data were weighted to the ONS profile of all adults in London aged 18+, by age, ethnicity, and region.

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 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.

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this research, sexual harassment and assault occurring in a public space include behaviours exhibited by a stranger in locations such as: the street, public transport, pubs, bars or clubs, gyms, events or festivals, recreational centres, shops or shopping centres, or public parks.

## Survey sample

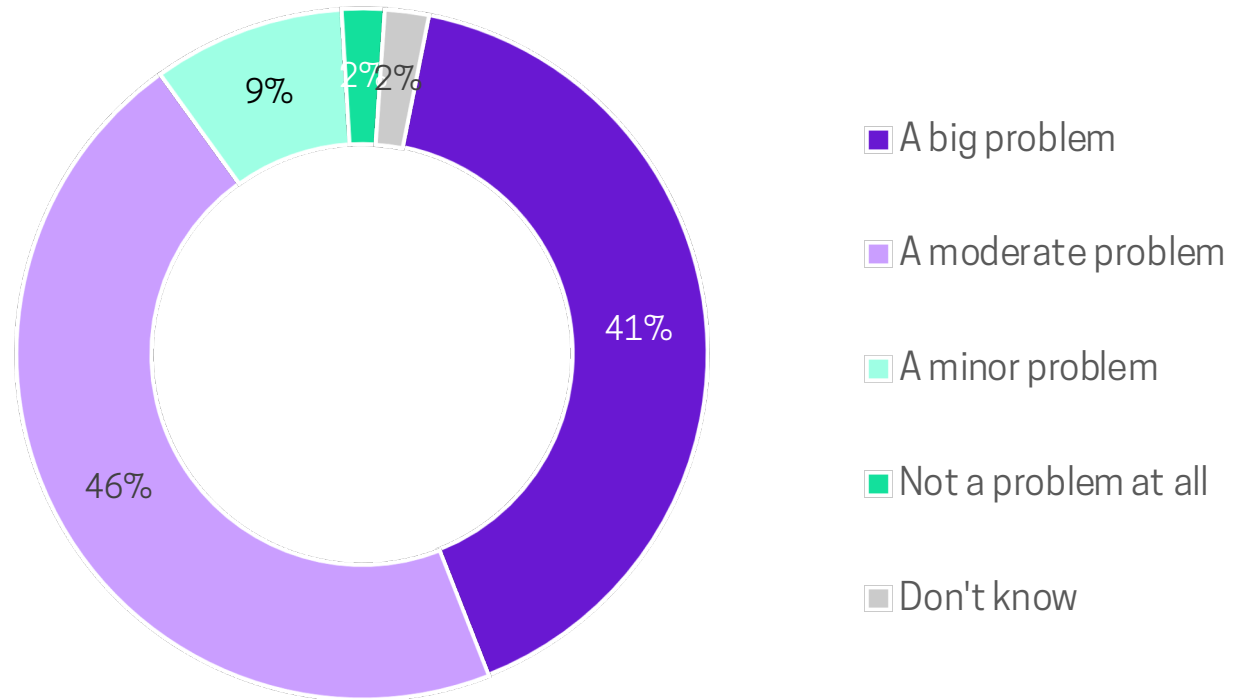
Age	%
16-21	22
22-25	21
26-30	31
31-34	26
Ethnicity	
White	54
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	14
Asian / Asian British	21
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups	6
Other ethnic group	6
London Regions	
Central London	21
North London	32
East London	18
South London	19
West London	11

Note: the proportions outlined refer to the weighted sample

# Perceived scale of sexual harassment in London public spaces

# How much of a problem is sexual harassment in London public spaces?

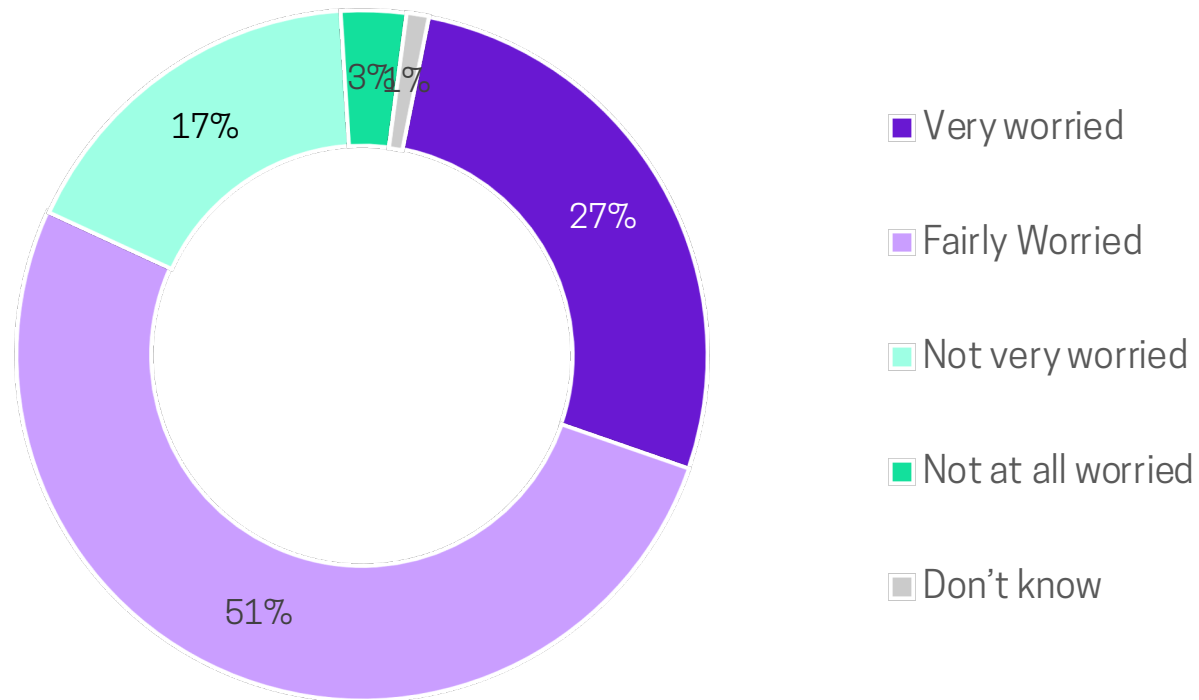
Nearly nine in ten (87%) of the young women surveyed considered sexual harassment in London public spaces to be a problem, with 41% considering it to be a 'big problem'.



BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1,314. Q1A. In your opinion, how much of a problem, if at all, do you think sexual harassment is in London's public spaces?

# How worried are young women about sexual harassment in London public spaces?

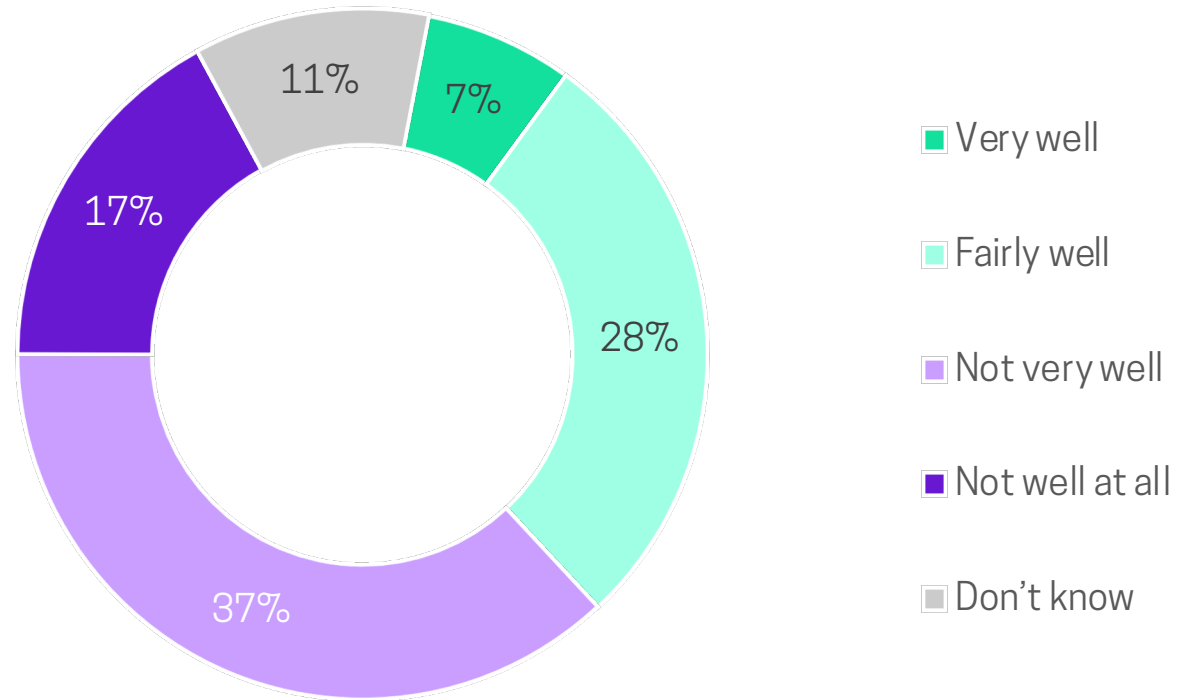
The majority (78%) of young women surveyed are either 'very worried' or 'fairly worried' about experiencing sexual harassment in a public space in London, with nearly three in ten (27%) saying they are 'very worried'.



BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1,314. Q1B. How worried, if at all, are you about personally experiencing sexual harassment in a public space in London?

# How well are authorities addressing sexual harassment in London?

More than half (54%) of the young women surveyed are of the opinion that the authorities in London are not addressing sexual harassment well. Three in ten (35%) thought that the authorities are doing well in addressing it.

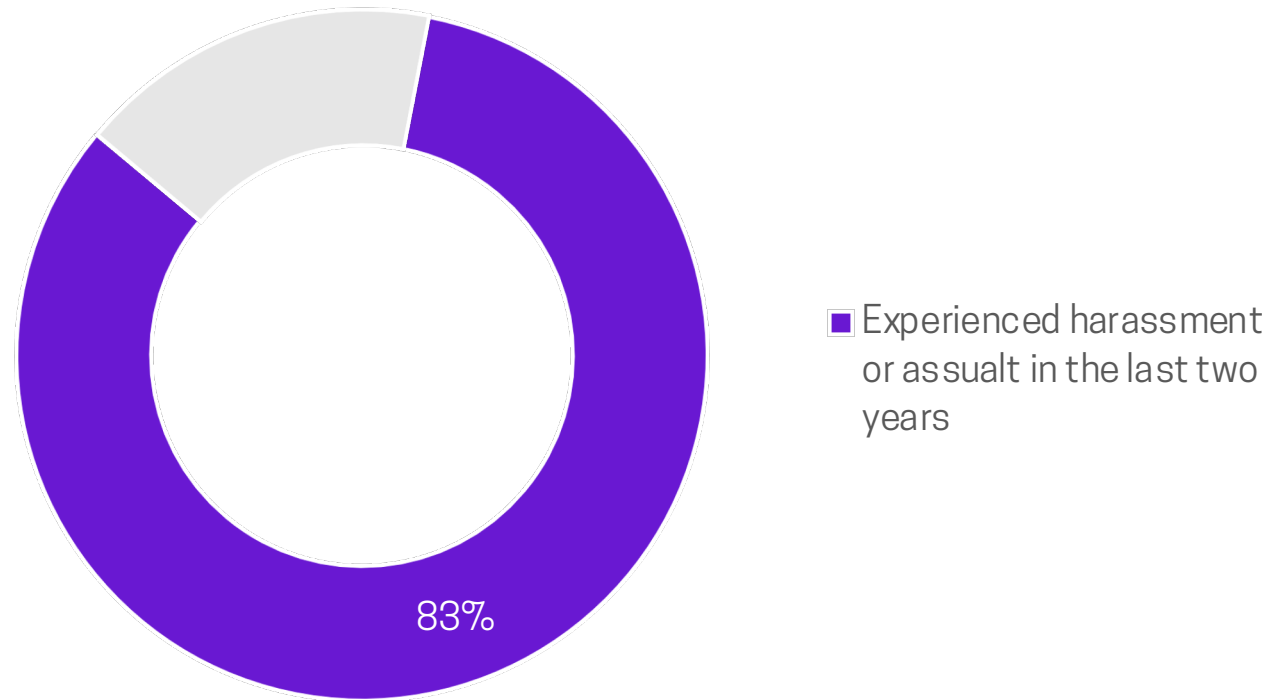


BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1,314. Q17. In your opinion, how well are the authorities in London addressing issues of sexual harassment?

# **Experiences of sexual harassment and assault in London public spaces**

# Incidence of sexual harassment or assault in public spaces, last 2 years

Eight in ten (83%) of young women reported having experienced at least one form of sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years in a public space in London.



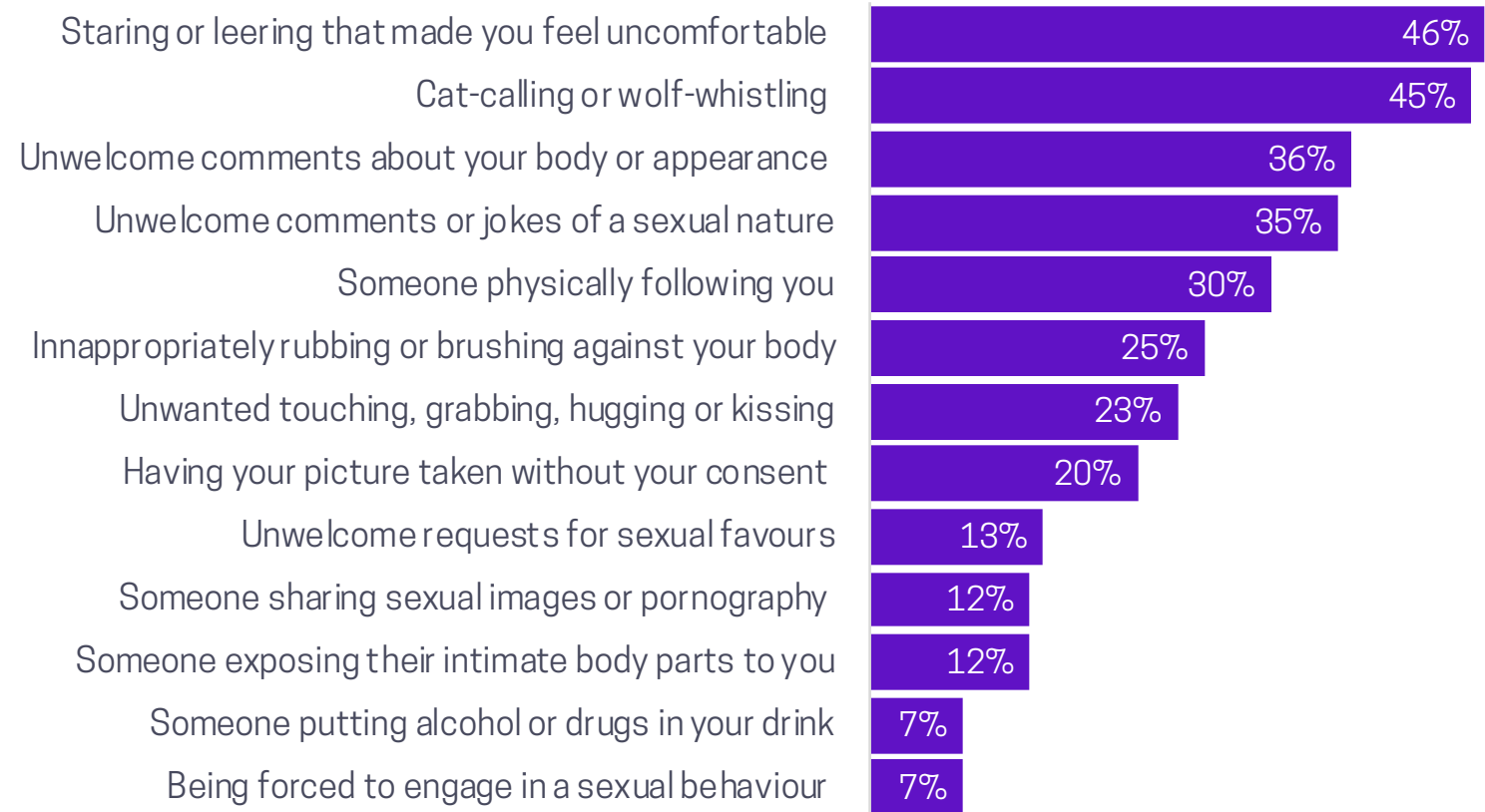
BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1314. Q1/Q2. Which of the following behaviours, if any, have you ever experienced in a public space in London? And how many times have you experienced these behaviours in the past 2 years? (Data rebased on total sample).



# Experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces, last 2 years

The young women most commonly experienced staring or leering (46%), cat-calling and wolf-whistling (45%), comments about their body or appearance (36%), or sexual comments or jokes (35%).

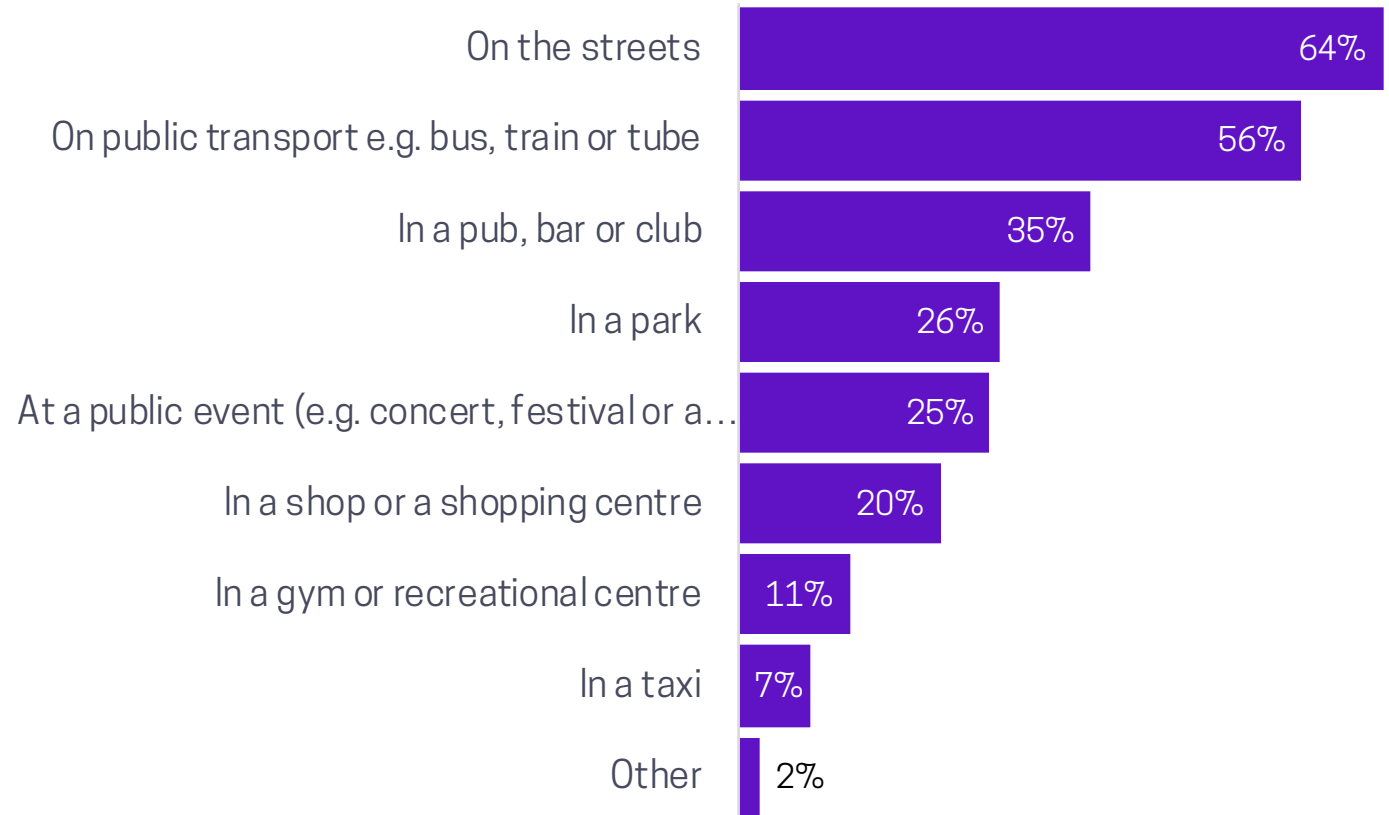
A concerning high proportion of the young women experienced sexual assault. These included inappropriate rubbing or brushing against their body (25%), and unwanted touching, grabbing, hugging or kissing (23%). 7% reported having been forced to engage in a sexual act in a public space in the past two years.



BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1314. Q1/Q2. Which of the following behaviours, if any, have you ever experienced in a public space in London? And how many times have you experienced these behaviours in the past 2 years? (Data rebased on total sample).

The young women most commonly experienced sexual harassment or assault in London on the streets or on public transport, followed by pubs, bars or clubs, in parks, at public events and in shopping centres.

# Location of incidents of sexual harassment or assault

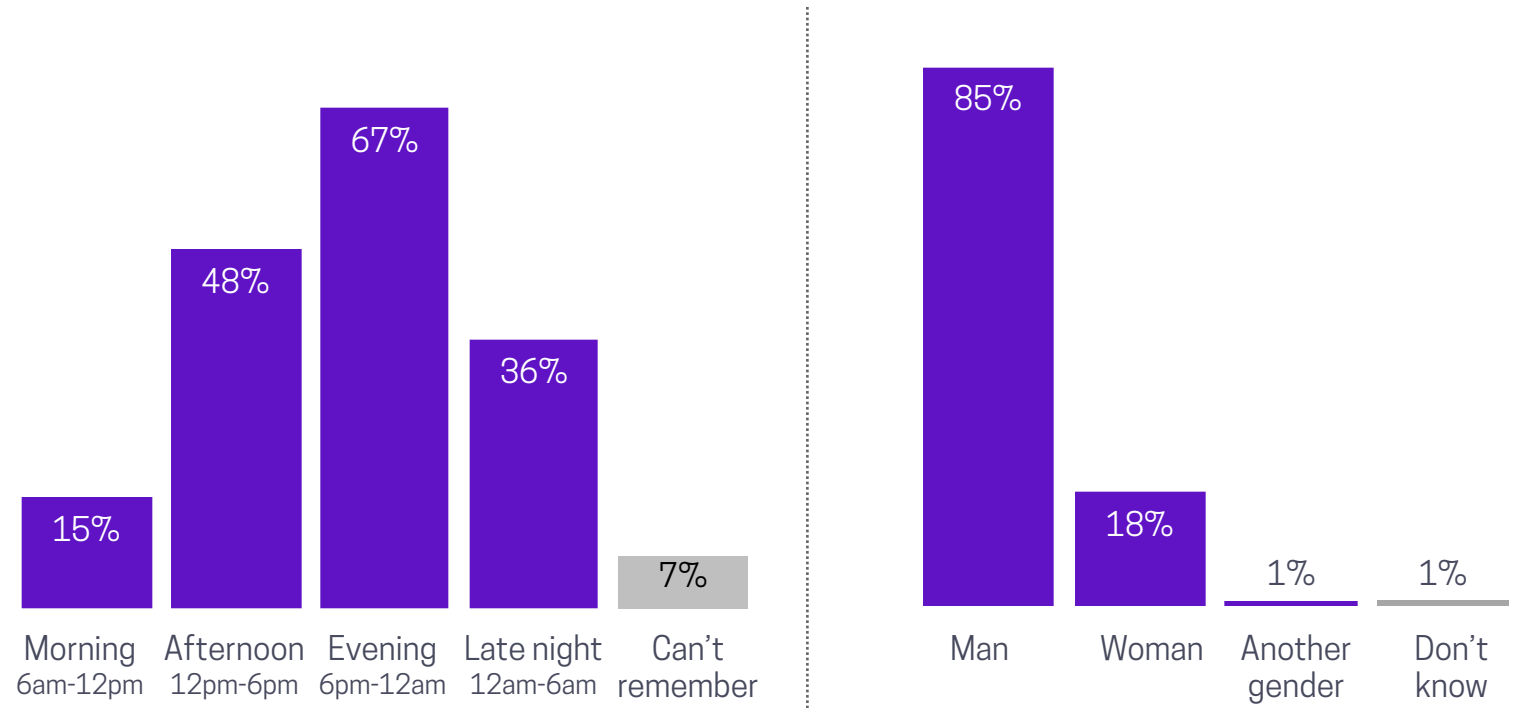


BASE: Respondents who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years: Unweighted total: 1,098. Q3. Where did you typically experience these behaviours in a public space in London? Please select all that apply

# Characteristics of incidents - time of day and gender of the harasser

The young women most commonly experienced sexual harassment or assault in the evening, between 6pm and 12am (67%), followed by the afternoon (48%), and late at night (36%).

The incidents of sexual harassment or assault had in most cases been committed by men (85%).

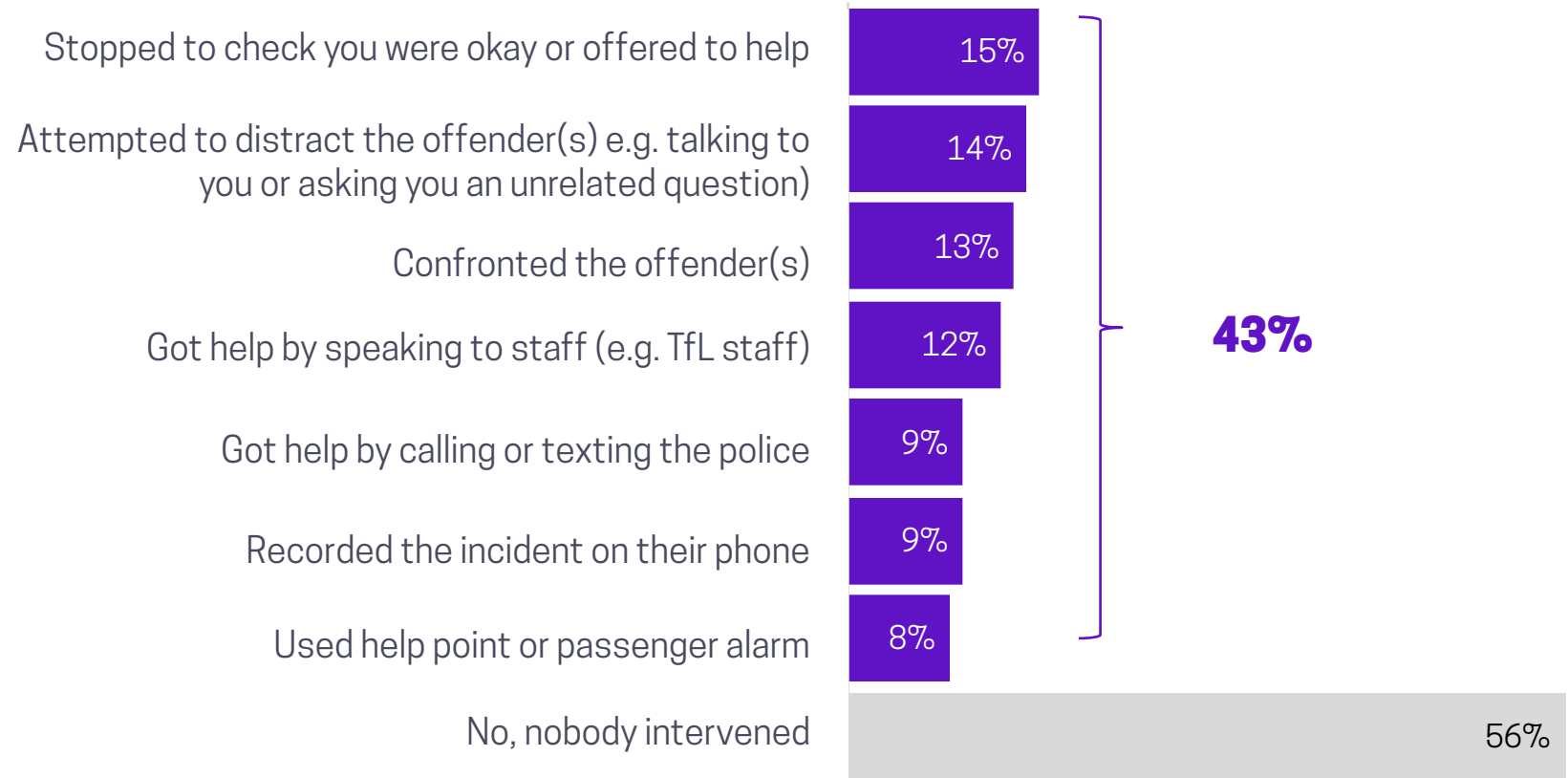


BASE: Respondents who experienced SH in the past 2 years: Unweighted total: 1,098. Q4. And, at what times of day did you typically experience these behaviours? Please select all that apply. Q7. Please now think about the person/people who did these behaviours. Which of the following best describes their gender?

# Bystander interventions to offer help or report incidents

Over half (56%) of the young women who experienced sexual harassment or assault in London stated that nobody had intervened to help them out or to offer support during the incident.

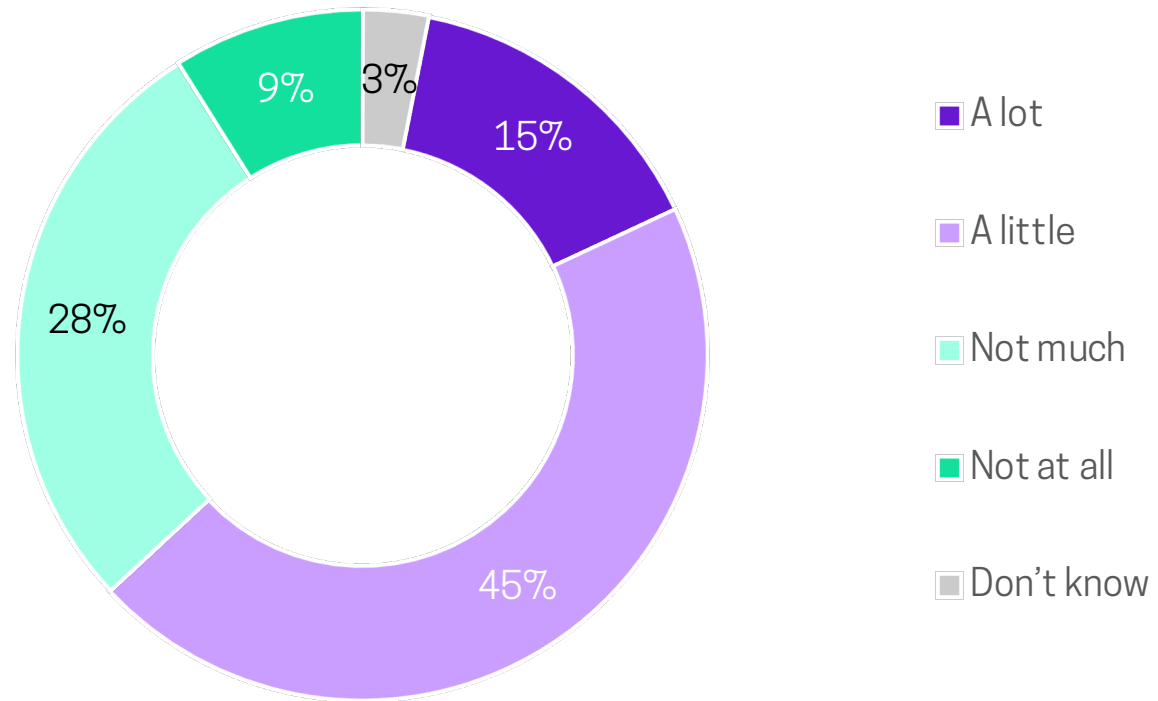
Those who experienced bystander support before said that this most often taken the form of directly offering help or support, stopping to check if they were alright, attempting to distract the offender, confronting the offender, or seeking help by speaking to a staff member.



BASE: Respondents who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years: Unweighted total: 1,098. Q5. Thinking about your experiences, did anybody intervene to offer any of the following support? Please select all that apply.

# Effect of sexual harassment on young women's mental wellbeing

Six in ten (60%) of the young women who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years said that the incident(s) had some effect on their mental wellbeing.



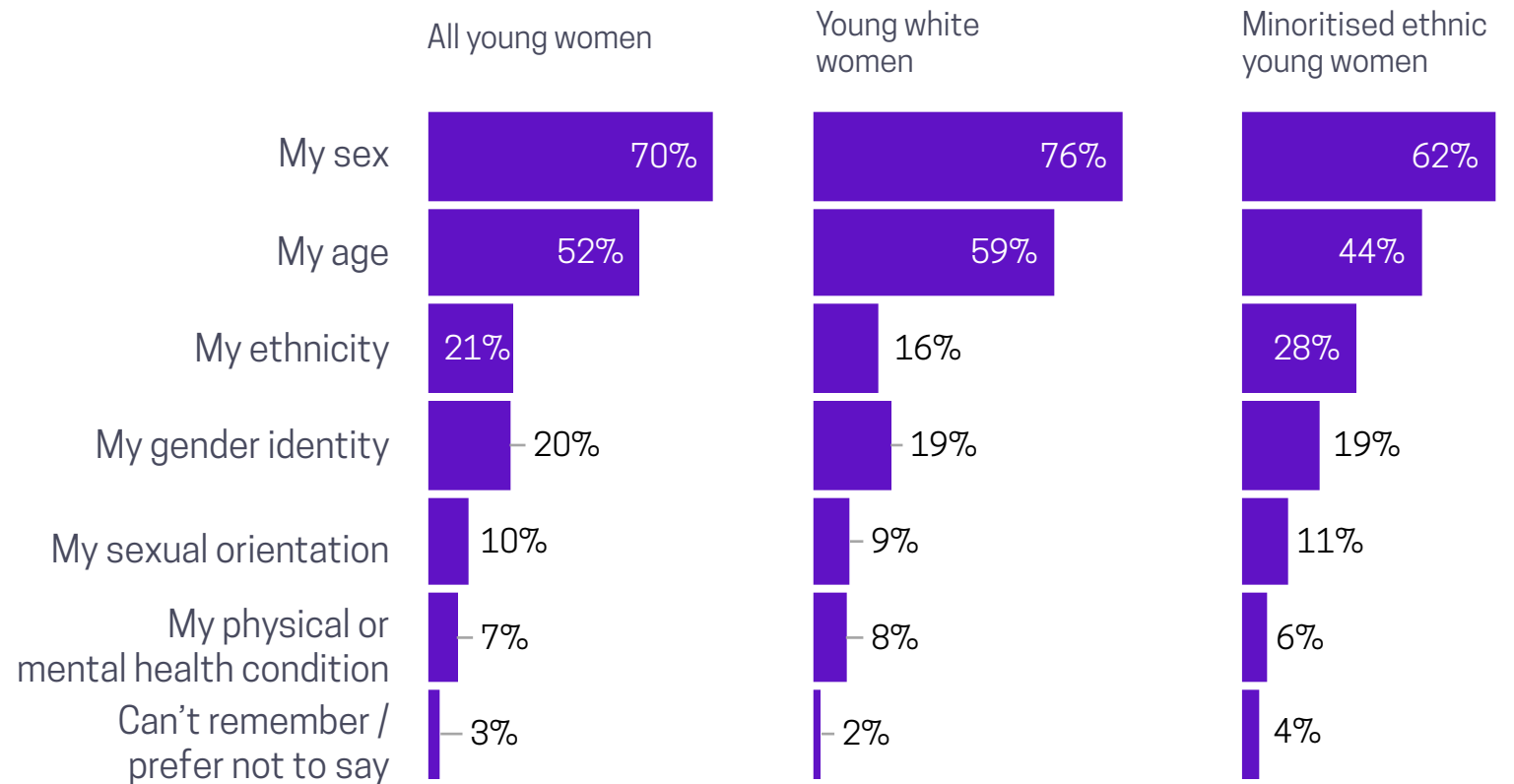
BASE: Respondents who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years: Unweighted total: 1,098.  
Q9. To what extent, if at all, have the behaviours you experienced negatively affected your mental wellbeing?

# **Racialised sexual harassment and assault**

# Perceived factors influencing sexual harassment or assault

The vast majority of the young women believe that their sex, followed by their age were the key factors in their experience of sexual harassment or assault.

Minoritised ethnic young women though are significantly more likely than young white women to believe that their ethnicity was a factor in the sexual harassment or assault they experienced (28% vs 16%).



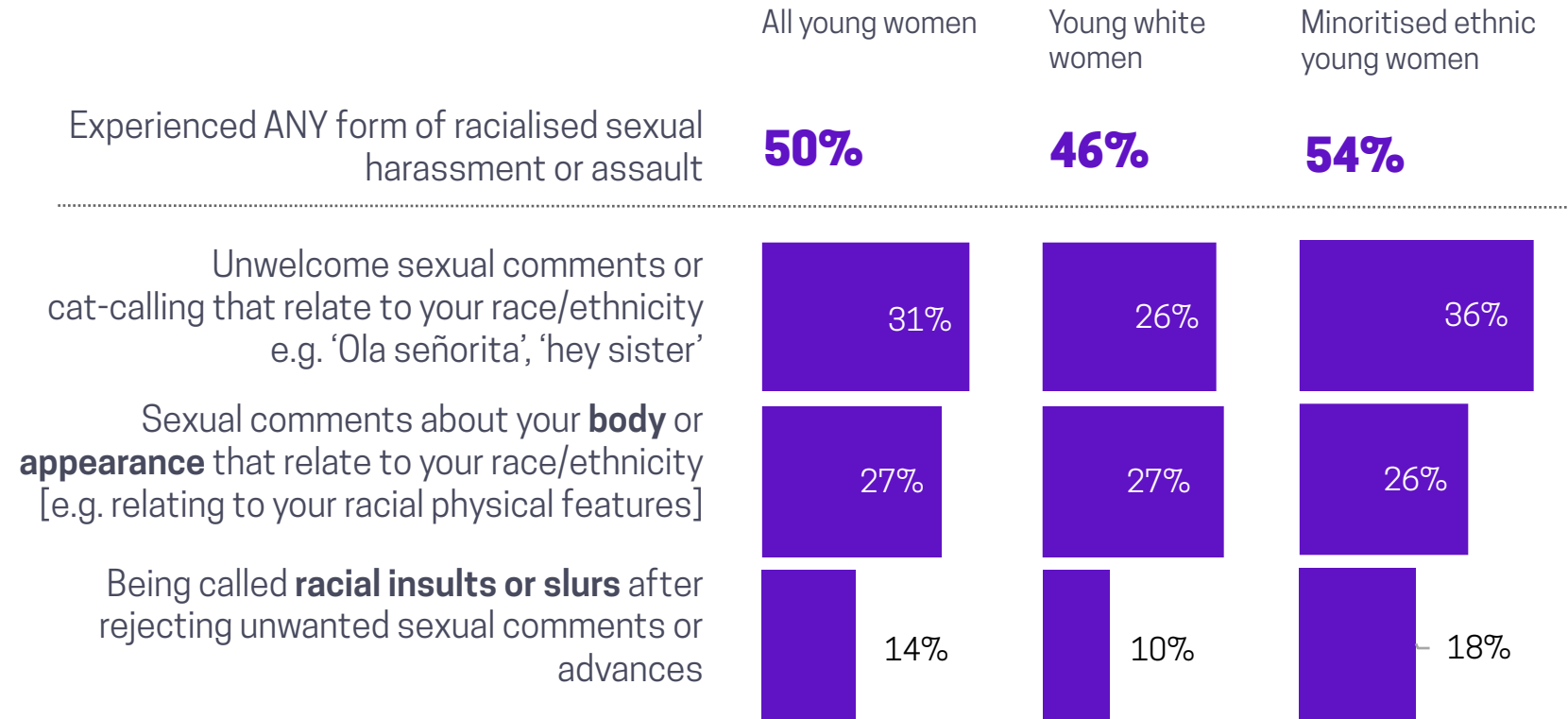
BASE: Respondents who experienced sexual harassment in the last two years. Unweighted total: 1098, White: 674, Minoritised ethnic young women: 416. Q5 Which of the following, if any, do you think was a factor in your experience? Please select all that apply?

Half of all the young women surveyed report experiencing sexual harassment or assault relating to their racial or ethnic identity.

Minoritised ethnic young women are significantly more likely than young white women to have experienced racialised sexual harassment, particularly unwelcome comments or catcalling relating to their race or ethnicity (36% vs 26%).

They are also significantly more likely to receive racial insults or slurs after rejecting sexual comments or advances from the harasser (18% vs 10%).

# Experiences of racialised sexual harassment in the past 2 years



BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1314, White: 782, Minoritised ethnic young women: 521. Q14. Which of the following behaviours, if any, have you personally experienced in a public space in London? And how often have you experienced these in the past 2 years.



Minoritised ethnic young women reported sexual harassment and assault that related to their racial identities, including fetishisation or stereotyping of their ethnicity, their bodies or skin colour.

Some young women also reported being called hateful insults or slurs when they rejected sexual advances.

# Racialised sexual harassment

“

Being Bengali I'm seen as 'exotic', more exciting and easier to take advantage of.

Age 18, Asian

“

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.

Age 26, other ethnicity

“

I am Hispanic so [I get] comments such as 'chúpamela mami' and 'sexy señorita'.

Age 32, Hispanic

“

I have received many sexual comments regarding my race ... to imply promiscuity.

Age 26, black

BASE: Minoritised ethnic young women who who experienced racialised sexual harassment. Q16. You mentioned that you have experienced unwelcome sexual comments, catcalling, or insults relating to your race/ethnicity. Could you please tell us more about your experience

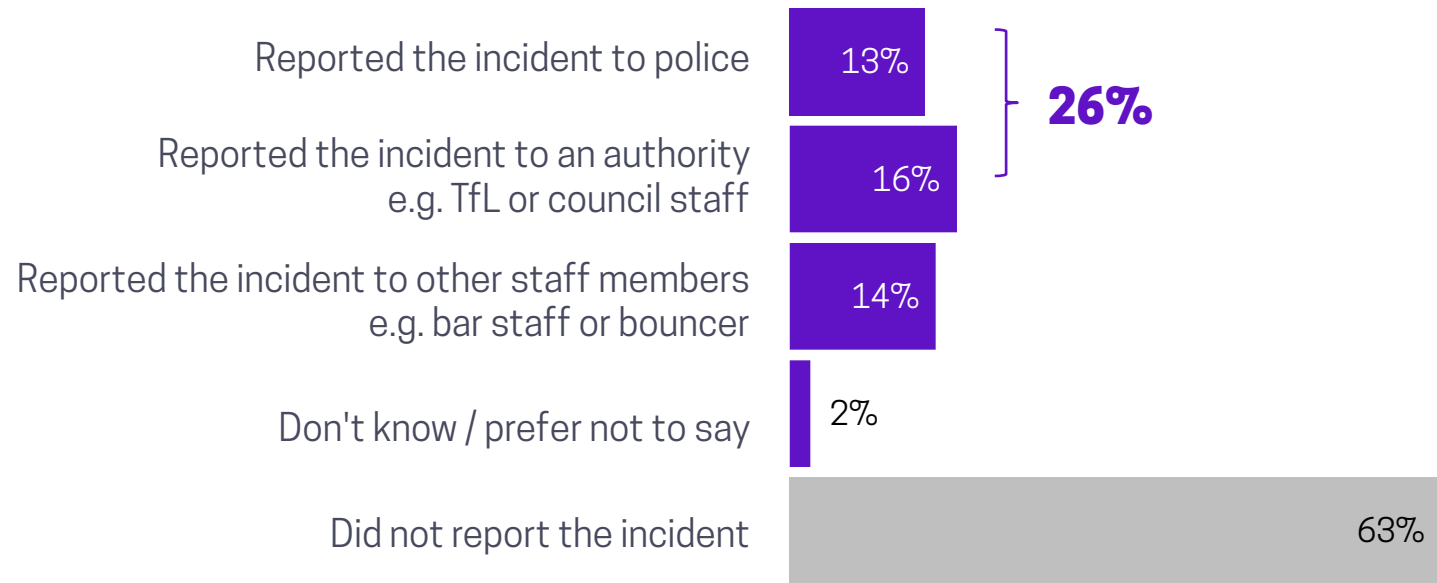
# **Reporting of sexual harassment or assault incidents**

# Reporting of sexual harassment or assault to the police or authorities

Just under a third of the young women (26%) who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years formally reported the incident(s) to the police or another authority.

One in ten (14%), meanwhile, said that they reported incidents to a staff member at the location where the incident took place, such as a restaurant manager, bar staff or a bouncer.

The majority of the young women (63%), however, did not report the incidents to anyone at all.



BASE: Respondents who experienced sexual harassment or assault in the past 2 years. Unweighted total: 1,098. Q10. Thinking of the behaviours you experienced, have you reported it to any of the following? Please select all that apply.

The young women's reasons for not reporting incidents of sexual harassment or assault to the police or other authorities varied.

Half of the young women surveyed (52%) felt that the incidents were not serious enough to report, and four in ten (45%) think that nothing would come out of reporting. A third, notably, thought that that they would not be believed or taken seriously if they sought to make a report (32%).

A significant minority - two in ten - said they did not know where or how to report the incident.

# Barriers to reporting to the police or the authorities



BASE: Respondents who did not report to police or authority. Unweighted total: 715. Q11. Which of the following reasons, if any, most closely explain why you did not report? Please select all that apply.

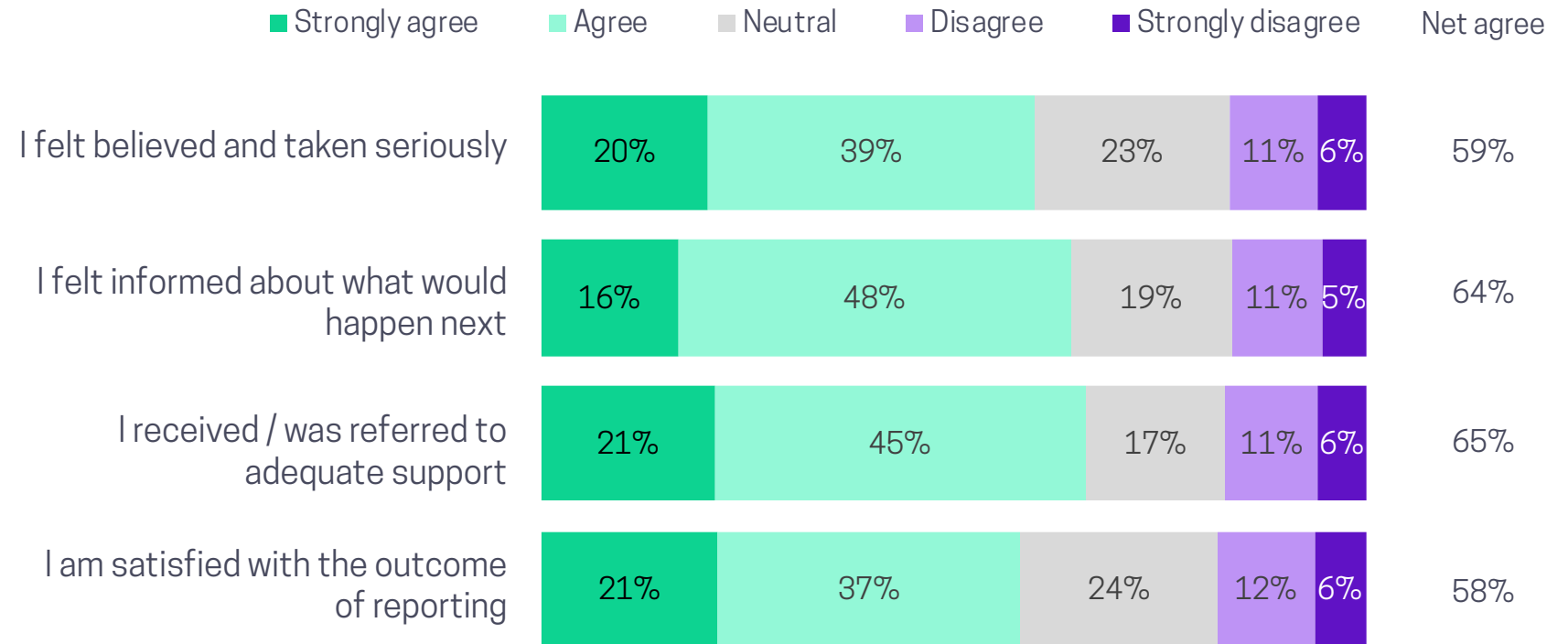
# **Experiences of reporting sexual harassment and assault to police or authority**

In general, experiences of reporting sexual harassment or assault to police or authority in London was moderately positive.

Over half (59%) of the young women who report to the police or authority 'felt believed and taken seriously'. Six in ten also 'felt informed about what would happen after reporting' (64%), felt that they 'received adequate support' (65%), and were 'satisfied with the outcome of the reporting' (58%).

Experiences of reporting, however, differed significantly by participants' ethnic backgrounds (see next slides).

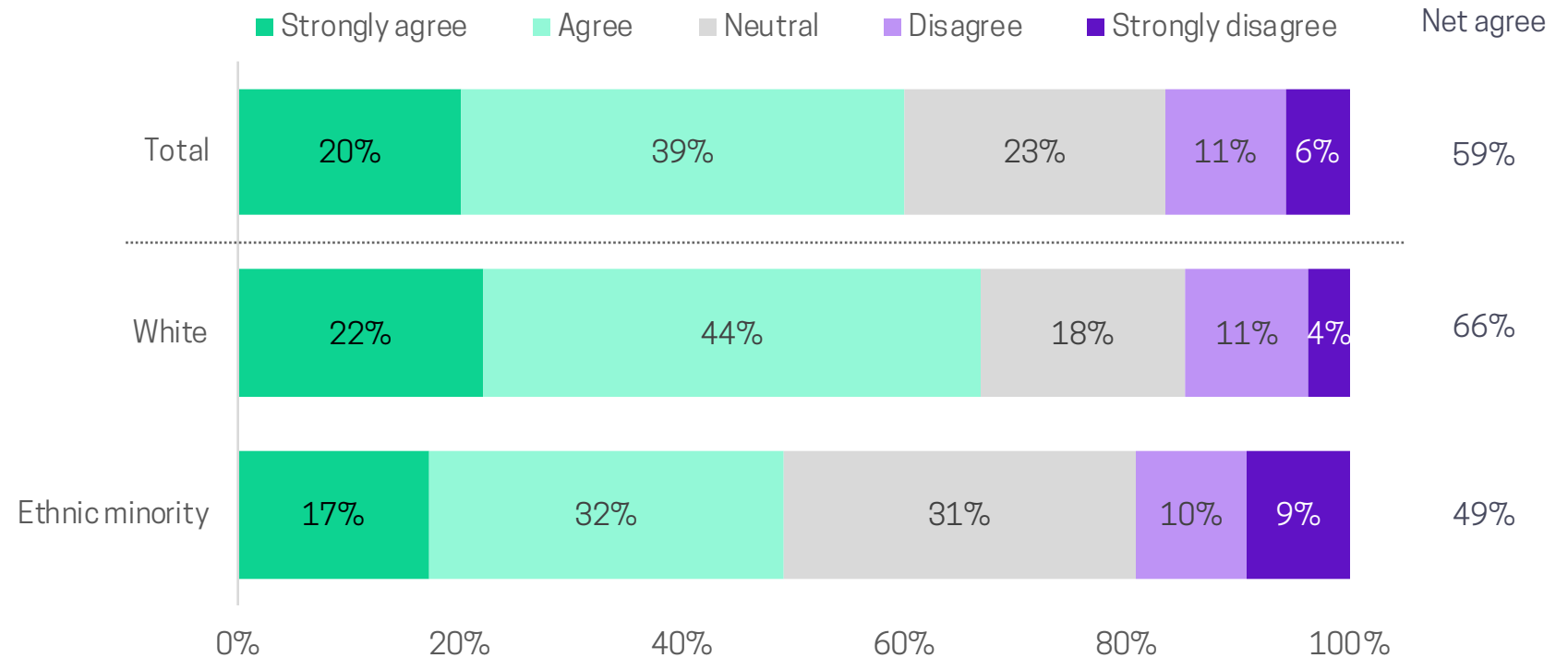
# Rating of experience of reporting to the police or the authorities



BASE: Respondents who reported to police or authority. Unweighted total: 266. Q13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following about your most recent experience of reporting to the police or an authority?

# 'I felt believed and taken seriously' – by ethnicity

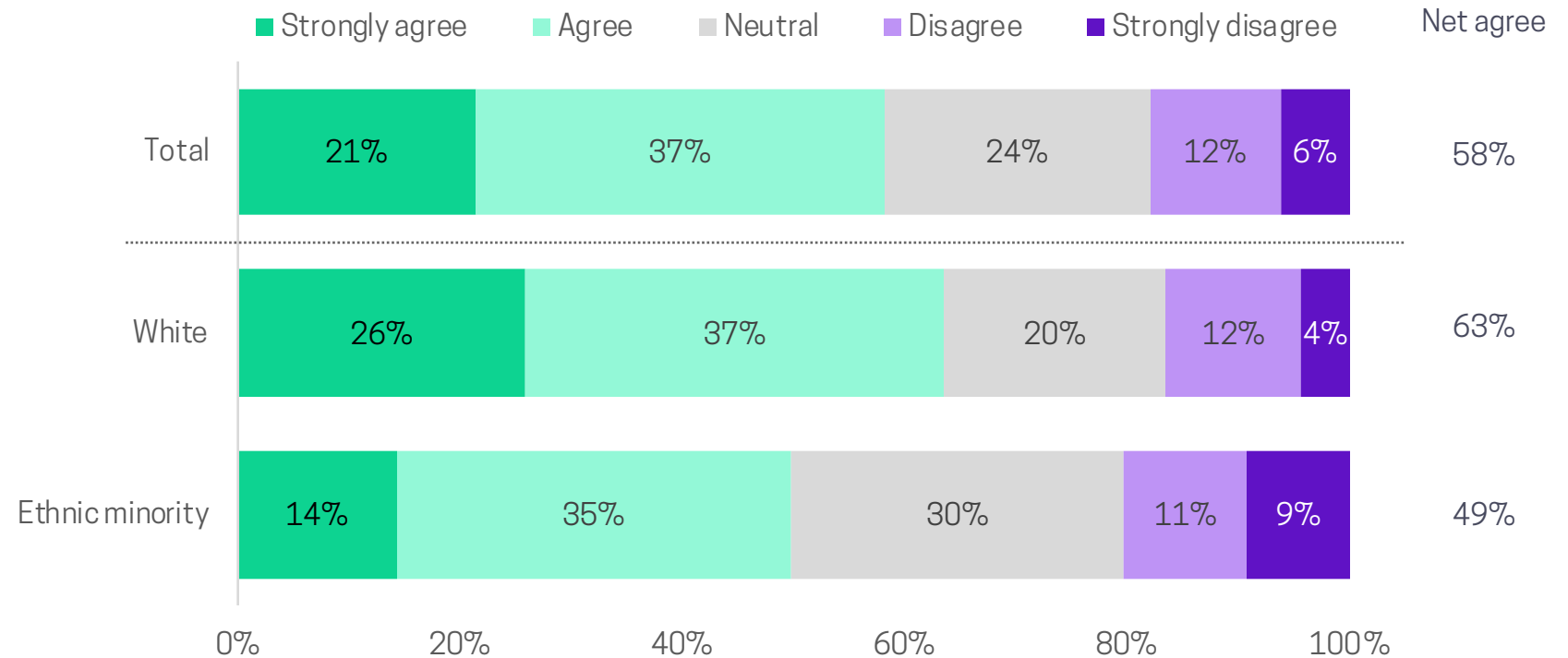
Young women from black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds are significantly less likely to feel believed and taken seriously when reporting to the police or the authority compared to young white women (49% agreeing with this statement vs. 66%, respectively).



BASE: Respondents who reported to police or authority. Unweighted total: 266. Q13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following about your most recent experience of reporting to the police or an authority?

# 'I am satisfied with the outcome of reporting' – by ethnicity

Minoritised ethnic young women are also significantly less likely than young white women to report feeling satisfied with the result of their report to the police or an authority (49% agreeing with this statement vs. 63%, respectively).



BASE: Respondents who reported to police or authority. Unweighted total: 266. Q13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following about your most recent experience of reporting to the police or an authority?



Experiences of reporting incidents of sexual harassment and assault to the police or authority varied among young women.

While some found the police to be supportive and understanding, others felt they were not taken seriously, or found their accounts of sexual harassment or assault dismissed by police staff.

# Experience reporting to the police

“

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 it to be true and said that it's a waste of time to report.

Age 20, Asian

“

Although they were supportive and understanding, they couldn't do anything. It technically wasn't illegal despite it making me feel uncomfortable and done without my consent.

Age 23, White

“

I know they didn't take me seriously and were almost laughing whilst I was explaining so they are no help at all.

Age 21, Black

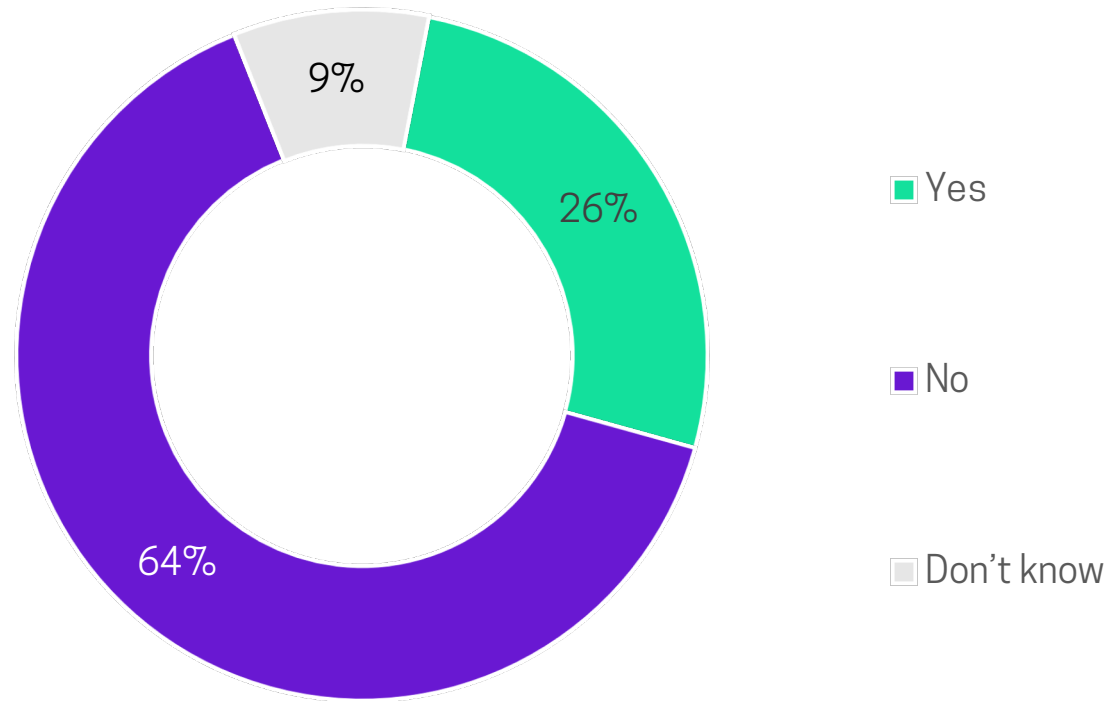
BASE: Young women who reported to the police. Please use this space to tell us anything more you'd like to share about your experience with reporting to the police.

# **Awareness of sexual harassment campaigns in London**

# Heard of advertising or publicity on sexual harassment in London

Six in ten of the young women surveyed (64%) had not seen, heard of or read about any recent publicity or campaign related to sexual harassment in London.

Among those who had (26%), the vast majority referred to adverts on the London Underground or in other parts of the London public transport network. A few also recalled the 'Ask for Angela' campaign in pubs and nightclubs, first launched in 2016.



BASE: All respondents. Unweighted total: 1,314. Q18. Have you seen, heard of or read any advertising, publicity or other public information in London which talked about sexual harassment recently?

# Recommendations

# Recommendations

- **Amplify anti-sexual harassment campaigns** in London and across the UK to raise public awareness of forms of sexual harassment, and instil a culture of intolerance to violence against women and girls. This should include multi-year, long-term funding for campaigns, and working with specialist VAWG sector, including by and for organisations, in their development.
- **Commit to interventions that help to prevent violence against women and girls**, such as high-quality relationships and sex education, based on consent and equality, as well as sufficient funding to schools to enable training, resourcing and dedicated capacity for its delivery.
- **Strengthen reporting mechanisms** to address the low level of reporting of sexual harassment incidents and to ensure that young women feel confident to come forward with their experiences to the police and authorities, and know how to do so easily and effectively.
- **Urgently investigate existing reporting processes and practices**, to address disparities in how young women of different ethnicities are treated by the police and authorities, and ensure they are supported and protected in an equitable way.
- **Regularly collect data on sexual harassment and assault in London**, as well as on reporting, including by demographic differences. This will build a better understanding of young women's diverse needs and experiences, and improve the authorities' ability to track progress.
- **Create policies and interventions informed by public consultations with young women**, to make sure decisions are informed by their needs and the reality of their experiences.

FORWARD is the African women-led organisation working to end violence against women and girls. From female genital mutilation and child marriage to domestic and sexual violence, we tackle abuse and discrimination – enabling African women and girls to have the dignity, health and equality they deserve.

The logo for FORWARD, featuring the word "FORWARD" in white, bold, uppercase letters. The letter "O" is replaced by a stylized white arrow pointing to the right. The logo is set against a dark blue rectangular background with a slight gradient and a white border.

FORWARD

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