

Cracking down on sex-based harassment in public

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New law will target those who harass women and girls in public because of their sex.

Everyone will be safer to walk the streets freely without fear of public sexual harassment after the government brought in a powerful new law today.

For far too long, women and girls in particular have been expected to endure obscene comments, threats of sexual violence, and unnecessary, threatening invasions of their personal space to intimidate them in public.

These behaviours can force women and girls to change their routes, routines and behaviour just to feel safe. The perpetrators can all too often leave their victims feeling anxious, shattering their confidence, and forcing them to stay on high alert just to go about their lives freely. Too often, when this behaviour goes unchecked, we know that it can form part of a wider pattern of behaviour involving more serious crimes.

This government will not tolerate this. We have declared violence against women and girls a national emergency and are using the full power of the state to tackle these crimes with the seriousness they deserve, stepping in early to stop harassment escalating into more serious violence.

The new sex-based harassment offence introduced today gives police stronger powers to act decisively. It covers intentional harassment directed at someone because of their sex including where perpetrators target women and girls in public places, including streets, parks, public transport, taxis, shops and other everyday spaces.

Crucially, the law, which began as a Private Members' Bill brought in by Greg Clark and Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, sees perpetrators receiving tougher consequences, including up to 2 years behind bars.

The government will work closely with police, frontline organisations, and campaign groups to ensure the new law is enforced robustly.

Police will follow new statutory guidance published today so the law is applied consistently across England and Wales, ensuring offenders have nowhere to hide and face real consequences.

Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, Jess Phillips, said:

The sad reality is that many women and girls have been cornered, leered at or shouted at in public, or have faced intimidating threats of violence.

Too often they've been made to feel like it's their problem to manage. That is not good enough.

Instead of forcing women and girls to change their behaviour, we are going after those who choose to target and intimidate them.

These new laws put the focus on perpetrators. If you harass someone in public because of their sex, it will not be tolerated and you can face a criminal record and up to 2 years behind bars.

Rose Caldwell, the CEO at Plan International UK, said:

Everyone deserves to move through public spaces without fear. For too long, girls and young women have been left alone to navigate harassment that chips away at their confidence, dignity and freedom. Today marks a long-overdue shift that will make a genuine difference to their lives.

As the Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Act comes into force, we now have clear guidance that names these behaviours for what they are: illegal and unacceptable. Girls shouldn't have to fear uninvited touching on public transport or accept that it's 'just the way things are' when they get catcalled on the street.

This is a win for all those who campaigned for safer streets and really matters in a world where we are seeing women and girls' rights increasingly under attack. We'll keep advocating to ensure victims feel safe to report this crime and continue banging the drum that this must be paired with prevention. This includes tackling misogyny early in our schools. Without addressing root causes of sexual harassment, we won't fix the system that holds us all back from a fairer world.

Georgia Theodoulou, Director of Advocacy at Our Streets Now, said:

As a grassroots organisation, we are extremely proud to have affected legal change in the UK, which is testament to the power of young campaigners and the MPs and lawyers who supported us over the years.

We know that whilst this sends a message that public sexual harassment will no longer be normalised for so many women and girls, the law alone will not change the problematic culture we still live in.

We will carry this success forward in our preventative education work with professionals and young people in the UK.

Michael Kill, CEO of Night Time Industries Association, said:

This is a significant and welcome step forward in tackling behaviour that has too often been normalised or dismissed. No one should feel unsafe or intimidated simply for going about their daily life, and it is right that the focus is now firmly on those who perpetrate this conduct rather than those who endure it.

From an industry perspective, particularly across the night-time economy, we recognise both the responsibility and the opportunity to support these measures. Venues, transport providers and security teams all play a vital role in creating safer public spaces, and clear legislation strengthens the framework we operate within.

However, legislation alone is not enough. Consistent enforcement, public awareness, and partnership between government, police and businesses will be key to making this meaningful in practice.

This must mark the beginning of a cultural shift where harassment is not tolerated anywhere, at any time.

Plan UK, Our Streets Now and organisations across the violence against women and girls sector have long called for stronger action on public sexual harassment, and today's commencement delivers on what campaigners have been urging for years.

This legislation reflects the tireless work of VAWG charities, survivors and advocates who have consistently highlighted the harm caused by public sexual harassment and pushed for meaningful change.

The rollout of the law is a key delivery milestone from the government's violence against women and girls strategy published in December, which focuses on prevention, early intervention and relentless action against offenders.

Other sweeping measures in the strategy include ensuring there are specialist rape and serious sexual offence teams in every police force to ensure rapists and serious sexual offenders are tracked down and brought to justice.

At the same time, the government is tackling violence before it starts, with new lessons to challenge misogyny and promote healthy relationships in schools, stronger guidance on teenage relationship abuse, and early intervention to challenge harmful attitudes among boys and young men.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cracking-down-on-sex-based-harassment-in-public>