



PLAN INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

1. Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the National Children's Commissioner's consultation on the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Plan International Australia's work within Australia has largely focussed on gender inequality for girls, in particular gender based violence experienced by girls in public places and cyber-bullying.

This submission focusses on the experiences of girls and young women in the context of gender based violence, in particular street harassment and cyber-bullying. We hope that their views and voices will form part of the Children's Commissioner's reporting.

2. About Plan International

Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the world's oldest and largest development and humanitarian organisations that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice. Plan International is independent, with no religious affiliation.

3. Violence against children

Gender based street harassment in public places

Girls' experiences of violence and sexual abuse in public places in Australia violate their article 34 right to be free from sexual abuse, their right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment as well as their right to non-discrimination.

On 22 May 2018, Plan International released a report on girls' experiences of violence, harassment and abuse in Sydney.¹ The report is based on a survey of 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. We also interviewed Plan International's youth activists living in Sydney for qualitative data.

¹ Plan International Australia, 'Sexism in the City: Young women speak up about street harassment in the city', 22 May 2018.

The key findings from the report paint a troubling picture of the gender based violence experienced by girls and young women in public places.

Of the young women surveyed who have personally experienced gender based violence in the form of street harassment in Sydney:

- 4 out of 5 say they first experienced street harassment when they were under 18. More than a third of girls and young women were first harassed between the ages of 11 and 15.
- 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.
- Almost 1 in 4 girls and young women experience street harassment at least once a month or more.
- 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.
- 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.

'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.' ■■■■■, 16

The survey found the most common forms of street harassment for young women in Sydney included:

- Cat-calling (83%)
- Menacing behaviour such as leering or swearing (55%)
- Being followed (50%)
- Being told to smile (44%)
- Having their path blocked (30%)
- Being touched inappropriately (30%); and
- Physical violence or sexual assault (11%)

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.

Gender based violence in the form of street harassment is causing girls and young women to change their behaviour. Furthermore it has a deep and lasting effect on their mental health and well-being.

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. – [REDACTED], 16.

As noted in the key findings, 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%).

	Girls who first experienced harassment at 15 or under	Girls who first experienced harassment at 16 or over
Ongoing anxiety and depression	28.4%	18.4%
Avoiding going out at night or to certain places	49.5%	33.1%
Ongoing distrust of men	52.6%	38.7%
Avoiding walking or travelling alone	60.0%	49.1%

The findings of this survey confirmed previous research that Plan International has conducted with Our Watch. In 2016 a survey of 600 Australian girls and young women aged 15–19 was commissioned, asking their views on personal safety and gender equality, including their sense of security in public spaces.²

The Plan/Our Watch survey confirmed that many young Australian girls’ concerns about personal safety are curbing their freedom of movement in public places. Almost one third (30 percent) of girls surveyed agreed that “girls should not be out in public places after dark” – with 45 percent disagreeing. While half (50 percent) disagreed that “girls should not travel alone on public transport,” 23 percent of girls surveyed agreed with this statement.

Online cyber bullying

The 2016 survey also included findings on girls’ experiences of cyber-bullying. While online harassment and abuse can be experienced by anyone, there are gendered patterns that show that young women are particularly susceptible to harassment and abuse directly related to their gender and age. This online harassment and abuse is increasingly being used as an instrument of gender-based violence in Australia – violence or threats inflicted on someone because of their gender intended to harm them or control how they behave, speak or think.

Cyberbullying or online harassment and abuse can include behaviours ranging from “name-calling, social embarrassment and targeted offensive language, through to sexual harassment, unwanted

² Plan International, [‘A Right to the Night: Australian girls on their safety in public place’](#), June 2016.

sexual behaviours, exploitation or abuse (such as by taking or distributing intimate or sexually explicit images without permission), as well as threats and cyberstalking.” Online harassment also includes repeated and unwanted requests for photos of a sexual nature.

Seven out of ten young women surveyed agreed girls are often bullied or harassed online – only seven percent disagreed. Over half of those surveyed (58 percent) also agreed that girls often received uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material such as texts, video clips and pornography.

Over half of those surveyed (51 percent) agreed that girls are often pressured to take ‘sexy’ photos of themselves and share them. These requests for photos were almost always unwanted and uninvited; only six percent of girls surveyed thought this behaviour was acceptable – 81 percent of girls surveyed disagreed that it was acceptable for a boyfriend to ask for a naked photo.

Despite a perception among survey participants that online abuse is common, 44 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “girls feel comfortable reporting incidents of abusive online behaviour” with only 28 percent agreeing with this proposition. Academic research suggests students who are cyberbullied are less likely to seek help than students who were victimised in more traditional ways.

Cyberbullying and online harassment and abuse of adolescents has been linked to lower self-esteem, poor school attendance and performance and in some cases increased depressive symptoms. Kids Helpline data suggests that younger victims of online abuse may also be more likely to consider suicide or self-harm in response to cyberbullying than those who experience more “traditional” forms of bullying. The impact of cyberbullying or harassment may be more severe than bullying ‘in real life’ because of the typically wider audience in which public humiliation or embarrassment can occur, and the increased level of invasiveness that is possible, in particular the ability to penetrate a victim’s home and/or bedroom.

4. State’s failure to act

Gender based violence in the form of street harassment and cyber-bullying continues to be a growing problem for girls in Australia. Authorities including the federal government, state governments, public transport authorities and local councils have a duty to act to prevent harm to children in this context.

Girls that we surveyed had recommendations for authorities to improve their experiences in public places. In our most recent survey in Sydney almost all girls and young women in Sydney agreed 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%)

The girls that we surveyed in 2016 had a range of recommendations to address cyber-bullying:

- “[I want] better understanding of girls today, better communication especially with online bullying and stuff, we need to be better taught too that if we are respectful and have better attitudes we can feel safer and have better relationships, and less pressure about us growing up.” – Young woman, aged 16 years.
- “[I want] More training at an earlier age within schools to explain the dangers of online predators and safety by actually having people who have experienced it talking to them so they know it is real and can happen.” – Young woman, aged 16 years.
- “[I want] more online and social media monitoring with the right authority and to offer protection for all girls” – Young woman, aged 15 years.

Conclusion

We wish you well in finalising your report. Please do not hesitate to contact Pasanna Mutha-Merenege, Government Relations Manager on [REDACTED] if you have any questions.