



SEXISM IN THE CITY

Young women speak up about street harassment in Sydney

May 2018

Plan International Australia



**FREE
TO BE**

FOREWORD



**By Susanne Legena, CEO,
Plan International Australia**

There is so much to love about living in a city. Cities are vibrant, fascinating places that pulse with life and diversity. But not everyone experiences the same place in the same way. For some, cities can be frightening.

Five years ago, when Plan International set out to better understand street harassment as part of our global Safer Cities for Girls program, we soon learned that in all societies, street harassment is far more common than we imagine.

And now, as this report will entail, we have evidence that it can have serious and lasting effects on the wellbeing of girls and women. We know that the more a girl or young woman experiences it, the more detrimental it is for her mental health.

Street harassment is more often than not, a silently endured problem that is viewed as part of the normal female experience. It is not taken seriously enough. And as a result, too often, it goes unreported.

When we asked young women in this report what they did in response to the most serious incident they had experienced, only 1 in 13 (7%) young women in this survey reported it to authorities. Reporting to family and friends was more common (60%), but almost a third (30%) did nothing.

The vast majority of young women we surveyed (85%) feel that reporting systems for street harassment are simply not good enough.

Our hope is that this report, as part of our broader global work to make cities everywhere safer, more welcoming places for girls, will become a valuable resource for those with a stake in city safety, whether it is councils, city planners, police or transit authorities. That it will assist them to recognise street harassment as a very real and pressing issue and to strengthen the case to make combatting street harassment a priority.

We can start with smart city design that discourages harassers and empowers women. We can take steps to ensure women and girls feel safe and supported to report it when it happens. We can ensure the message is being received that it's never OK and that bystanders do have a duty to step up when it occurs.

Turning the tide on street harassment will not happen overnight and it will not happen in isolation. It will take a concerted effort to tackle this problem, which stems from deep seated inequality that still exists in all societies. But it does have to happen.

Like any form of sexism, a culture shift is required so that this behaviour is never encouraged and that it's not seen as normal or acceptable.

What this report tells us, loud and clear, is that cat-calling and menacing behavior is not 'harmless fun'. It has real and lasting repercussions. It's affecting the well-being of our young women at home and around the globe and in many cases, they are simply opting out of using public spaces.

At a time when #MeToo and #TimesUp are starting to shift the dial on gender inequality, the time is right to make lasting changes. All of us can – and must be - allies in this change.

By Lauren Lancaster, 16, Sydney
– Youth activist
Plan International Australia



It is an unfortunate truth that nearly every young woman has experienced street harassment.

Whether it's hollering, being followed, brushed up against on public transport, or even told to get in a car, women are routinely made to feel unsafe in spaces that are 'for the public'.

As a young woman living in Sydney, I'm no stranger to these interactions.

I remember the first time I was harassed on the street, walking with my friend when we were about 11 or 12-years-old. It was bizarre to me at the time – how could some man just get away with yelling lewd comments out at us from an idling car?

Even for a 16-year-old, it's expected that if you go out by yourself, or with others, you will probably get whistled at, maybe a man will try to touch you, or you'll be propositioned on the street.

Street harassment has become so normalised that too often women don't speak up about it, for fear of being labelled an 'over-reactor' or worse, having the blame laid on us: it's what we're wearing, how we behave, maybe even just because we're out on the street we're asking for it.

Sydney is one of the most liveable cities in the world, but the sad fact is that women are not being afforded the same right to feel safe and comfortable in public spaces that men are.

For too long, we have been told to 'brush it off', that these small incidents are not important, and that they do not matter enough to warrant any action.

But where is the line drawn? When does street harassment change from inevitable to unacceptable? By failing to respond to street harassment across the spectrum of seriousness, we are condoning it in all its forms.

I believe that women should feel safe and confident wherever they are, not constantly on-guard against threats to their personal and psychological wellbeing.

This is why Plan International Australia's safety map for young women, Free to Be Sydney, is an incredibly exciting tool that can help women in our city counter street harassment and make real governmental, institutional change.

The map connects young women's immediate experiences to a wider network to push for change and gives us a voice that is powerful. It is through our stories and showing decision-makers what it is like to be a young woman in Sydney that we will see real change.

I hope you will join us help to make Sydney a safer, more welcoming place, for all.

KEY FINDINGS

We like to think of Sydney as a welcoming city, a positive place that celebrates diversity and inclusion. A city that makes it easy to live, work, study and play. Yet for a lot of girls and young women who call Sydney home, that's just not the reality.

Plan International Australia surveyed 500 young women in Sydney aged 18-25 to gain insight into how they experience public spaces in Australia's biggest city. Shockingly, 90% said they don't feel safe in their city after dark. They've told us they're being harassed, followed, cat-called, groped or leered at, often on a regular basis. And it's affecting their routines, their enjoyment of the city and even their mental health. Some have experienced even more severe forms of physical and sexual violence, not only at night, but during the day as well.

For too many young women, street harassment leaves them feeling afraid, powerless and even at fault. Others have become desensitised to it, because after a while, it becomes 'something you have to deal with as a woman,' just a reality of life in the city.

It's time for a major cultural shift. We need to make Sydney safer for girls.

**ALMOST 1 IN 4 YOUNG
WOMEN EXPERIENCE STREET
HARASSMENT AT LEAST
ONCE A MONTH OR MORE**

**4 OUT OF 5 SAY
THEY FIRST EXPERIENCED
STREET HARASSMENT
WHEN THEY WERE UNDER 18**

Of the young women surveyed who have personally experienced street harassment in Sydney:

- Almost 1 in 4 experience street harassment at least once a month or more
- 4 out of 5 say they first experienced street harassment when they were under 18
- More than a third were first harassed between the ages of 11 and 15
- 1 in 3 girls who have been harassed once a month or more report experiencing anxiety, depression or ongoing mental health issues as a direct result
- Those who have been harassed on a regular basis (once a month or more) are almost twice as likely to report experiencing anxiety, depression or ongoing mental health issues as a result
- Girls who first experienced street harassment at a younger age (15 or under) were more likely to report ongoing impacts on their behaviour and wellbeing
- Around 3 out of 4 young women have been harassed when there were witnesses present, yet very few (just 16%) had ever had a bystander step in to help them.

What is street harassment?

Unwelcome and uninvited comments, gestures and actions that occur in public and are directed at a person because of their gender, sex, sexual orientation or gender expression. Street harassment can take many forms such as whistling, leering, persistent requests for someone's name, number or destination after they've said no, sexual names, comments and demands, verbal abuse, following, flashing, public masturbation, groping, physical and sexual assault.

HELPING ALL GIRLS FEEL FREE TO BE IN SYDNEY

This research forms part of Plan International Australia's *Free to Be* project, which encourages young women to map those spaces where they feel safe, happy and included – and conversely – where they feel unsafe, anxious or intimidated. *Free to Be* has been designed by young women, working alongside Plan International Australia and our partners at CrowdSpot and Monash University's XYX Lab. It's a way of helping girls fight back against feeling afraid, unheard or disempowered, by sharing their stories and changing their city.

The online maps have been launched in Sydney, Kampala, Delhi, Madrid and Lima, in what is believed to be the most ambitious crowdsourced data collection project to shine a light on women's and girls' experiences of street harassment worldwide.

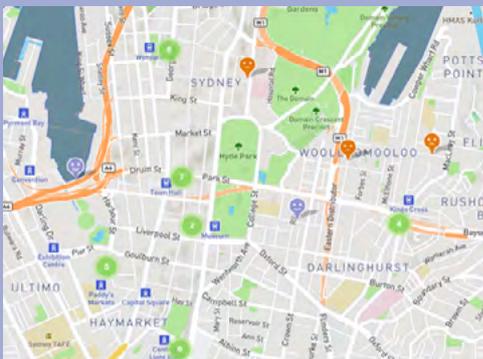
Through this ground-breaking project, we are empowering girls to share their experiences of street harassment, and their specific recommendations for what authorities can do to change it.

All responses are anonymous, and the results will be shared with the people who have the power to make the city safer, such as city councils, police and public transport authorities.

The project was first piloted in Melbourne, with remarkable results. More than 10,000 people visited the website, with thousands dropping pins to say where they felt safe or unsafe. The response from decision-makers has been overwhelmingly positive, with leaders from Melbourne City Council, Victoria Police, Metro Trains and other authorities using the data to make the city safer for girls and young women.

Now it's Sydney's turn. In the first 24 hours alone, women in Sydney pinpointed almost 1000 locations where they feel safe or unsafe. Over the course of the campaign, many more will share their stories, and the analysed data will be made available to all decision-makers who are willing to help create a safer Sydney.

'I don't want to just cross my fingers and hope that I won't be harassed or assaulted tonight Sydney should be a place where all women feel safe, empowered and where our experiences are understood.' – Alice, 21



Plan International Australia and our Youth Activists will be working tirelessly over the coming months to make Sydney a safer city for girls, but we can't do it without your help.

We are calling on Sydneysiders, community and youth groups, and all authorities with the power to make change in Sydney to get in touch, listen to the data and stories of young women, and join us in creating a safer city for all.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Plan International Australia surveyed 500 young women in Sydney aged 18-25 in April 2018. Participants were drawn from across metropolitan Sydney and included a random sample of students (48%), employed (41%), unemployed (10%) and other (1%). Participants were surveyed about their perceptions of safety in Sydney, as well as their personal experiences of street harassment as young women. The survey was facilitated by Ipsos Australia. Additional qualitative insights have been gathered from in-depth interviews with young women aged 16 to 22 years old, who are members of Plan International Australia's Youth Activist Series. These young women were specifically consulted about their own personal experiences of harassment in Sydney. Some were involved in developing the *Free to Be* map.

This research builds on previous surveys conducted by Plan International around the world that documents girls' and young women's experiences of harassment and gender inequality. It also builds on a national survey conducted in 2016 – A Right to the Night – by Plan International Australia and Our Watch, as well as data from the *Free to Be* digital mapping platform in Melbourne and the subsequent analysis conducted by Plan International Australia, Monash University's XYX Lab and CrowdSpot.



Lauren Lancaster, 16.

GIRLS FEEL UNSAFE IN SYDNEY ALL THE TIME, AND ESPECIALLY AT NIGHT

Just 1 in 10 young women in Sydney say they always feel safe to go out at night. For the other 9 out of 10 young women, being in the city after dark leaves them feeling afraid or intimidated. A staggering 90% of girls sometimes or always feel unsafe in Sydney after dark, with almost 1 in 6 (16%) feeling this way all the time.

Yet street harassment isn't limited to after dark. It's almost as common during the day. Of girls who have experienced street harassment, 57% say it usually happens at night, while 43% report it being more common during the day.

Public transport elicits particular worries for girls. Even during the day, when young women are travelling to and from school, university or work, almost half (46%) feel unsafe using Sydney's public transport alone. They've reported experiences such as having men expose themselves and leer at them on quiet daytime trains, being groped, being brushed up against inappropriately during peak hour and men whispering inappropriate comments in their ears.

At night, this feeling of being unsafe on public transport rises to 92%, almost on par with what women report in developing cities such as Delhi and Lima. Slightly fewer – although still a concerning large number at 81% – feel unsafe using taxis and ride sharing services alone at night.

'A man on the train, started harassing me about how I looked, asking where I lived where I was going. Only to follow me off the platform pressing his body against me, chasing me down the station and into the shops. I had to hide in the bathroom for a while, as he was still outside waiting for me.'

– Free to Be, Sydney map

IT'S CAUSING GIRLS TO MODIFY THEIR BEHAVIOUR OR STAY AT HOME TO REMAIN SAFE

A 2016 study by Plan International Australia and Our Watch found that nationally, 1 in 3 young women aged 15-19 believe that girls should avoid public places after dark. That report found that a pervasive culture of victim blaming is unfairly shifting the responsibility for safety in public places away from the perpetrators of crimes and onto women and girls.¹

In Sydney, the reality for 18 to 25-year-old women appears to be even more acute. More than two-thirds (69%) say they sometimes or always avoid going out at night because they're concerned for their safety. An alarming 12% of young women say they completely avoid going out at night because they don't believe it's safe.

'I was running early evening. There are no lights so it's very dark, it has put me off running through there again.' – Free to Be, Sydney map

When young women do go out at night, 9 out of 10 (90%) feel the need to make specific safety plans. Many report having changed their behaviour in direct response to street harassment. This includes things like avoiding walking or travelling alone (53%) and dressing differently or changing their make-up (19%).

'Even for a 16-year-old, it's expected that if you go out by yourself, or with others, you will probably get whistled at, maybe a man will try to touch you, or you'll be propositioned on the street. Street harassment has become so normalised that too often women don't speak up about it, for fear of being labelled an 'over-reactor' or worse, having the blame laid on us: it's what we're wearing, how we behave, maybe even just because we're out on the street we're asking for it.' – Lauren, 16

¹ A Right to the Night: Australian girls on their safety in public places, Plan International Australia and Our Watch, 2016 <https://www.plan.org.au/~media/plan/documents/resources/a-right-to-the-night.pdf?la=en>

STREET HARASSMENT CAN HAVE A SERIOUS AND LASTING IMPACT ON GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH

Girls' fears are grounded in their day to day experiences. Research by the Australia Institute in 2015 found that 87% of women in Australia have experienced some form of physical or verbal street harassment.ⁱⁱ

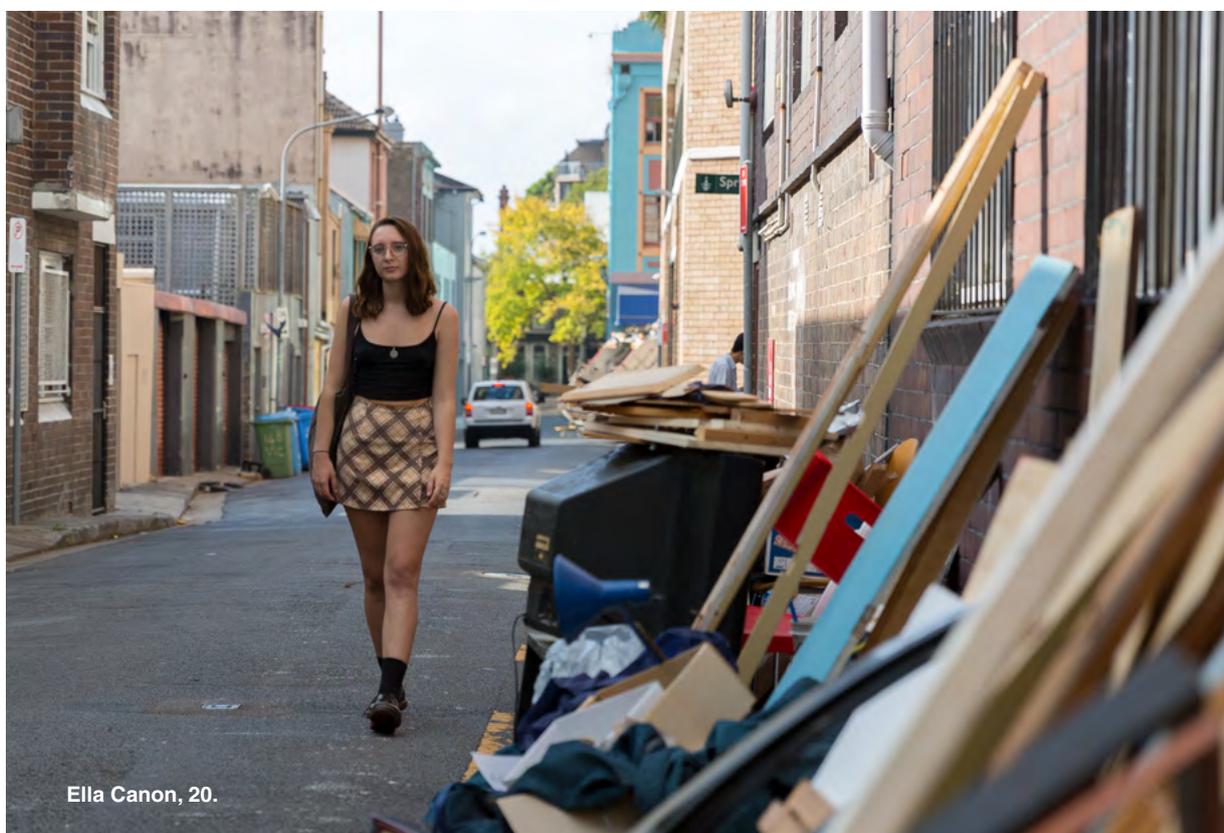
These aren't isolated, one-off experiences. Of the young women who have experienced street harassment in Sydney, Plan International Australia's research finds that 85% have experienced this more than once. Almost a quarter (22%) of young women in Sydney are harassed once a month or more, with more than 1 in 10 facing it on at least a weekly basis.

The more often young women experience street harassment, the more it impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. More than 1 in 3 girls (35%) who have been harassed once a month or more report anxiety, depression or ongoing mental health issues as a direct result.

This is a significant finding, almost twice the rate of mental health impacts reported by young women who have been harassed one to 10 times in total (18%).

This lingering impact on girls' mental health should be enough to end, once and for all, the ill-informed notion that catcalling and harassment is just 'harmless fun,' 'a compliment,' or 'something that should be taken less seriously.' A cultural shift is long overdue, not only in Sydney but around the world: anything that leaves girls feeling anxious, depressed, upset or ashamed is simply unacceptable.

'The barrage of street harassment I experience simply just while getting from one place to another leaves me feeling defiled, then powerless and then numb. It should not be an everyday occurrence that I call my parents when I'm walking home at night, with the background thought that if I get raped, at least someone will know to call the police. Every time I walk home, I can only cross my fingers and hope that something doesn't happen to me.' – Alice, 21



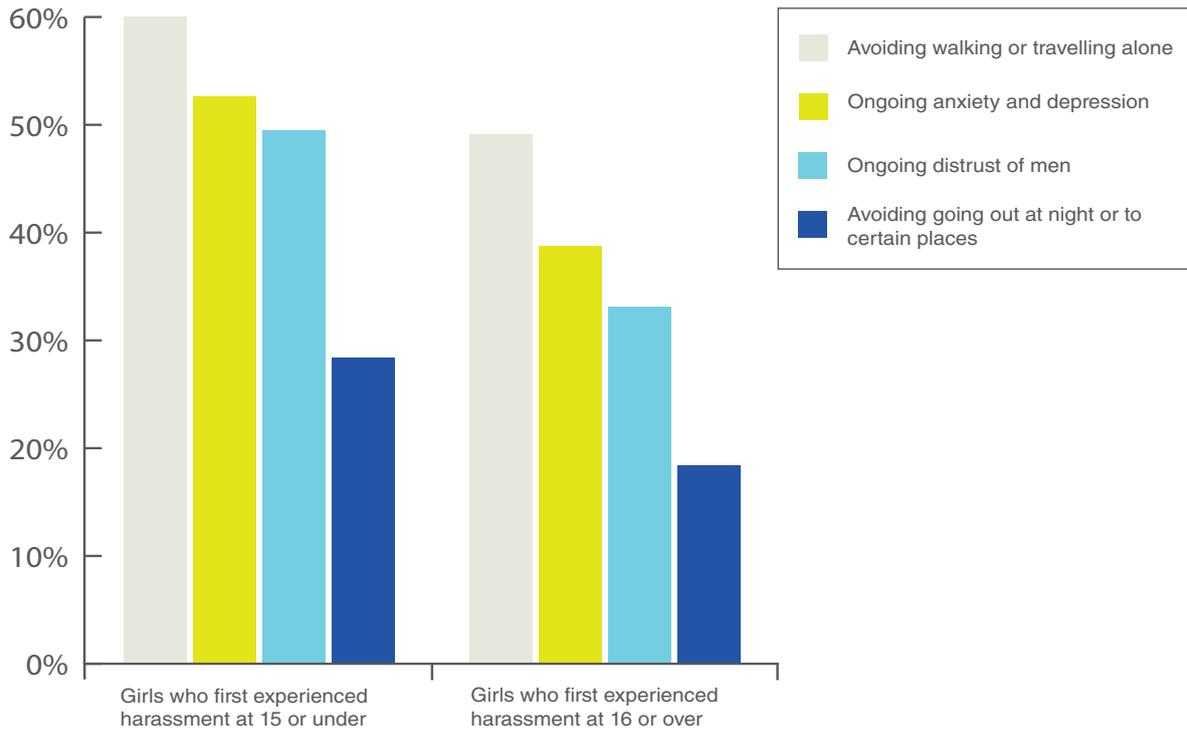
Ella Canon, 20.

ii Everyday Sexism: Australian women's experiences of street harassment, The Australia Institute, 2015 http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/Everyday_sexism_TAIMarch2015_0.pdf

GIRLS START TO EXPERIENCE STREET HARASSMENT AT A DISTURBINGLY YOUNG AGE

Of the young women who have experienced street harassment in Sydney, 4 out of 5 (82%) say this first happened when they were under 18. More than a third (35%) were first harassed between the ages of 11 and 15, while some girls even report this first happening to them at age 10 or younger.

Girls who first experienced harassment at a younger age (15 or under) were more likely to report ongoing impacts on their behaviour and wellbeing. This includes a greater likelihood of ongoing anxiety and depression (28% vs 18%), ongoing distrust of men (52% vs 39%) and avoiding going out at night or to certain places (50% vs 33%).



Consequences of girls experiencing street harassment

'I was in year 4 the first time I was catcalled. I was walking home after ballet practice, only a few streets away from home, when a car with P-plates slowed down next to me. In it was a group of men who started honking, wolf-whistling and shouting comments I didn't understand. I was alone and terrified and ran the rest of the way home. Still I am scared to walk the streets of Sydney. When I hear footsteps behind me, I speed up. When a car slows down next to me my heart skips a beat. When I see someone approaching me, I make a mental plan of what to do if something goes wrong.' - Milly, 16



Eddie Bannerman, 19, drops a pin on the Free to Be map in Kings Cross, Sydney.

WOMEN ARE EXPERIENCING THE FULL SPECTRUM OF HARASSMENT, BUT DON'T FEEL EMPOWERED TO REPORT IT.

Common forms of street harassment for young women in Sydney include:



When asked what they did in response to the most serious incident they had experienced, only 1 in 13 (7%) young women reported it to authorities. Reporting to family and friends was much more common (60%), whilst almost a third (30%) did nothing.

The responsibility to improve rates of reporting doesn't lie with victims, but rather with authorities. This is a strong view held by the young women we surveyed – the vast majority (85%) said the current reporting systems for street harassment are not good enough.

'I don't want to have to change my behaviour so that I'm not harassed. I want decision makers, authorities and men to act.' – Alice, 21

France is one of the countries leading the response to street harassment, cracking down on predatory behaviour by introducing on the spot fines for public sexual harassment. In Canada a number of public transport authorities have introduced apps for travellers to report sexual harassment as well as racist and homophobic behaviour. The apps are complemented by behaviour change campaigns to demonstrate zero tolerance for such behaviour.

WE NEED TO TACKLE GENDER NORMS AND ENCOURAGE BYSTANDERS TO ACT

In almost all cases, the perpetrators were men (95%), whether on their own (53%) or in groups (42%). This erodes girls' trust in men who do the right thing, with 44% saying they felt less trusting of men in public as a result of their personal experience of street harassment.

'A man around 60 began walking alongside as I was going to the bus stop. He asked me lots of questions about where I was going and if he could come with me. I asked him multiple times to leave me alone, even at the bus stop where eight other people were waiting for the bus, no-one helped'. - Free to Be, Sydney map

Around 3 out of 4 young women (77%) have been harassed when there were witnesses present, yet only 1 in 6 (16%) had ever had a witness or bystander step in to help them. Overwhelmingly, 9 out of 10 young women (90%) want men to intervene if they see street harassment occurring, and believe that men have an important positive role to play as bystanders.

Mobilising bystanders to act in response to violence and harassment is widely recognised to be a crucial form of prevention. Authorities can play a crucial role in empowering people to intervene as bystanders; research by Our Watch has found that 79% of Australians want practical tips about ways to safely intervene when witnessing disrespect towards women and girls.ⁱⁱⁱ

'I was harassed by a man while I was waiting to be picked up from the station. He was screaming at me from the bus bay on the other side of the road around 8pm on a weekday. There were people around but nobody stepped in to do anything.' – Free to Be, Sydney map

TACKLING THE PROBLEM STARTS WITH PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ARE SAYING

Through *Free to Be*, Plan International Australia is providing young women with a platform to share their experiences and shape their city. We are inviting Sydney's authorities to join us and our Youth Activists in making the city safer for girls.

Almost all young women in Sydney agree that:

- They would feel safer if the city was designed with women's safety and wellbeing in mind (91%)
- City councils have a responsibility to take women's safety more seriously (96%)
- Public transport authorities should do more to make trains and buses safer for women (81%)
- A cultural shift in male behaviour is required to prevent street harassment (87.6%)

'I am scared to walk the streets of Sydney. The fear is always there. When I hear footsteps behind me, I speed up. When a car slows down next to me my heart skips a beat. When I see someone approaching me, I make a mental plan of what to do if something goes wrong.' – Milly, 16.

CREATING SAFER CITIES FOR GIRLS WORLDWIDE^{iv}

Free to Be is currently taking place in five cities around the world, including Sydney, Kampala, Lima, Delhi and Madrid, and is believed to be the most ambitious project to crowdsource data about street harassment ever undertaken. It complements Plan International's acclaimed Safer Cities for Girls program, which works with young women and decision-makers across the world to tackle violence and harassment in some of the world's most dangerous cities.

Delhi, India: Delhi has the highest rate of rape in India, accounting for 13% of crimes against women. Only 3% of girls reported always feeling safe when using public transportation in Delhi. Girls commonly experience fear, violence, and discrimination. Public transportation, particularly buses, was counted as among the most unsafe spaces for girls.

Kampala, Uganda: In Kampala, 80% of girls report feeling unsafe in public. Girls say they feel particularly vulnerable in markets, on the streets and in recreational centres due to high incidents of rape and theft. Girls feel particularly unsafe on public transportation, when walking, and when using passenger taxis and motorcycles (boda-boda).

Lima, Peru: Only 2% of girls surveyed in Lima said they always feel safe on public transport. Girls also felt uncomfortable walking on the streets. The notoriously high crime rate, poorly lit areas and lack of signage were major concerns for girls in Lima. Girls in Lima connected public and private expressions of violence against women and girls, explaining that high levels of domestic violence negatively affect their sense of safety in public spaces as well.

About Plan International's Safer Cities for Girls Program

Plan International's global Safer Cities for Girls Program works to tackle unequal power relations and challenge harmful social norms that perpetuate the insecurity and exclusion of girls in cities. The programme provides girls with a platform to discuss the issues they face and the opportunity to provide input into the development of their cities and works with governments and institutions, families and communities, and girls and boys themselves so they can become active citizens and effective change-makers.

In Vietnam's capital city Hanoi, girls are using a Minecraft to create a version of their city where they feel safe and included. Young women in Hanoi told our team in Vietnam about the range of dangers they face in their community. So Plan International and UN-Habitat joined forces to bring together our Safer Cities for Girls program and the popular game.

The girls have taken their designs to decision makers who have already committed to suggestions like including installing more street lights and building a fence around a deep canal that runs through the community.

'I've been able to contribute to building a community that is more beautiful, safer and friendlier for myself and for girls in general – and for the community as a whole.' – Anh, 15.

Report authorised by S. Legena, Plan International Australia.

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A Just world for Children
Equality for girls