Cymorth i Ferched Cymru
Welsh Women's Aid

NO GREY AREA

PHASE 2

No Grey Area Survey Report by Welsh Women's Aid

Introduction

This report discusses and contains examples of sexual harassment. If you or anyone you know needs support, help is available to you now. The Live Fear Free Helpline can provide confidential advice or support around domestic abuse, sexual violence or violence against women. It is available 24/7, 7 days a week. Call 0808 80 10 800, text 07860077333 or email info@livefearfreehelpline.wales. You can also access the Live Fear Free Helpline online chat by heading to: https://www.gov.wales/live-fear-free/contact-live-fear-free.

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue across the UK, and Wales is no exception.

This report presents findings from Phase 2 of the No Grey Area survey into sexual harassment, which gathered data on the prevalence, impact, and responses to public sexual harassment in Wales. Both quantitative statistics and qualitative experiences from survey respondents are included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This study aims to shed light on the widespread nature of harassment, the societal and institutional responses, and the lived experiences of victims to contribute towards creating change that lasts through a whole-systems approach.

The first phase of this project took place in 2020-2021 focussing solely on workplace sexual harassment. The findings showed that four out of five, or 81% of women in Wales (157 respondents) shared that they had experienced sexual harassment at work on at least one occasion, although it was found that a higher percentage than this provided details of harassment in subsequent questions in the survey. This indicates that although the majority of respondents acknowledge their experiences to be harassment, there are others who are still in a 'grey area' where they are unsure or unaware that their experiences constituted sexual harassment.[1] There are many reasons why a survivor may not recognise sexual harassment, and this can be because of a number of factors such as an acceptance at a society level

1. https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/No-Grey-Area-Survey-Report.pdf

for inappropriate behaviour and a lack of understanding of what sexual harassment is. The impact that was uncovered from sexual harassment in one area of life was profound and the ripple effect into other areas of survivors lives was clear. This is a key reason for continuing this work to gain a greater understanding of the scale of the problem in other areas of society and why it has evolved to look at public sexual harassment.

Public sexual harassment can include a range of behaviours, including unwanted comments, gestures, physical advances, and intimidation in public spaces. The issue is deeply rooted in societal attitudes, power dynamics, and inadequate legal protections. While recent efforts have been made to address the problem, many individuals continue to face harassment with limited avenues for justice or support.

Last October, the UK Government announced new legal duties for employers to anticipate when sexual harassment may occur and take reasonable steps to prevent it. Whilst the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act was announced as new protections to prevent harassment from taking place, the update did not include the right for individuals to bring claims against employers who were failing in their preventative duty.[2] It only allowed cases where sexual harassment had already happened. A breach of this duty can result in an uplift of compensation by 25%, but places no consequences on the employer as a result of not taking preventative steps prior to a civil case of sexual harassment.

The protections provided by the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act however did give the European Human Rights Commission the power to take enforcement action where evidence is found that organisations are failing to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. This is different to a domestic case and will allow enforcement action to be taken whether or not any sexual harassment cases have occurred. Employers are able to raise their concerns via the Equality and Human Rights Commission's whistleblowing function.[3] However, there is a concern that this is a process that is completely inaccessible to survivors.

Why this research is important

Research on public sexual harassment is important for several reasons. First, it helps to quantify the prevalence of the issue, providing data that can inform policymakers, police, and campaign groups. Without evidence of the scale of the problem, it can continue to be dismissed or unfairly labelled a low-level issue, which leads to inadequate responses.

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-protections-from-sexual-harassment-come-into-force
3 https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/whistleblowing#report

Second, this research amplifies the voices of survivors, many of whom may not have had the opportunity to share their experiences otherwise. Understanding the personal impact of harassment through qualitative data is essential in creating meaning behind this drive for collective change and demonstrating the urgency of addressing the issue.

Third, investigating public sexual harassment can contribute to the development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies. By identifying the problem and listening to survivors experiences and expertise, interventions can be put in place to target this behaviour. This can come from a range of measures such as public awareness campaigns and stronger enforcement of anti-harassment policies.

However, when discussing data in relation to all forms of violence against women and girls, we must always acknowledge that survivors do not always come forward and disclose their lived experiences. Survivors often fear the repercussions of speaking out, whether through stigmas that remain within our society today, or a fear of a criminal justice system that retraumatises survivors through systems that are not trauma informed. It is vital that we acknowledge all survivors, whether they choose to disclose their experiences or not.

This research plays a crucial role in shifting societal norms. By bringing attention to the issue, it creates conversations about acceptable behaviour in public spaces and challenges deeply ingrained attitudes that normalise or trivialise harassment. To create true change that lasts, there needs to be a shift in those attitudes which only comes through collective awareness, and studies like this are vital in driving progress toward a culture that no longer accepts this behaviour.

Key findings

Prevalence of public sexual harassment

Of the 148 responses, a significant majority (92%, n=133) reported experiencing public sexual harassment at some point in their lives. This increase compared to the 81% that experienced sexual harassment at work [4] demonstrates how prevalent this is throughout society. Sexual harassment is a problem that is not limited to one area of a survivor's life.

Incidents ranged from verbal harassment (74%, n=101), non-verbal harassment (26%, n=36) physical assault (80%, n=109) and cyber harassment (24%, n=32) and took place in a variety of locations.

4 https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/No-Grey-Area-Survey-Report.pdf

74%
Verbal harassment

26%
Non-verbal harassment

24%
Cyber harassment

80%
Physical assault

The most common locations for harassment included public transport, streets, and nightlife venues. Notably, a considerable proportion of incidents occurred in the daytime, reinforcing that this is not a hidden issue and dismantling the myth that this form of abuse only takes place at night.

In addition to our survey responses, the data from our Live Fear Free Helpline (LFFH) emphasises the scale and severity of sexual harassment in Wales.

From April 2022 to March 2025, we have had 1,463 contacts who have faced harassment or stalking.

Within the last year (April 2024 – March 2025), there have been 335 contacts who have experienced harassment. These contacts exemplify what can happen if harassment goes unchecked and can intensify into extremely dangerous behaviour, with 5% of these contacts also reporting death threats, and 6% of these contacts receiving a refuge referral. These records also demonstrate who the perpetrator is likely to be, with 78% of contacts reporting that their perpetrator was their ex-partner.

Reporting and institutional response

Only a small proportion of survivors reported incidents of sexual harassment with an overwhelming 77% (n=105) of respondents saying they did not report incidents of sexual harassment.

Figure 1: ‘Did you report the incident(s) of sexual harassment?’ chart

Only 3% (n=4) of respondents reported the incident and further action was taken. This small number is further supported by the 10% (n=13) of respondents that reported, but no action was taken. Some of the reasons cited for non-reporting were; fear of not being believed, concerns about retaliation, and doubts about institutional effectiveness.

“workplace not reported, in public space did report was investigated then dropped”

Many respondents indicated a lack of trust in reporting systems and a lack of clarity around the reporting process, with some expressing frustration over prolonged investigations and unsatisfactory outcomes.

“I was harassed as a child in a bus station I told a steward they shrugged their shoulders and did nothing so I was scared and never told anyone subsequently”

A subset of respondents noted that when they reported incidents to workplaces or university authorities, responses varied widely, with some institutions taking proactive measures while others dismissed complaints.

"Reported the incidents in the workplace. It was reported and accepted as banter by the perpetrator. I was then put on performance review by the perpetrator and ended up leaving the role I had loved and had held for 10 years. The perpetrator was new to the company. I had never made a report about anyone else. I did not report the other incidents."

When workplaces and institutions do not support survivors in their reports, it inevitably leads to a reduction in reporting, leaving the pervasive issue of sexual harassment unchecked. It also leaves survivors feeling a lack of justice and can lead to further feelings of invalidation.

Psychological and social impact

We know from anecdotal data and the findings from No Grey Area: Phase 1 that the impact of sexual harassment goes far beyond the immediate response to the behaviour. There are several psychological and social impacts that can last for significant periods of time.

When asked 'How much of an impact did the sexual harassment and associated feeling have on you?', only 4% (n=5) stated that there was no impact. Other respondents gave a variety of answers ranging from 'little impact' and 'somewhat of an impact' to 'large impact'.

"I found it upsetting, but it also taught me to be very clear about my personal boundaries"

"I would say the normalising of sexual harassment as a child lead to me not acting on sexual abuse as I got older, as I was used to these difficult feelings."

Increased anxiety and fear: Many respondents reported heightened levels of anxiety and fear in public spaces following harassment, particularly in environments where they had previously felt safe.

"Makes it difficult to go out and causes anxiety"

"I was going to say yes, but with some anxiety but wanted to elaborate that this is after going through therapy and having multiple coping mechanisms."

Avoidance of certain locations: When asked if they felt comfortable returning to the location of harassment, 45% (n=52) said yes, 36% (n= 41) expressed hesitation, and 11% (n=13) said they actively avoided those areas, altering their daily routines as a result. Out of the respondents that selected 'Other (please specify)' when asking about returning to the location of the sexual harassment the responses shared more insight suggesting that there was still anxiety related to the location but there were other factors at play such as that they had to return due to work, they couldn't return as the place no longer existed or they did with additional support.

"I don't travel on trains now because it happened on a train when I was 14. I have been on 2 trains in the last 20 years and had severe anxiety because of it. I am now 40."

"Unless I have to, I don't go to places where the sexual harassment occurred. Public place was a venue for Weddings/ Funerals/ Birthdays and I have avoided people's Weddings/ Birthday's to avoid the venue. The other was a college and unfortunately I do courses there so I go to the college but I don't go to the area the sexual harassment took place."

Long-term emotional distress: Respondents described experiencing lasting psychological distress, including panic attacks, depression, and a persistent sense of vulnerability.

"It's a memory I always have with me. The physical harassment was when I was 12 and I remember how it made me feel to this day."

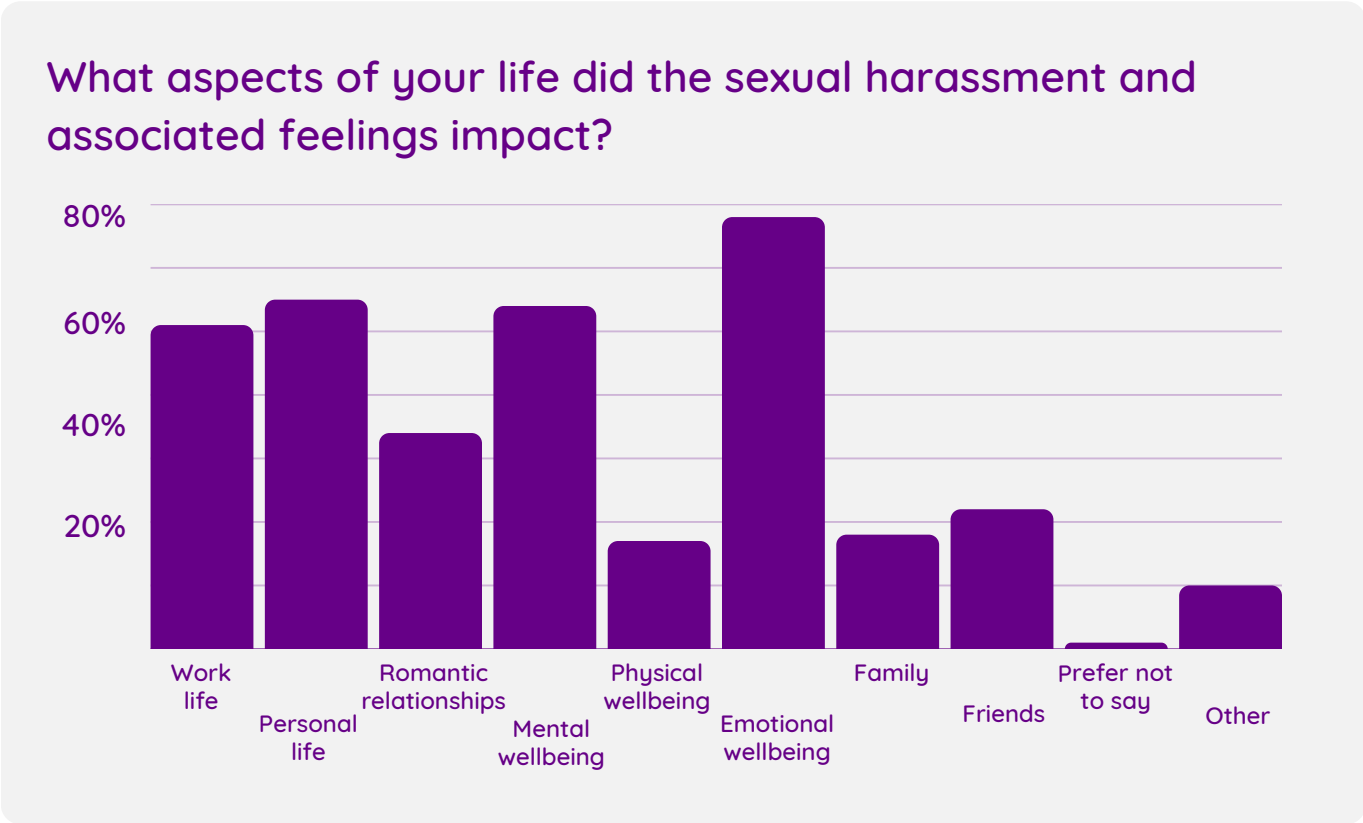
Post-traumatic stress symptoms: A significant number of survivors reported symptoms consistent with PTSD, including heightened vigilance, difficulty sleeping, recurring distressing memories of incidents, and difficulty concentrating in daily life.

Impact on social and professional life: The long-term impact of harassment extended beyond mental well-being, affecting personal relationships, work productivity, and willingness to engage in social activities. Some victims withdrew from professional opportunities or changed career paths due to ongoing distress.

"Definitely. It affects journeys, times of travel, methods of travel, the likelihood of me being alone in places where I might not be able to get help."

"(Yes) I stopped socialising as much and became a lot more conscious about myself and environment."

Figure 2: ‘What aspects of your life did the sexual harassment and associated feelings impact?’ chart



Sense of powerlessness and frustration: Many respondents expressed feelings of helplessness, with some stating they had resigned themselves to harassment as an inevitable part of their daily lives.

> “[I felt]…less confident in a public space and vulnerable when out alone or when walking past groups of men”

Emotional impact

When reflecting on how their experiences made them feel, respondents shared a wide range of emotional reactions that highlight the deep and personal toll of harassment:

- **Shame and self-blame:** Several respondents reported feeling ashamed or blaming themselves for what happened, particularly when others around them did not intervene or when their reports were dismissed.

- **Anger and resentment:** A number of participants expressed intense anger. This was directed not only at the perpetrators but also at a society that allows such behaviour to continue unchallenged.

- **Loss of confidence:** Some survivors described a profound loss of self-esteem and confidence, both in public settings and in their interpersonal relationships.

- **Numbness and detachment:** A few individuals reported becoming emotionally numb or dissociating as a coping mechanism in response to repeated incidents.

- **Heightened sense of injustice:** Many respondents felt a deep sense of injustice, especially those who had reported incidents and felt ignored or disbelieved.

One participant wrote,

"I felt dirty and ashamed, even though I knew it wasn't my fault. It haunted me for weeks." 

Another shared,

"It made me question my worth and feel like I didn't belong in public spaces." 

These emotional responses underscore the complex and far-reaching impact of public sexual harassment, not just as a series of isolated incidents but as experiences that shape how individuals view themselves and their place in the world.

Highlighted personal testimonies

Survey respondents provided first-hand accounts of their experiences, offering a powerful insight into the real-life impact of sexual harassment:

- **Fear and vulnerability:** One respondent described an encounter on public transport: "A man sat next to me and kept touching my leg despite my protests. No one around me intervened. I was too afraid to make a scene."

- **Public apathy:** Another participant noted, "There were people around when it happened, but no one stepped in. It made me feel invisible."

- **Lasting psychological impact:** A survivor shared, "Even years later, I still flinch when someone walks too close behind me."

- **Normalisation of harassment:** A young woman recounted, "I was harassed in my school uniform. It didn't stop when I got older—it just changed form. Men feel entitled to make comments, no matter my age."

These testimonies underscore the widespread and deeply ingrained nature of public sexual harassment, demonstrating the urgent need for cultural and policy-driven changes.

Responses to sexual harassment that put the responsibility of safety on the survivor have become common place. Many social groups are coming up with solutions to a problem that is not theirs to fix, for example running clubs to exercise in public safely, calling friend's when they get home and other responses that place the solution on the shoulders of survivors.

Whilst many of these actions can be supportive and comforting spaces, we need to ensure that as a society, we respond to ensuring that everyone has access to the right to feel safe in all spaces.

Demographic breakdown

The survey included individuals from diverse gender and sexual orientation backgrounds and showed a distribution between age groups demonstrating that this is a lifelong issue for many and not something that affects one group. It is a pervasive and entrenched problem within our society that requires a collaborative approach to tackling it. It should be noted that research identifies.[5,6,7]

Figure 3: 'Do you think that any of the below factors had an influence on the sexual harassment that occurred?' table

Do you think that any of the below factors had an influence on the sexual harassment that occurred?

Answer choices	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Age	70%	81
Gender	86%	100
Relationship status	17%	20
Disability	2%	3
Religion or belief	2%	2
Ethnicity	3%	3
Sexual orientation	9%	11
Prefer not to say	2%	1
Other (please specify)	11%	13
	Answered	116
	Skipped	32

5 Black women's experience of sexual harassment in the workplace | TUC
6 Sexual harassment of LGBT people in the workplace | TUC
7 Sexual harassment of disabled women in the workplace | TUC

Awareness of sexual harassment

Although the key findings of this report have focussed on the respondents' experiences of sexual harassment, the survey also asked whether they felt there was enough awareness around sexual harassment. There was an overwhelming number that responded that there wasn't (88%, n=108). This demonstrates why research such as this is so important. It helps us to understand where the gaps are in public awareness and informs our next steps in improving this and creating change that lasts.

The survey also asked about the kinds of resources that respondents would find beneficial and the results were vast and varied. They included, cultural change, improvements in education, funding for the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) sector, more support available for victims and improvements in responses when sexual harassment is reported.

- **Accessible mental health support:** Many respondents called for free or low-cost access to counselling and trauma-informed therapy. The emotional toll of harassment was described as profound, and access to professional mental health services and VAWDASV support services was viewed as essential for recovery.

- **Clear reporting channels:** Participants emphasised the need for simple, confidential, and well-publicised systems for reporting harassment, both within institutions and in public contexts. Several called for anonymous reporting options and better follow-up communication.

- **Legal support and advocacy:** Respondents expressed the need for legal guidance and advocacy services to help them understand their rights and navigate the reporting process. Survivors often felt overwhelmed by the legal system and desired support from trained professionals.

- **Safe spaces and community support groups:** Survivors expressed a desire for peer-led support networks or drop-in centres where they could speak openly about their experiences without judgment. Community support was seen as a way to counteract the isolation many felt.

- **Education and awareness campaigns:** Respondents believed that public education initiatives targeting both young people and adults could help prevent harassment by changing cultural attitudes and increasing awareness of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour.

- Bystander Intervention Training: Several individuals noted the importance of bystander training, so people feel equipped to step in and safely challenge harassment when they witness it.

One respondent stated,

> **"I just wanted someone to believe me and help me figure out what to do next."**

This highlights the fundamental need for compassionate, survivor-centred responses that empower individuals rather than retraumatise them.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings from this survey reinforce the urgent need for policy changes, public awareness campaigns, and institutional reforms to combat public sexual harassment in Wales. These are our recommendations:

- Strengthening reporting mechanisms and ensuring accountability in handling cases.
- Implementing prevention initiatives to challenge social norms that enable harassment through public awareness campaigns and education.
- Providing better support services for survivors, including mental health resources and legal assistance.
- Encouraging active bystander intervention training to empower individuals to challenge harassment when they witness it.
- Enhancing workplace and educational institution policies to protect victims and provide clear pathways for reporting and redress.

Addressing public sexual harassment requires a whole-systems approach, with a collaborative effort between policymakers, police, and society as a whole to create safer public spaces for all individuals in Wales. The urgency of this issue demands immediate and sustained action to shift cultural attitudes and build a society where everyone can navigate public spaces without fear and where there is no grey area for sexual harassment.

Acknowledgements

Welsh Women's Aid would like to thank everyone that took part in the No Grey Area Phase 1 and Phase 2 surveys. We are, as always, grateful to every survivor that chooses to come forward with their experiences. We are also equally here for survivors who do not feel ready to disclose. Both are equally valid responses to sexual harassment. Thank you also to everyone who shared the survey and helped to get the message out there.

This report was written and collated by Rose Baxter-Jones, Communications and Campaigns Manager. We would also like to acknowledge the staff who have supported the creation and design of this report, including Ali White, Stephanie Grimshaw and Maria Measham.

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Without bringing these issues into the light, the grey area will continue to persist.

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