



**YOUNG  
WOMEN'S  
TRUST**

# IMPACT OF SEXISM ON YOUNG WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

**E·S·R·C**  
ECONOMIC  
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COUNCIL

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# INTRODUCTION

Young women's mental health cannot be seen in isolation from the context of sexism and broader structural inequality that they face. The majority (64 percent) of young women surveyed by Young Women's Trust in 2019 saw sexism as a major problem in the UK.

In this study, Young Women's Trust working with Dr Ruth Hackett from University College London (UCL) found that **young women aged 16-30 were the age group of women most likely to experience sexism, with the impact on their mental health even greater than older women.** They experienced higher rates of sexism than other ages at school/work, on public transport, in taxis, and outside on the street, with 82 percent of those who had experienced sexism having faced street harassment.

**Young women who had experienced sexism (including attacks or threats) were five times more likely to experience depression than those that hadn't, and even four years later they still reported greater psychological distress.**

This study shows a clear link between sexism and young women's mental ill health including long-term impact, and therefore the urgent need to tackle sexism in all its forms and locations from the earliest point possible. It also highlights the importance of mental health and other services recognising the impact that sexism, including being attacked or threatened because of your sex, is having on young women in the UK.

## Background and Methodology

This report highlights new analysis specifically on young women building on Dr Ruth Hackett's original [study](#) which examined a large UK dataset for the impact of sexism on mental health for women of all ages. The study found that women who experience sexism were three times more likely to experience depression and were also more likely to be younger highlighting this topic to explore further.

Sexism is defined in this study as **feeling unsafe, avoiding going to/being in a setting, being insulted/threatened or being physically attacked because of your sex.** Participants were asked if they had experienced any of the above and then asked why they thought this was (with their sex as an option), and data was compared over a four year period.

We also asked members of our Young Women's Advisory Panel their views on the statistics and whether they reflected their own experiences.

## Experiences of sexism

- Young women aged 16-30 reported experiencing more sexism in the last year (24 percent) than women aged 31-93 (17 percent)
- Young women aged 16-24 reported experiencing more sexism than those aged 25-30 (25 percent compared to 23 percent)

*"I think young women are seen as an easier target; I think people assume they will be less likely to stand up for themselves. I also think they're generally more likely to be viewed as naive in a patronising way, leading to people acting more condescending towards them."*

*"Young women are more easily targeted for comments due to perceived lack of experience i.e. not being able to assert how inappropriate certain situations or circumstances are."*

*"I think young women experience more sexism due to the fact that we live in an age where girls are encouraged to look and behave a particular way from an early age, via social media, TV, billboards etc. This is largely responsible for the warped perception that young men have about young women, hence why they are under so much pressure – to compete/impress/conform and fit in with their peers."*

Young Women's Advisory Panel members

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Some young woman also asked if the higher rate of reporting could be due to awareness and attitudes:

*“Attitudes towards sexism – do younger women now have less tolerance for sexist behaviour?”*

*“We perhaps feel more comfortable identifying sexism, and taking issue with it, due to the progression we’ve experienced in our society. I also feel women of different generations perhaps experience different types of sexism more often.”*

*Young Women’s Advisory Panel members*

## Locations young women experience sexism

- Women aged 16-30 experience greater rates of sexism than those aged 31-93 at school/work (13.7 percent vs 10.8 percent), on public transport (42.2 percent vs 38.1 percent), in taxis (20.5 percent vs 13.6 percent) and outside on the street (81.9 percent vs 74.8 percent).
- Young women aged 16-24 are more likely to experience street harassment compared to 25-30 year olds (84.2 percent vs 79.1 percent) and the street is the most common setting where sexism is reported.

## Impact of sexism on mental health

- Young women aged 16-30 who experience sexism were over 5 times more likely to have clinical depression than young women who had not had this experience (A stronger likelihood compared to women aged 31-93 who were 2.4 times more likely to have depression).
- Young women who experience sexism were also more likely to report a lower satisfaction with life.
- Sexism is more strongly associated with depression, poor mental functioning, poor life satisfaction, fair/poor self-rated health and reports of limiting longstanding illness in women aged 16-30 than in the overall sample (aged 16-93).

*“I feel ‘lad culture’ is still prevalent within our society, and this has encouraged the street harassment of young women.”*

*“I think it’s easier for people to get away with sexism in public because harassing a stranger usually doesn’t have any consequences – the victim doesn’t know who the other person is and probably won’t see them again later.”*

*“Sexism can leave women with anxiety - for example when going for a run or doing physical activities I feel the need to cover up to attract less attention or always run with one headphone in to be ‘safe’”*

*“Sexism I have experienced within the workplace have included being groped by a manager as an apprentice, near sexual assault at an office party, again by a manager as an apprentice, after which I was told it was my fault for consuming alcohol. Also the dissemination of pornographic images of a female co-worker without her knowledge by various male co-workers, male managers unzipping the dress of my female manager in the office without her consent, being told it was unnecessary for myself and other women in the office to attend meetings and general sexist comments within the workplace. I have also experienced street harassment on several occasions, and all of these experiences have led to stress and anxiety, for which I have had to seek medical advice for on occasion.”*

*“In my personal experience, I have struggled with both stress and anxiety in part as a result of the sexism I experienced within the workplace. I dreaded going to work every morning, and it took its toll on both my mental and physical health, and I became a shell of the person I once was.”*

*Young Women’s Advisory Panel members*

## Why does sexism impact young women's mental health?

*“Sexism can challenge your perception of your appearance, your worth as a person and what you feel you deserve to ask for both in personal and professional relationships. You settle, you don't want to rock the boat with things and make a fuss and make things worse for yourself by doing so – or you kick off and make things worse by perpetuation of the “hysterical woman” stereotype. It can make you not want to go and see people/places who trigger certain feelings, I have withdrawn myself socially when I have had bad anxiety and not seen friends for months on end. I have left jobs. I have avoided certain places within my hometown.”*

*“Insecurity and a loss of self-worth stemming from being shunned in certain industries and particular circles in society, e.g. women are less likely to be taken seriously in professions such as building work, mechanics, plumbing etc. as well as sports, politics, the list goes on... depression as a result of being restricted and limited to what they can achieve, as well as mistreatment from men who view women as a commodity.”*

*“Being told we are destined to be mothers, housekeepers and wives. That we should juggle career and family. That we will want to have children and get married. That there is an idea of “women's work” and therefore work that can't be or shouldn't be for women.”*

*“Along with unrealistic beauty expectations comes the overwhelming pressure to fit in and be accepted, which interferes with young women's self-esteem, her ability to be comfortable and content with herself.”*

*“Anxiety surrounding how they may be perceived based on whether they behave or dressed appropriately according to other people's standards, e.g. if you show off your figure or too much skin you may be labelled as “a slut”, or even the opposite, females that wear loose clothing and appear less preened are often told they aren't good enough because their image is less polished.”*

*Young Women's Advisory Panel members*

## Impact of sexism on mental health over time

- Younger women who had experienced sexism were more likely to report greater psychological distress even four years following a sexist experience than those that hadn't experienced this, indicating that sexism leads to mental health problems developing over time. Young women (aged 16-30) were more likely to report greater psychological distress 4 years later than the overall sample (aged 16-93).

## Why does sexism impact mental health over four years?

*“Sexism sits in the core of you and if you try and ignore it and don't address it, it rots away and the problems permeate to other areas of your life.”*

*“As someone whose mental health has always been a factor in their every day life, suffering sexual violence and sexism definitely exacerbates it and sexism is just another form of the violence inflicted upon women. Which is why it affects us. It is insidious and causes you to doubt yourself.”*

*“The impact of what they face is felt deeper than what the perpetrators know. Sexism for a long time was disregarded so women may have felt their feelings were also disregarded or not handled accordingly.”*

**“ I feel that as sexism towards young women is a common occurrence, this can affect us more and more over time, as it makes it difficult not to internalise the sexism we have experienced. For example, if a young woman is subjected to sexual objectification over an extended period of time, she may fixate on her appearance in an unhealthy way.”**

**“ I think repeatedly feeling talked down to as a young woman or otherwise experiencing sexism can impact your self-esteem and make it harder to stand up for yourself in future; you can start to feel that the experience is a normal part of life and that you just have to put up with it.”**

**“ There are some major barriers to women (particularly young women) getting help for their mental health – serious mental health problems are often seen as “being overly dramatic” or “being hysterical”.**

*Young Women's Advisory Panel members*

Sexism is damaging young women's mental health including clear long-term detrimental impact, therefore should be acknowledged and tackled in all its forms and locations from the earliest point possible. This report highlights the importance of mental health and other services recognising the impact that sexism, including being attacked or threatened because of your sex, is having on young women in the UK.

## CONTACT YOUNG WOMEN'S TRUST

Young Women's Trust is a feminist organisation working to achieve economic justice for young women. We give economic power to young women by raising their voices, challenging sexist stereotypes and rebuilding workplaces free from discrimination. We do this by:

- Providing free coaching and CV feedback to young women to help them build their skills, identify their talents and develop strong mental health
- Advising companies how to build equal workplaces
- Campaigning for young women to be valued – at work and in their unpaid work
- Training young activists to share their experiences and be the change

If you'd like more information on our research, email [esther.sample@youngwomenstrust.org](mailto:esther.sample@youngwomenstrust.org) or visit [www.youngwomenstrust.org](http://www.youngwomenstrust.org)

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