



**SPORT
ENGLAND**

FEELING SAFE IN FITNESS AND LEISURE CENTRES

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES
OF WOMEN AGED 16-34



The Activity Check-In tracks behaviours and attitudes from both adults, children and young people towards sport and physical activity, revealing the impacts of a rapidly changing world.

Each wave captures views on a specific topic of current relevance - in this publication we focus on the experiences of women aged 16-34 in fitness and leisure centres.

Full data sets are available [on our website](#).

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This document is for partners and organisations who work in the sport and physical activity sector. It explores attitudes, experiences and behaviours relating to sexual harassment and intimidation in fitness and leisure centres.

The findings show how concerns about safety can influence whether people use these settings, how they behave when attending, and whether they continue to participate.



CONTEXT

In 2022, research from Sport England's This Girl Can campaign, in partnership with ukactive, found that many women, particularly younger women, were concerned about sexual harassment and intimidation in fitness and leisure centres. Many reported taking precautionary measures or changing their behaviour as a result.

This follow-up research explores current attitudes, behaviours and experiences related to sexual harassment and intimidation in these settings.

Among women aged 16–34, the most common reasons for not attending fitness and leisure centres, or not attending more often, are cost (44%), centres being too busy (35%) and centres being too far away or difficult to get to (20%).

Concerns about safety are also evident, with 19% saying they feel uncomfortable or unsafe due to the possibility of sexual harassment or intimidation. This suggests that these concerns sit alongside wider practical barriers to participation.

Sexual harassment and intimidation are not issues that are unique to fitness and leisure centres. The research found that only 14% believe experiencing sexual harassment or intimidation is more likely in fitness and leisure centres than in everyday life.

However, fitness and leisure centres are environments where the sport and physical activity sector has an opportunity to influence people's experiences.

By creating welcoming environments, implementing clear policies and reporting procedures, and ensuring staff are equipped to respond appropriately, organisations can help people feel safer and more confident to take part.

Many fitness and leisure providers already work hard to create safe, welcoming and inclusive environments through staff training, safeguarding procedures, codes of conduct and participant support.



This research is not an assessment of individual facilities or organisations. Instead, it focuses on understanding people's experiences and perceptions within everyday fitness and leisure environments and identifying opportunities for the sector to continue building confidence and positive experiences.

Around three in four (74%) women aged 16–34 report using a fitness or leisure centre at least once in the last 12 months, compared with around half of all adults (51%). Around two in five (40%) use one at least weekly.

Understanding the experiences of this group is important because concerns about safety can influence participation decisions and experiences of being active.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted as part of Activity Check-In Wave 20.

Topic questions on safety in leisure settings were included alongside the regular tracker survey.

The quantitative survey ran between 16 and 21 January 2026. Additional boost fieldwork ran until 23 January 2026.

A boost sample increased the number of women aged 16–34 to 1,345 respondents, allowing more detailed analysis of this group.

The findings are based on quantitative survey evidence.

The survey used a broad definition of sexual harassment and intimidation, including physical, verbal, non-verbal and online behaviours – a full list of definitions can be found at the end of the report.

These findings build on earlier research from This Girl Can and contribute to a growing understanding of how concerns about safety can shape women's participation in sport and physical activity.

Unless otherwise stated, findings in this report relate to women aged 16–34.



SAFETY, CONFIDENCE AND PERCEPTIONS

Concerns about sexual harassment and intimidation are widespread among women aged 16–34.

Nearly four in five (78%) agree that women are at risk of sexual harassment or intimidation when taking part in sport and physical activity in public spaces, while 73% agree women are at risk in public facilities.

Views among men aged 16–34 are lower than among women of the same age, but remain high, with 68% and 61% respectively agreeing that women are at risk.

Three in five (62%) women aged 16–34 agree that fitness and leisure centres feel more like a place for men than women.

Less than half (45%) agree that places where people take part in sport and physical activity are as safe and welcoming for women as they are for men.

The same proportion (45%) also agree that these places are doing enough to tackle harassment or intimidation.

Across these measures, concern is higher among those aged 16–24 than those aged 25–34.



EXPERIENCES OF HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION

Among women aged 16–34 who use fitness and leisure centres, 37% are very or extremely concerned about the possibility of experiencing sexual harassment or intimidation at their centre, while 16% are not at all concerned.

14% say sexual harassment or intimidation is more likely in fitness and leisure centres than in everyday life.

Overall, 86% report experiencing at least one form of physical, verbal, non-verbal or online harassment or intimidation in the last three years.

Non-verbal harassment is the most commonly reported form, experienced at least once by 78% of women aged 16–34. Verbal harassment is reported by 73%, online harassment by 64%, and physical harassment by 59%.

For comparison, 74% of men aged 16–34 report experiencing at least one form of harassment or intimidation in the last three years, compared with 58% of all adults aged 16+.

Similar rates are reported for witnessing incidents and experiencing them.



IMPACT ON PARTICIPATION AND BEHAVIOUR

Concerns about sexual harassment and intimidation are influencing both participation and behaviour among women aged 16–34.

Among women who had not used a fitness or leisure centre in the last 12 months, almost three in five (58%) are at least somewhat concerned about the possibility of experiencing sexual harassment if they were to use one.

Around two in five (43%) say concerns about sexual harassment have influenced their decision not to use a fitness or leisure centre.

Among women who use fitness and leisure centres, 62% report making some form of behaviour change after experiencing or witnessing harassment or intimidation. For comparison, the equivalent figure for men aged 16–34 is 47%.

The most commonly reported changes to behaviours are avoiding dressing in a certain way (29%), avoiding visiting at certain times (29%), avoiding areas of the centre that usually have more men (29%) and avoiding attending on their own (26%).

One in ten (10%) report stopping using fitness and leisure centres permanently following an incident, while 18% considered doing so.



REPORTING AND TRUST

There is strong support among women aged 16–34 for reporting harassment and intimidation in fitness and leisure centres.

Nearly four in five (79%) women aged 16–34 who use fitness and leisure centres agree that all forms of sexual harassment, including non-physical behaviours, should be reported to a member of staff. A similar proportion (77%) agree that it is clear what type of behaviour should be reported. However, confidence in the reporting process is lower.

Around a third do not agree that it is clear how to report incidents (35%), that staff know how to handle reports appropriately (34%), that they would feel comfortable speaking to staff about concerns (32%), or that their centre would act on reports (31%).

Among women aged 16–34, 58% of those who witnessed an incident reported it, compared with 51% of those who experienced an incident.

Among those who had never reported witnessing or experiencing

harassment or intimidation, the most common reasons were protection-related concerns (47%), process-related concerns (40%) and staff-related concerns (36%).

- **Protection-related concerns** included worries about retaliation, anonymity, confidentiality or having no private way to report.
- **Process-related concerns** reflected uncertainty about how reports would be handled, including concerns that reports would not be taken seriously, the process would take too long, or that they would not be kept informed.
- **Staff-related concerns** included not knowing who to speak to, concerns that staff were not sufficiently trained, or believing the centre would not prioritise the issue.

Among women aged 16–34 who reported an incident, 64% were satisfied with how the fitness or leisure centre handled it.



OPPORTUNITIES

The findings highlight several areas organisations may wish to consider:

Make expectations clear

Harassment and intimidation can take physical, verbal, non-verbal and online forms. Clear communication can help participants understand what behaviour is unacceptable and what should be reported.

Improve confidence in reporting

While support for reporting harassment is high, confidence in reporting processes and responses is lower.

Support staff capability

Among those who had never reported witnessing or experiencing harassment or intimidation, 36% cited staff-related concerns as a reason for not reporting incidents.

Consider participation impacts

The findings show that experiences and concerns can influence behaviour and continued participation.



NEXT STEPS

This research provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of women aged 16–34 in fitness and leisure centres, and highlights opportunities to continue building environments where everyone feels safe, welcome and able to be active.

Many organisations across the sector are already taking positive action. To support this, This Girl Can and ukactive have developed the Safer Spaces to Move Resource Hub, which provides free guidance, practical tools, training and resources to help gym, fitness and leisure operators create safer, more inclusive environments for women and girls.

Resources include operational guidance, staff e-learning, policies, procedures and practical communication tools developed in collaboration with partners across the sector.

Partners are encouraged to use the findings from this report alongside these resources to review their own environments, policies and practices, and continue building confidence and positive experiences for everyone using fitness and leisure facilities.

RESOURCES

Relevant resources and full data tables are available on the:

[Activity Check-In page](#)

Additional resources include:

[This Girl Can insight and research](#)

[Safer Spaces to Move hub](#)

[Sport England safeguarding](#)

[Survey resources](#)



DEFINITIONS

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which: violates someone's dignity, makes someone feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated, creates a hostile or offensive environment. Sexual harassment can come in different forms, including:

Physical sexual harassment

Including unwanted touching, invasion of personal space (touching or non-touching), following around the facility, cornering and sexual assault including exposure.

Verbal sexual harassment

Including cat calling or wolf-whistling, sexual 'jokes' or innuendos, suggestive comments, unwanted comments on your body or appearance.

Non-verbal sexual harassment or intimidation

Including staring/leering, suggestive looks, physical gestures. It can also happen when groups congregate in any area, dominating space and equipment.

Online sexual harassment or intimidation

Including social media talking or harassment, inappropriate messaging, photography/filming without consent, sharing sexualised images or videos without consent.