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Part 3

Identities and lived experiences

6 Adolescent girls' experiences of street harassment: emotions, comments, impact, actions and the law

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Abstract

Street harassment (SH) is experienced by adolescent girls in ways that can affect their self-confidence, well-being and ability to learn. Our work contributes to the literature about street harassment of adolescents when other publications have been limited to harassment in school environments or online. Our multi-disciplinary team from psychology, social policy, linguistics, law and education analysed 118 street harassment reports recorded over a six-week period. The reports were made by children and young people in the UK aged 11–15 years from three secondary schools with 68 identifying as female. We found that adolescent girls show emotional responses that are noticeably different to that of boys, and that girls can construct their experiences of street harassment in ways that are distinctive. Girls can also comment and act in response to experiencing street harassment differently and can be protected in law through specific misogyny hate crime initiatives. We make recommendations for managing street harassment experiences in the interests of protecting children and young people from harm. We also suggest ways to promote adolescent girls' rights to be seen in society and be free from harassment from other members of the public.

Introduction

The prevalence and range of street harassment (SH) incidents as experienced by adolescents[1] is an understudied area. SH can be defined as harassment behaviour in public places occurring both on-street (Fileborn 2014; Logan 2015; Vera-Gray 2015; Wånggren 2016) and when using public transport (Logan 2015; Gekoski et al. 2017). SH includes a range of behaviours such as, "Threat of physical harm, staring or watching, shouting, following or stalking, indecent proposals, name calling and verbal abuse" (Deakin 2006, p. 378). SH can also be seen as an act of violence (Gardner 1995), a public health issue (Bucchianeri et al. 2014) and a precursor to violent crime (Logan 2015). The advantage of a multi-disciplinary team such as the authors in this chapter is to examine girls' SH experiences from different perspectives. This is because girls' behaviour, well-being, coping strategies, safety, ability to learn and behaviour can all be affected when out and about in public.

In this chapter, our team of academics from sociology, psychology, linguistics, law and education present a multi-disciplinary perspective on a study undertaken with three secondary schools in the UK. Both quantitative and qualitative data of adolescent girls is analysed to discuss the impact of SH experiences on emotions, well-being, safety, coping strategies and ability to learn. The study also included adolescent boys; however, the focus of this chapter is on the SH experiences of adolescent girls. In this regard, some mention is made of the findings about boys' experiences to discuss how girls' SH experiences appear distinctive. The chapter discusses findings relating to adolescent girls' emotions when experiencing SH and the comments they make about these experiences including what actions they can take. We also consider what the impact of SH on their education, and implications for how far SH is covered by UK law.

Emotional reactions, perceived safety and changed behaviour – a literature context

The SH of adolescent girls can be understood by looking at the literature about women's experiences of SH, which has been well documented. For example, Gardner (1995), one of the key studies to analyse public behaviour, reported their entire sample of 293 women had experienced SH with only nine of the women reporting that their experiences of SH were not 'troublesome'. Furthermore, 65 of the women reported making a 'notable life decision' following their experiences such as moving to a new house or changing jobs to avoid the perceived or actual harassment in public places that they had experienced. In this way, although SH is a common experience for many women, the impact of such experiences varies (Fileborn 2014). However, the *emotional* impact of SH is significant, and the literature has documented a range of emotional responses associated with SH in adult females ranging from annoyance to fear (Bowman 1993).

Characteristic of the studies about adult females is that a link between experiencing SH and subsequent negative emotions has been reported (Fairchild and Rudman 2008). Research suggests that fear is a common response to SH experiences. For example, adult females are more likely to report experiencing fear following rude behaviour in public places and these experiences have an impact on their subsequent well-being compared to adult males (Bastomski and Smith 2017). Although Bastomski and Smith (2017) note that it is hard to tell without further research whether the experiences between adult females and males are quantifiably different or whether these differences reflect variance in how the event is perceived, other research has reported that it is important to recognise that adult males also experience SH (Laniya 2005).

While it is beyond the remit of this chapter to cover the differences between girls' and boys' experiences of SH, this is discussed in our paper Betts et al. (2019).

Davidson et al. (2016) report an association between women's experiences of SH and their anxiety, with greater experiences of SH associated with elevated experiences of anxiety. Davidson et al. (2016) explore the mediating role of perceived public safety in both busy public places and isolated public places. The results highlight that while experiences of SH are likely to lead to a reduction in perceived levels of safety in isolated places and in busy public places, only perceived public safety in isolated public places predicted elevated levels of anxiety. Therefore, it seems that having experienced SH, women's perceptions of public safety are changed and that this is particularly impactful in isolated environments.

Moreover, evidence shows that the emotional responses associated with women experiencing SH can result in them changing their behaviour to avoid future incidents (Bowman 1993). Bowman, in one of the only studies about SH as social behaviour phenomenon, also discusses how although women may fear SH, their reactions can be considered to be counterproductive. For example, women often ignore or give the impression that they are ignoring the situation. Although Bowman (1993) suggests the reasons for such behaviours may be complex, one possible motive is embarrassment while another is not wanting to 'reward' the person engaging in the behaviour by providing an obvious response. Therefore, SH also prompts changes in behaviour so women do not put themselves in situations where they may experience harassment again.

While studies have explored the emotional impact of experiences of SH in adult women, fewer studies have considered the emotional impact of SH on young people. Recent research with women aged 14–21 in the UK highlighted that young women experience similar emotional

responses to SH to those reported by adult women (Southgate and Russell 2018). For example, feeling embarrassed and ashamed because they were drawn attention to; disorientated and confused because of the harassment; anger; fear because of how the situation may develop and helplessness. There is also evidence that the emotional response to SH occurs in cultures other than the UK. For example, when SH was operationalised and assessed as 'Eve teasing' (a euphemism in South Asia for sexual harassment in public places), Talboys et al. (2017) reported that adolescents and young adults – including both boys and girls from Punjab, India who experienced 'Eve teasing' – also experienced negative emotions. Specifically, of the 36 participants who experienced 'Eve teasing', the majority reported feelings of anger (61%) and feelings of shame or humiliation (47%). Participants also reported experiencing fear, worry or tension following experiencing 'Eve teasing'. Talboys et al. (2017) argue that their findings can be explained by the normative beliefs or victim blaming and the perceived association between 'Eve teasing' and more severe forms of sexual violence. In this way, the context of women's SH literature offers insight into the experiences of adolescent girls in the UK.

Street harassment and public safety – legal and educational contexts

Recognising SH as a safety issue for adolescent girls when out in public is critical. However, even though the UK is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and enshrines 'best interests of the child' considerations in both family[2] and criminal law[3] contexts and through the establishment of the Children's Commissioner[4], actually *listening* to children and adolescents still is not the norm. For example, Gearon (2019) has highlighted that the problems of the state response to child trafficking are immigration and prosecution-led rather than child-focused, leading to further victimisation of the children.

Similarly, listening to what adolescent girls have to say about how they understand SH incidents is important in addressing the problem.

Crime statistics in relation to children and adolescents regarding SH are sparse. Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports rely on both recorded crime data and Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) questionnaire responses, but both are limited. Recorded crime data comes from police forces (who do not all record crime in the same way) and requires a report to the police and the police to record it as a crime, so unreported crime and harassing behaviour short of criminal conduct is missed. The CSEW relies on a nationally representative sample survey asking people about their experience of crime in the preceding 12 months, but its comparatively small child (aged 10–15) section (around 2,398 compared to 33,735 adults, ONS (2020)) makes extrapolation difficult and it only collects experiences of serious offences (violence causing injury and theft, but not sexual offences) (ONS 2019b). Lower-level street harassment and sexual misconduct are not caught by the CSEW and the apparent tendency of respondents to downplay incidents (79% of respondents perceived the violence they suffered as not a crime in ONS (2019)) suggests that the CSEW could be hampered in gathering information on lower-level incidents by the label 'crime'. Further, the ONS statistics are not routinely broken down by gender.

Gallagher et al. (1998) examined victimisation outside the home, whether criminal or not, but the questionnaires focused on fear, thus potentially missing out behaviour which did not result in this emotional response, and there has been no follow-up study in the following 30 years.

The study discussed in this chapter seeks to establish what SH problems adolescents face and how they react to these. This is because adolescents, particularly but not exclusively groomed ones, do not necessarily react negatively to unacceptable behaviour. Understanding SH is

therefore difficult for adolescents. Furthermore, adults need to understand and properly categorise what they are being told by adolescents about SH. Adolescents' experiences feed into the decision whether to criminalise, and also into the criminal justice system response to non-criminal behaviour which may in fact be pre-criminal (for example, identifying vulnerable children to target for exploitation) and society's response to the behaviour, even if it is not criminalised. There is a significant gender aspect to this (whether girls are targeted by particular behaviour and particular crimes, whether they report differently and whether they respond differently) which also informs whether adult responses need to differ. The responsibility to listen to adolescent girls' experiences of SH is therefore paramount.

Safety is also a significant aspect to the impact of SH experiences for adolescent girls regarding their education. Learning can be configured as a characteristic human condition, but specific circumstances (both internal and external) are more likely to support and facilitate learning. While 'natural learning' (Knowles et al. 2011) is a default state of living and occurs continuously "as the individual interacts spontaneously with the environment" (Knowles et al. 2011, p. 215), the ability to learn or study can be disrupted by different negative events, and this includes SH experiences. Bandura (1977) emphasises calm or low emotional arousal is more likely to produce success in learning, and Wallace (2007, p. 107) claims that it is important to build "self-concept in order to…achieve high performance" since learning cannot take place when young people feel de-motivated.

As a signatory to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the UK has signalled its commitment to providing each child with automatic access to education which will "develop a child's personality, talents and abilities". However, to profit from education, young people need to be in a state of learning readiness. Such readiness has become more significant in

contemporary education as increasingly schools require learners to be independent and to exhibit "agency (intentional behaviour) in a learning environment" (Khan et al. 2010, p. 95). In this regard, events which occur before learning are critical as these episodes may impact on a student's emotional well-being, their personal feelings of self-efficacy and their capacity to learn. The study discussed below explores the impact of SH on adolescent girls' ability to positively engage with education, since SH can undermine their ability to learn.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to examine adolescents' SH experiences. The objectives were to explore adolescents' emotional response following SH, to analyse their descriptions and reflections of SH and to consider the implications of these experiences for their education and legal rights. We undertook this study in two stages. Firstly, adolescents were asked to report SH to the team using either a bespoke mobile app or a paper copy of a print-out of the app. They were asked to indicate any SH incidents for example, whether there was any name calling or if any physical contact occurred, to report their emotions using the app about the SH incidents for example feeling 'active', 'frightened', 'smiley', 'upset' and to add any further description about the SH experiences in their own words. Secondly, two focus groups were held to explore further how adolescents understood SH. The study produced three datasets: reporting the incidents and emotions, free-text descriptions, focus group transcripts.

Our sampling strategy was as follows. We used a convenience sample of schools known through professional teaching contacts of the research team. We then only included those who volunteered to report SH using the app, which means that while we cannot claim a representative sample took part, the findings are still indicative of the SH experiences of adolescents in the UK.

Three secondary school took part in the reporting of incidents and experiences, and two of these also participated in the focus groups. The schools were from the East Midlands and London, and using the English Indices of Deprivation 2015 (Gill 2015), the schools were 'inner-city very deprived', 'semi-rural deprived' and 'suburban very affluent' (thereby suggesting SH is not confined to deprived areas only). A total of 118 adolescents aged 11–15 years of which 68 identified as female (a further 43 identified as male and 7 did not give their gender) took part in reporting SH incidents and experiences over a six-week period using multiple-choice questions (MCQs) with additional free-text space for further descriptions. As part of the data collected about the incidents, adolescents were asked to report their emotional response to the SH incident/s using a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (PANAS-C) (Ebesutani et al. 2012). The PANAS-C is a short measure of positive effect and negative effect. Participants were presented with a series of emotions as MCQs and asked to indicate which ones they felt following the episode of harassment. Informed consent was gained from the headteachers, parents and carers and the adolescent students. We also ran school assemblies to explain the project, provide an opportunity for questions, inform of rights to confidentiality and anonymity and encourage talking with families, tutors or ChildLine for support if necessary. Although our study featured boys and girls (Betts et al. 2019), as SH affects not only girls (Deakin 2006), this chapter focuses on the SH of adolescent girls of secondary school age.

Our sampling of the focus groups was from two of the three schools which had taken part in the reports. The schools acted as gatekeepers in asking if any of the adolescents who had made a SH report also wanted to be in a focus group. Using additional information and consent forms specifically for the focus groups, 13 adolescents took part, nine from an all girls' school ('Ash[5]')

and four at a mixed-sex school ('Beech') where three participants were girls. The semi-structured focus group schedules covered: what 'SH' means, why people might harass others, whether being able to report SH was useful and what could be done if SH is experienced. Digital recordings by members of the research team were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The focus group and interview transcripts were analysed thematically (Mason 2002; Nowell et al. 2017) using a social constructionist epistemology (Burr 1995; Henwood 2014) to capture the thoughts and feelings of the participants (Sutton and Austin 2015). There were three main findings which showed the distinctiveness of SH for adolescent girls: (1) immediate effects of experiencing SH; (2) being able to identify SH from experiencing an incident and (3) the potential to disrupt their education.

The analysis from different academic disciplines shows how the SH of adolescent girls can be informed by multi-disciplinary team (Silberzahn et al. 2018; Urbanska et al. 2019) and promoting how social sciences and the humanities can work together (Arjomand 2016; Albert et al. 2017). The importance of a multi-disciplinary approach is that it lends itself to a phenomenon as complex as SH. SH has implications for psychology, social policy, education, law and linguists, and the analysis presented here from each academic discipline gives a multi-faceted approach.

Findings

The reports – the language of managing SH incidents

The emotional impact of experiencing SH in the UK was examined (Betts et al. 2019). The data revealed that adolescents reported experiencing very few positive emotions such as 'happy',

‘glad’ ‘proud’ following SH incidents. Both girls and boys reported experiencing negative emotions such as ‘frightened’, ‘disgusted’, ‘ashamed’ following incidents of SH, but the level of negative emotions was significantly greater in girls (as discussed in greater detail in Betts et al. 2019). However, when considering the findings, it is important to recognise that during adolescence, boys tend to increasingly restrict their emotional expression (Polce-Lynch et al. 2001). This demonstrates how adolescent girls’ experiences of SH are associated with a range of negative emotions.

Participants were also invited to provide a written description when reporting an incident in the study: ‘If you would like to tell us more about what happened and how you felt, please use your own words to describe the incident’. Of the 118 reports submitted, 61 included a free-text description. These descriptions averaged at 24.8 words in length, and around half of all girls (38/68) provided a description. ‘Narrative’ responses such as these “offer insights into people’s private worlds” (Pavlenko 2007, p. 164) which are inaccessible to purely quantitative or MCQ-based methods. In addition, the language choices that the adolescent girls used when describing the SH event re-constructs their experience, providing an insight into the “meanings they attach to those experiences” (Barkhuizen 2015, p. 176). Analysis of the language used in the free-text descriptions offers unique insight into: (i) the sexualised dialogues experienced by adolescent girls, (ii) the way in which the girls describe their responses to the harassment and (iii) how the quantitative and qualitative data collected can be triangulated. Of particular interest is the way adolescent girls used coping strategies following SH incidents.

Details of sexualised dialogue were distinctive to adolescent girls’ SH, and the dialogue details are not homogenous in nature. This extract shows a 15-year-old girl describing a taxi driver approaching her in the street:

> It was 5am and I was going to France and I was walking the vehicle slowed down to my speed and he asked me to go inside his car he showed me his taxi badge, convincing he was a taxi driver. He said to me he wanted to keep me 'safe' I had said no 3 times and he shrugged as if it was my fault like I was losing out. and then he drove out.

Although not explicitly sexual, this is unambiguously predatory, with the taxi driver attempting to coax the girl into his car. Whatever his motives, the girl indicated she felt 'frightened' and 'disgusted' at his approach in the MCQs. This sort of harassment is not widely reported in the literature on the harassment of adult women, and so may be unique to the harassment of adolescent girls. For example, studies of SH experienced by adult women does not indicate many men offering to 'keep them safe' (e.g. Kearl 2014; Mullany and Trickett 2018; Kearl et al. 2019). Promises to keep a young girl 'safe' fits within Lorenzo-Dus et al.'s (2016, p. 44) model of grooming discourse under 'deceptive trust development', in which "groomers hide their ulterior motive of wanting to engage the target in sexual activities by discursively building a trust-based bond with him/her" (Lorenzo-Dus 2019, p. 17). The fact that she 'said no 3 times' also suggests that there were multiple attempts by the man to get the girl into his car.

This extract, also submitted by another 15-year-old girl, shows a different sort of verbal harassment:

> I was walking to my friends' house and I got horned at and I looked and two guys (men) asked me 'how old are you babe?' It made me feel completely disgusted.

Here, the harassment is more explicitly sexualised, not least by the reference to the girl using the term of endearment 'babe'. Terms of address such as this are very commonly used by men to passing female strangers in "an attempt to conjure and impose a fleeing moment of heterosexual intimacy" (Bailey 2016, p. 599). However, requests for age are *not* commonly used in the

harassment of adult women; the combination of such a request and the word ‘babe’ that makes this incident distinctive for adolescent girls. It may be assumed that asking about the girl’s age to identify whether or not she is of the age of sexual consent (16 years of age in the UK). This suggests sexual intent pervades the entire exchange and is particularly predatory. This extract also reports a 14-year-old girl being complimented and asked her age:

> When me and my best mate was walking some man in a car went by us, turned around and came back to follow us in his car. He said ‘How old are you’ my mate said ‘why’ and he said your beautiful so then I rang my mum and we tried running away.

Compliments are an extremely common way in which men harass women and thereby “reinforce the right of all men to be rightful proprietors and legitimate commentators in public” (Gardner 1995, p. 147). ‘Compliments’ such as this are perceived by adult women as “rude and an invasion of privacy” (Kissling 1991, p. 453) and “objectively degrading, objectifying and frequently threatening in nature” (Sullivan et al. 2010, p. 238). Such effects and motives are exacerbated when the target of the harassment is an adolescent girl; during adolescence there is a “confusion between what is ordinary, what is complimentary and what is dangerous” (Vera-Gray 2017, p. 132). The analysis of these three extracts alone shows how SH of adolescent girls is distinct from that of adult women, while concerning in and of themselves, could be the precursor to much more serious crimes.

Although the text in the previous quote (14-year-old girl being complimented and asked her age) does not explicitly express any feeling or emotional response, the fact that the girls ran away and called their parents as a means of managing the incident indicates their feelings indirectly. However, when we look at the accompanying MCQ, the girl indicated that she felt ‘upset’, ‘scared’, ‘frightened’ and ‘afraid’ by the incident. This range of negative emotions emphasises

the need to ask adolescents directly how incidents made them feel rather than assuming they would disclose it in accounts or statements about an event. Reports by others also shed more light on this:

> on the way back from school me and my friend Amy[6] was going home and a car was beep I was scared

> people just called me names that made me really upset

> it was just banta with my friends apart from one thing

When compared and triangulated with their accompanying MCQs, these quotes provide important insights into disclosure patterns of adolescent girls. In the first quote, the girl reports being 'scared', the only emotion selected in the MCQs. In others, however (such as the second quote), the girl expresses feeling 'really upset' in the written account, but had earlier responded to the multiple-choice questions that she felt a range of additional, perhaps more concerning, emotions: 'afraid', 'ashamed', 'frightened', 'lonely', 'miserable', 'moody', 'nervous', 'sad', 'scared' and 'upset'. In this case, saying that she felt 'upset' hides a number of emotional reactions that she disclosed when asked in a different way. The third quote is particularly telling, describing SH as 'just banta', while indicating she felt 'blue' in the MCQs, and reporting experiencing *five* types of harassment, selecting that 'I was called names', 'I was laughed at', 'I was pushed/hit', 'I was tripped up' and 'I had my bag taken/grabbed'. Attributing five different co-occurring behaviours to 'just banta with my friends' therefore appears problematic, with the 'apart from one thing', suggesting she distinguishes one event as not being 'banta'. By labelling the incidents as 'banta', the girl is possibly mitigating, downplaying and normalising what happened. The use of euphemistic terms such as 'banta' to describe potentially traumatic

experiences can reflect a confusion as to whether threatening and dangerous behaviours will be taken seriously by adults (e.g. Hlavka 2014). It is important to have an understanding of the ways in which language is used to encode and attach meaning to experiences of adolescent girls' SH. The girls who provided free-text extracts also often gave details of how they physically responded to and used coping strategies when experiencing SH.

> me and friend was from school then a car stopped and papped by a man in a car so we walked away

> I was in a shop in [town] and this man started staring at me and my friends and when we were about to leave he started to get his things and he started to follow us we ran away and we lost him

These two extracts show the girls managing SH by walking or running away. This mirrors the most common 'coping strategies' that adult women use as 'passive' (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Saunders et al. 2016) or 'avoidance' (Magley 2002), to reduce, rather than escalate, potential danger or threat. This shows how avoidance or evasion as the primary response to SH is a coping strategy that girls develop at a young age.

The free-text descriptions also captured insights into public safety at all levels of SH behaviour, whether 'low level', or more serious, criminal incidents. By cross-referencing both the narrative text MCQs for each report with the elements of specific offences, it was possible to establish which incidents were criminal and which fell outside the law. It was also possible to show how girls' SH experiences are distinctive from that of boys', as girls were more likely to report SH using the app (Table 6.1).[7]

<COMP: Place Table 6.1 Here>

The types of crime experienced by adolescent girls and boys were also were also different (Table 6.2):

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While boys were more likely to be the victims of street harassment which can be classified as acquisitive offences or driving offences, girls were much more likely to be the victims of minor public order offences and slightly more likely to be victims of minor offences against the person. Only one report each of sexual assault and threatening with a bladed article, and both victims were girls. While Deakin's (2006) analysis of Gallagher et al.'s (1998) results also found that girls suffered more harassment and sexual offending, it was also found that harassment formed the bulk of victimisation of both genders.[9]

The reports of non-criminal behaviour bore out the same pattern with perpetrators more ready to approach and interact with girls than boys. There were similar levels of being followed and/or stared at in concerning situations (three girls, two boys), but only girls reported being approached and spoken to. It was also only girls (three) who reported being filmed or photographed, a change from Gallagher et al.'s research (1998), and likely driven by the proliferation of mobile phones with cameras, as well as the ability to use and share images.

Currently, even where an offence can be identified, it is often not possible to prosecute due to the paucity of evidence, particularly when the perpetrator is a stranger as highlighted by Bowman (1993). Where the incident is serious, such as a robbery, the police may be willing to devote time and resources to investigating it, but the tendency of young people to underplay the importance of incidents makes reporting is unlikely in the first place; adults need to be able to bridge this reporting gap and support young people to understand what has happened to them. Police investigation is significantly less likely when the incident amounts to, at most, a minor public

order matter. However, the incidents of girls being approached may well be precursors to offending, for example, child abduction, child sexual offences or exploitation. Adults could help prevent grooming and victimisation (Turnbull et al. 2012; James et al. 2017), but this is dependent on listening to adolescents, understanding SH and knowing how to act. As Bowman (1993) argues, the law can fail to support where SH incidents occur, leaving the safety of adolescent girls at risk.

The focus groups – confusion, unpredictability and a negative impact on learning

The focus groups with adolescent girls took place at two of the participating schools: 'Ash' (an all girl's school) and 'Beech' (a mixed-sex school).

Firstly, SH was described in terms of confusion and fear:

> …probably that scared…you just want to get out of that place ('Mia' yr8 'Beech').

The girls described SH as a traumatic experience with the potential to harm, as reported by adult women (Vera-Gray 2015, 2017; Jones et al. 2018). Feeling confused can follow experiencing unexpected, disturbing and traumatic incidents (Davidson et al. 2016), affecting the ability of individuals to process emotion (Clapp et al. 2015). The confusion caused by experiencing SH is therefore significant for adolescent girls.

Secondly, SH was seen as unpredictable public disorder incidents that can happen anywhere and at any time:

> …you could erm be street harassed any time… ('Ayah' yr9 'Ash').

Avoiding what seem to be unsafe routes can be about *feeling* safer, rather than necessarily *being* safer when out in public (Buckley 2016). However, the girls regarded limiting their movements

in public to try and minimise the risk of experiencing SH as neither healthy nor preferable (Fernandez 2016), and possibly 'victim blaming' (Vera-Gray 2017). However, in managing their experiences, the girls emphasised recognising and naming SH:

> Not many people know how to deal with being street harassed…if I got street harassed I wouldn't of classified it as SH I would of just thought it was a random thing ('Hana' yr7 'Ash').

The naming of traumatic experiences is a political act (Swartz 2017). The danger of *not* identifying SH is that of accepting incidents as normal experiences when out in public, with students developing potential risky coping strategies from becoming 'desensitised' (Mellgren et al. 2018). Two girls from 'Ash' school commented:

> …as a teenager, you might just brush it under the carpet thinking it's a minor issue… ('Barbara' yr8 'Ash')

> …yeah I think that that's right I think it's quite easy to sort of think 'Oh this happens, I'll just shrug it off' or 'I'm not too sure what to do so I'll carry on' kind of thing ('Chloe' yr8 'Ash').

Other ways of managing SH involved reporting incidents to the police as 'Amy' from 'Ash' school described:

> Do you know how the police might respond if you were to report street harassment? (Researcher)

> Erm if you described how the person looked they could go on a search… ('Barbara' yr 8 'Ash')

> Erm my situation wasn't taken seriously. I was with my little sister and my friend and she was also younger than me… ('Amy' yr7 'Ash')

> …you informed the police did you? (Researcher)
>
> Yeah but nothing happened (‘Amy’ yr7 ‘Ash’)
>
> And nothing happened? And what did they say to you?.. (Researcher)
>
> Nothing really. They just said like ‘we’re on it go home’ and stuff, and nothing happened. They didn’t contact us back or anything (‘Amy’ yr7 ‘Ash’).

The girls from ‘Ash’ school were not confident in reporting to the police, and much more likely to speak with their parents or friends in the first instance (Hamilton et al. 2016). They regarded talking about their experiences with people they knew and trusted to be a healthy way of dealing with the distress of SH (Malin et al. 2019):

> I would say that if you do get street harassed that erm you shouldn’t let it affect you like in your later life you should still stay confident when you’re going out and about and still be happy when you’re going like to places (‘Sara’ yr9 ‘Ash’)
>
> …Erm you should always talk to people if you feel like erm your upset or if you if it happens like frequently you should talk to someone and hopefully sort it out (‘Sara’ yr9 ‘Ash’)
>
> Erm I think that erm like be friends with the right people because if something happens to you then you need someone to talk to or someone to be there for you (‘Niyati’ yr7 ‘Ash’).

Similarly, the focus group at ‘Beech’ school expressed the same views with an emphasis on being able to trust the right people:

> I’m sure everyone’s got like a good friend that that they know wouldn’t judge them on everything, and if they don’t have that, there’s like parents and family and stuff, that may be a cousin or sommat like that. That you know someone that, that you’re close to them, you

> know won't like, after finding that out, like they won't leave you, don't want to stay and help you through it… ('Lilly' yr 7 'Beech')

> …like a sibling… ('fire-breathing-dragon' yr 8 'Beech')

> …they want to help you and stay with you through it ('Lilly' yr 7 'Beech').

> …Erm, yeh. Don't be afraid to tell anyone ('fire-breathing-dragon' yr8 'Beech').

> If they, if you tell someone if that if there's like a friend if they, like, if they were truly close to you they wouldn't change their mind, they wouldn't say anything like, they wouldn't tell anyone, they would just like keep it like a secret, and like, they wouldn't want you to get hurt… ('Mia' yr 8 'Beech').

Reluctance in contacting the police included not thinking SH was serious enough to be reported, they feared being blamed for over-reacting and they were not confident they would be believed about their experiences. As Vera-Gray (2017) writes, reporting to the police can be disappointing, compounding the distress of the original harassment incident for the individual. Thirdly, both focus groups also demonstrated SH had a direct (and often immediate) impact on adolescents affecting their learning. The girls discussed a heightened emotional state, and that the incidents made them feel 'really scared and worried', 'confused' and 'really annoyed', all of which counter the calm state, which Bandura (1977) claims is more suited for productive and positive learning. Others stated SH caused them to feel 'sad', 'disgusted', 'upset' and 'bad about yourself', at odds with Wallace's assertion (2007) for the need to have a positive sense of self and your personal abilities when learning. As 'Mia' and 'Lilly' at 'Beech' school commented, SH incidents were not easily forgotten and can lead to very negative thinking and harmful behaviour.

> …days or like months…it might like flash back into your mind, you might just start thinking about it again ('Mia' yr8 'Beech')

> YP1: And the thing is you'll start thinking about like if street harassment or something does happen to you, then you don't speak to someone about it, and you don't tell anyone, then you, and then you're always thinking about it, you'd just be like ashamed of it, because you might think, and especially if its like happened to you more than once, you would like start to think why do people like pick on me or something [inaudible] and stuff, that would start to like self-harm and suicide and stuff like that ('Lilly' yr7 'Beech')

> …So you need to like tell people… ('Lilly' yr7 'Beech')

> …And then if you don't have many friends anyway, like if that does happen to someone like that doesn't have any friends, then that could lead to like self-harming ('Mia' yr8 'Beech').

Furthermore, these feelings had the potential to resurface and, by distracting, continue to exert a negative impact on learning readiness. This high level of emotional turmoil did not help adolescents to learn, and their comments indicate SH left them feeling shaken and preoccupied with the exchange.

Interestingly, the girls at 'Beech' school appreciated they may need some time to recover,

> Until you're like ready to talk about it ('Fire-breathing-dragon' yr8 'Beech'),

and even considered that specialist help might be necessary,

> speak to someone about it…a bit like a therapist…never be afraid to talk ('Fire-breathing-dragon' yr8 'Beech'),

> Yeh. Don't bottle it up cause it doesn't help ('Mia' yr8 'Beech').

Conclusions

Significant aspects emerge from examining how adolescent girls experience SH. The negative emotions experienced by adolescent girls following SH incidents are more severe than those of boys, and the SH incidents experienced by girls also appear different to that of boys (Betts et al. 2019), for example, the incidents reported were more likely to be criminal than those reported by boys, with girls only reporting being spoken to or being filmed or photographed. Furthermore, girls can 'mask' their negative feelings. This indicates that SH puts their safety and well-being at risk due to the impact of SH, for example being asked their age, with obvious sexual connotations, is not something reported by adult women. While their coping strategies are similar to that of adult women, girls only respond with avoidance or evasion. The confusion experienced following SH incidents, and the unpredictability of when and where SH might occur emphasises the difficulties for girls in developing successful coping strategies. Of most concern is that of the impact experiencing SH can have on learning, namely disruption and distraction. If, as Kramer (cited in Rogers 1961, p. xiii) asserts, self-actualisation is the highest order of learning and being, then reporting SH incidents is to start a hugely positive response. It is the role of parents, teachers, academics, educators, law enforcement and adult members of the community to listen, support and address the risks that SH poses for adolescent girls.

Endnotes

[1] In our study, 'adolescent' refers to children ages 11–15 years.

[2] Children Act 1989 s. 1.

[3] Children and Young Persons Act 1933 s. 44(1).

[4] Children Act 2004 Part 1.

[5] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the individual participants and their respective schools; the pseudonyms for the individual participants were self-selected by those at ‘Beech’ school and ascribed to those at ‘Ash’.

[6] All names used in these reports are pseudonyms.

[7] There were also seven reporters who either did not identify as a particular gender or chose not to give their gender.

[8] Three of the reports appeared to be of the same incident, all experienced by girls.

[9] Vehicle-based behaviour was not captured by Gallagher et al. (1998).

Table 6.1 Breakdown of reports of crime by gender

	Girls	Boys
Reported SH using the app	68 (57% of all reports)	43 (36% of all reports)
Reported incident amounted to a possible crime	32 (47% of girls’ reports, 27% of all reports)	19 (44% of boys’ reports, 16% of all reports)

Table 6.2 Breakdown of crime reports by crime category and gender

Offence	Girls	Boys
Minor public order – s. 4, 4A or 5 Public Order Act 1986 (verbal)	20	5
Assault/battery/harassment (physical)	8[8]	4
Sexual assault	1	0
Threatening with a bladed article	1	0
Attempted/full theft/robbery	2	7
Careless/dangerous driving	–	3
Totals	32	19

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