
VAWG in public spaces: Barriers to reporting and impacts on women and girls

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In the turbulent wake of a series of high-profile crimes against women, there has been a resurgence of research and policy interest in combating VAWG in public spaces. While events such as the tragic murders of Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard, Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry are mercifully rare, they provoke widescale protest and outcry in part because they resonate with near-universal experiences among women and girls: of sometimes – or often - feeling unsafe in public and changing or limiting their movements, dress and activities to ward off ‘stranger intrusions’ (Vera Gray, 2018). A recent UK-wide survey by UN Women found that 97% of 18–24-year-olds had experienced harassment of some form (APPG-UNW), while an earlier survey of 28 European countries showed that **64%** of UK participants had avoided places or situations due to their fear of being physically or sexually assaulted, during the previous 12 months (FRA, 2012). This background hum of threat is low-level but pervasive, curtailing women and girls’ ability to move freely and enjoy equal access to public spaces.

In the past, VAWG prevention campaigns that emphasise personal safety have attracted critique for targeting prospective victims rather than perpetrators, urging women and girls to remain perpetually vigilant in order to avoid harm: “watch your drinks. Watch your friends. Watch out” (Vera Gray, 2018: 46). Other notorious campaigns like the 2009 Travel for London (TfL) ‘Cabwise’ adverts employed shock and awe tactics, invoking the threat of sexual predation while implying that victimisation may be a direct consequence of female negligence: “Text ‘Cabwise’ to 60835 now or call 999 later” (TfL, 2009). In recent years there has been a major shift in messaging, with a move to primary prevention efforts targeting bystanders and the wider community, such as the Good Night Out campaign (Quigg & Bigland, 2020) or the Home Office’s recent ‘Enough’ campaign (Home Office, 2022). Instead of advocating for ever-straitening personal safety behaviours for women and girls, such campaigns invite community members to safely challenge or report harmful behaviours.

Safer Streets: A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on VAWG in public spaces

As part of a wider project to design an evidence-based community crime prevention and awareness campaign, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk commissioned the University of Suffolk to undertake an REA on VAWG in public spaces¹, with a particular focus on identifying what works in challenging VAWG-supportive attitudes and promoting positive behavioural change. The REA also distilled the evidence on barriers to

¹ For the purposes of the REA, and in accordance with the Safer Streets fund specifications, researchers focused on “crimes that disproportionately impact women and girls’ safety and feelings of safety in public spaces” including rape, causing sexual activity without consent, sexual coercion, sexual assault/ indecent assault, abduction, street harassment, stalking, indecent exposure and voyeurism, unwanted sexual touching and ‘upskirting’ (Home Office, 2021: 11).

reporting VAWG in public spaces and the impact public VAWG has on women and girls' sense of safety.

The team of four researchers conducted an adapted question-led REA between 15 November 2021-31 January 2022. The review comprised four stages, with an initial screening of 1600 items. 52 of the screened items were eligible for full-text review. These were subsequently reviewed by two researchers, and independently assessed for relevance and rigour using a streamlined 'Weight of Evidence' approach. At the conclusion of this stage, 19 items were eligible for inclusion. Researchers then used a subset of these 19 items as a 'start set' for identifying further relevant articles/reports, systematically reviewing and appraising the reference lists of included items for relevance and rigour. This snowballing process yielded a further 20 articles for inclusion, bringing the total to 39.

This research summary will focus on our conclusions regarding two of the three research questions:

- What does reviewed literature say regarding the barriers to reporting VAWG in public spaces?
- What does reviewed literature say about feelings of diminished safety in relation to VAWG in public spaces?

Barriers to reporting: overview

In UK contexts, identified barriers included a lack of clarity regarding available reporting mechanisms (Adams, 2021; Solymosi *et al*, 2017), reluctance to cause a scene (Lewis *et al*, 2019); a lack of confidence that reporting would help (APPG-UNW, 2021; Solymosi *et al*, 2017); fear of being blamed for one's victimisation or perceived as an underserving or precipitous victim (Brooks, 2014; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020); doubting that an experience was serious enough to merit reporting (APPG-UNW, 2021; Solymosi *et al*, 2017); ambiguity regarding what defines violence and/or harassment (Ball & Wesson, 2017); rape myth acceptance and scepticism by institutional gatekeepers (Murphy & Hine, 2019) and delayed recognition that an experience constitutes sexual violence (Waterhouse *et al*, 2016).

The evidence suggests that there are a range of psychological, emotional, practical, social, cultural and institutional barriers which a woman or girl who experiences VAWG may need to navigate on her way to (successfully) reporting, each of which must be taken into account and meaningfully addressed when trying to promote reporting.

Impacts on women and girls: overview

Reviewed literature suggests that women and girls in the UK, as elsewhere, continue to be restricted and inconvenienced by the threat of VAWG on a daily basis, engaging in routine avoidance and 'safety work' practices such as avoiding or modifying their use of public transport (Gekoski *et al*, 2015); avoiding dark and secluded streets, even if it means going out of their way or walking further (HMICFRS, 2021); not going out at night (Lam, 2021); watching their drinks in social settings (Brooks, 2014); dressing down to reduce visibility or de-emphasise sexuality (Corteen, 2002; Nicholls, 2017) or wearing sunglasses or headphones in public to evade intrusions by unknown men (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Each of these individual restrictions may seem irksome but ultimately reasonable - "an annoying but necessary result of living in a world where occasionally strangers may do you

harm” (Vera Gray & Kelly, 2020: 266). However, these restrictions cumulatively act to limit women and girls in personally, professionally and societally harmful ways – contributing to reduced mobility and social and economic activity, and a loss of access to public spaces. Further, the quiet ubiquity of such measures – and attitudes towards women who fail to satisfy expected standards of safekeeping – contributes to the normalisation of the idea that women and girls are lesser citizens with a lesser right to enjoy public spaces.

Discussion

The findings in relation to these questions were sobering, pointing to a pervasive cultural normalisation and minimisation of sexual violence and harassment in the UK – particularly evident in permissive environments such as bars and clubs (Quigg *et al*, 2021; Quigg & Bigland, 2020), or those governed by social norms of polite non-interference such as public transport (Lewis *et al*, 2019)– and punitive responses towards women and girls who transgress gendered behavioural expectations of propriety and hypervigilance (Brooks, 2014; Quigg *et al*, 2018).

This climate of minimisation contributes to reduced reporting and a sense of impunity for perpetrators: a 2021 UK-wide survey found that more than 95% of its female participants had never reported their experiences of sexual harassment, with 55% who had not reported citing their belief that the incident wasn’t “serious enough” to report (APPG-UNW, 2021: 17). A further 45% stated that they had not reported as they lacked confidence that reporting would help.

The fear (or actuality) of secondary victimisation, and a lack of faith in existing institutions and reporting mechanisms to achieve just outcomes, also emerged as significant themes across reviewed UK literature, with the justifiable fear of encountering “inappropriate or counter-productive” responses from institutional gatekeepers acting as a major barrier to reporting (Universities UK, 2016: 28).

Our findings indicate that UK women and girls’ lives continue to be significantly shaped, and constrained, by the threat and actuality of VAWG. In light of the evidence, we recommended that efforts to encourage reporting should focus on practical, social and cultural barriers, as well as addressing women’s knowledge and confidence about reporting mechanisms. We also recommended that when designing prevention and awareness campaigns, developers/implementers should ensure that it mitigates rather than adds to dominant messaging urging women to limit their freedoms to secure safety.

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