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Women and Girls' Safety in Parks: Lessons from Research and Practice

CONFERENCE REPORT

10-11 May 2023

School of Law, Liberty Building, University of Leeds

Dr Anna Barker and Rebecca Fox, University of Leeds

With thanks to conference organisers and sponsors



Introduction

Across the UK, 27,000 parks give much-needed green space for exercise, play, socialising and relaxing – as well as walking, wheeling and cycling routes away from cars and busy roads. Whilst parks are open to all there is still a long way to go to ensure they are used and experienced as safe and welcoming places by everyone. In Britain, women are three times more likely than men to report feeling unsafe in parks, and women feel less safe in parks than in other types of public spaces ([Office for National Statistics, 2022](#)). This has a significant impact on the lives of women and girls, for concerns about safety curtails their ability to move freely around towns and cities, limits opportunities to socialise, improve wellbeing and to engage in physical activity and exercise. Collectively, this amounts to a much wider social problem as the proven health and wellbeing benefits of parks depend on feeling safe ([Public Health England, 2020](#)).

On 10th and 11th May, the University of Leeds hosted an [international conference](#) to discuss the safety of women and girls in parks. Over 100 attendees from a range of professional and academic backgrounds working in research, parks management, landscape architecture, urban design, planning, policing, women's organisations, Friends groups, and civil society organisations came together to reflect upon the current evidence base, share multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral learnings and consider directions for future research. Speakers from the UK, Sweden and Australia contributed lessons from research and practice, offering ways forward to improve women and girls' safety in the UK's parks.

The conference was a culmination of [research in West Yorkshire](#) to explore how women and girls' perceive safety in parks and to understand what makes these spaces feel safer and more welcoming to use and enjoy. Informed by this research, the conference served as a platform to launch new guidance, [Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls](#) created by a partnership by the [University of Leeds](#), [Make Space for Girls](#), [Keep Britain Tidy/Green Flag Award](#), and [West Yorkshire Combined Authority](#), with funding from the [Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin](#), and the [Economic and Social Research Council](#). Aimed at audiences such as local authorities, park managers, landscape designers, policing organisations and community groups, the guidance has been developed to enable public parks and green spaces to be better designed, managed and maintained to promote women and girls' safety, facilitating more equal access to and use of them.

The conference was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Leeds.

Conference objectives

1. To assess the contemporary landscape and consider the range of barriers which restrict women and girls' access to, use of and safety within parks.
2. To share lessons from research and practice with stakeholders working to improve the inclusion and safety of women and girls in parks and public spaces.
3. To launch new national practical guidance designed to improve women and girls' access to and safety within parks and green spaces.
4. To share learning and reflections from different contexts beyond the UK – notably Sweden and Australia – and to facilitate comparative discussion.
5. To identify gaps in research and practice and promote the production of new ideas, strategies, connections and partnerships for potential future research.

Key learnings from the conference

1. Lived experience is invaluable to informing policy change; research and reform must centre the voices of women and girls in discussions and decisions around their experiences and perceptions of safety.
2. Parks must be designed with women and girls' safety and needs in mind and coproducing the design of parks with those using, or wanting to use, them is the best way to understand what matters to them.
3. Finding consensus is useful to provide a starting point for invoking change, but research and reform must accommodate the diversity amongst women and girls.
4. Intersectionality must be considered to effectively address the barriers to women and girls feeling and being safe in parks. This involves accounting for the views and experiences of minoritized groups and considering characteristics such as race, ethnicity, disability, age, and gender identity.
5. The presence of women is one of the best ways to signal feelings of safety amongst other women, so if parks can be designed in a way that encourages women to use them, it will create a positive feedback loop whereby the presence of women in an area increases the likelihood of other women being present.
6. Safety must be understood and addressed as a gendered issue.
7. The safety of women and girls is a collective responsibility, and a society in which they are protected benefits everyone.
8. The threat of male violence against women and girls in parks speaks to a wider social problem rooted in patriarchal and misogynistic systems, traditions and attitudes, and there are limits on the extent to which urban design can dismantle these. However, each sector must work

- towards contributing the difference they can make, and we can make a difference to the lives of women and girls in the way our parks are planned, designed, managed and maintained.
9. There is a continued need to shift the burden of responsibility off of women and girls and their use of avoidance tactics and instead address the wider issues which allow perpetrators to commit harm.
 10. Educating boys about appropriate behaviour towards women and girls, and calling out that which is inappropriate, can foster allyship and play a productive role in improving women and girls' safety.
 11. Austerity has had a considerable negative impact on parks for at least the past 15 years but the strategic political prioritisation of improving of women and girls' safety in public spaces can be used to encourage people in power to take action.



Photo 1 Dr Rachel Hewitt, Newcastle University, giving the opening keynote speech

Day One: Women and Girls' Safety in Parks: Lessons from Research and Practice

After a welcome and introduction from **Dr Anna Barker, University of Leeds** and **Alison Lowe OBE, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, West Yorkshire**, discussion formally commenced with a keynote address by **Dr Rachel Hewitt, Newcastle University**.



Photo 2 Dr Anna Barker, University of Leeds, introduces the problem of safety in parks

Dr Rachel Hewitt, Newcastle University, began by highlighting the impact that the real and perceived threat of male violence and harassment has on the lives of women. She discussed how adolescent girls' territories shrink under the perception that they do not belong in outdoor spaces in the same way that boys do, and how this carries detrimental long-term effects on their educational and social development. Referring to the work of Western Australian researcher Kandy James, Rachel spoke of how girls' retreat from communal spaces can decrease their chances of learning the important skills fostered in these spaces which help to prepare young people for roles in the public sphere. Rachel stressed the importance of appreciating that the anxieties of girls are genuine, substantiated concerns, stating that 'most girls and women have personal experience of being intimidated by men in public spaces, and indeed, we are living through a period in which men's public

harassment is intensifying'. The keynote provided a brilliant introduction to the conference, paving the way for further discussion.



Photo 3 Alison Lowe OBE, Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime, West Yorkshire opens the conference

Session 1: Contextualising Women and Girls' Safety in Parks

Session 1 focused on the context foregrounding research into women and girls' safety in parks. Discussion illustrated the timely nature of this research, presenting an insight into the rapidly growing evidence that women and girls face gendered challenges when accessing these public spaces. The session was chaired by **Alison Lowe OBE, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, West Yorkshire**.

The first speaker was **Saskia Garner, Suzy Lamplugh Trust**. Saskia shared the charity's mission of building a safer society by reducing the risk and occurrence of abuse and violence through education, campaigning and support. She raised concerns about how widespread behaviours, such as stalking and harassment, can lead to the normalisation of violence and increase the risk of harm for women and girls. Saskia stated that the spaces in which perpetrators can offend must be reduced and reclaimed.

Jeannette Morris-Boam, Leeds Women's Aid, shared how a significant percentage of women feel unsafe when exercising in public, and a lack of people, poor accessibility and lighting in parks contribute to their feelings of insecurity. Citing the hashtag '#betterforwomenbetterforeveryone',

Jeanette stressed the need for localised evidence-based learning from within communities and for those in power to listen to women and girls with lived experience.



Photo 4 Opening panel with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Make Space for Girls, Leeds Women's Aid and Women in Sport, Chaired by Alison Lowe OBE, Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime

Tanya Martin, Women in Sport, noted how feelings of exclusion from exercise and sport exist amongst girls from a young age. She shared how these feelings can produce long-term discrepancies between the self-belief and confidence of boys and girls, resulting in outdoor spaces being often dominated by boys and men. Tanya also highlighted the need for more innovation work between organisations to drive solutions and reform, reclaim spaces and achieve equality in sport.

Imogen Clark, co-founder of Make Space for Girls, concluded Session 1 with a call for parks to be more welcoming for women and girls under the crucial recognition that safety is a gendered issue. She acknowledged how the presence of spaces and activities aimed at young men sits in stark contrast to the absence of inclusive environments for girls, framing this disparity as discriminatory. Stating that 'safety is a big obstacle to teenage girls using parks', Imogen encouraged the continuation of campaigning for outdoor spaces designed with teenage girls in mind.

Key learnings from Session 1

1. Women and girls use parks and outdoor spaces less than men and boys due to feelings of insecurity, unsafety and fear of judgment.
2. Just as the use of parks can significantly benefit people's physical and mental health, reduced access to and use of them can have negative impacts on health.
3. Discrepancies of self-belief and confidence between boys and girls can emerge at a young age, with these feelings often continuing into adolescence and adulthood and having long-term effects on their social and educational development.
4. Widespread behaviours, such as stalking and harassment, can lead to the normalisation of male violence and increase the risk of harm for women and girls, further discouraging their use of public spaces.
5. Calling out and countering the normalisation of unacceptable and offensive behaviour in public parks can help make these places safer for women and girls.
6. Localised evidence-based learning from within communities is crucial to resolving the problems facing women and girls in parks and outdoor spaces, and these areas should be better designed with their safety in mind.

Session 2: Lessons from Research

Session 2 drew upon recent research to establish the current national picture of work into women and girls' safety in parks. The session was chaired by **Professor Conor O'Reilly, Director, Centre for Criminal Justice Studies**.

Dr Anna Barker, University of Leeds, began the session by outlining research she led by a team at Leeds into the views and lived experiences of women and girls in West Yorkshire, specifically conducted to understand what makes a park feel safe or unsafe to them. The research, which informed the practical guidance launched at the conference, reported on the views of 67 women, 50 teenage girls and 27 professionals. It found that 20% of women felt unsafe in their local park during the day. The percentage of women who felt unsafe in their local park rose to 93% when asked about after dark. Anna identified key areas of consensus among women and girls as to what might make parks feel safer, and identified areas where women and girls' views diverged.



Photo 5 Dr Anna Barker, University of Leeds, outlines research into women and girls' perceptions of safety in parks

Professor Rachel Pain, Newcastle University, discussed her work exploring violence against women and girls in parks in North-East England. She shared how almost a quarter of women who had experienced violence said it had happened in a park, compared to just over 1% of men, leading her to describe parks as 'spaces of hyper-unsafety' and 'site[s] of violence'. The study also identified issues such as the impact of austerity on park management and the importance of nature to park-users. The intersectional dimension of the issue was also raised, with Rachel acknowledging that, along with women, individuals from racial and ethnic minorities, young people and those that are disabled experience disproportionate risk of harm in public spaces compared to their counterparts.



Photo 6 Professor Rachel Pain, Newcastle University, outlines research into VAWG in parks in the North-East of England

Dr Julia King, LSE Cities, London School of Economics, shared her research which asked ‘how have girls been designed out of public spaces?’. Julia’s work highlighted how young women’s feelings of unsafety impact how and if they use public spaces, thereby moving through them in a different way to young men. She considered how the lack of facilities for young women requires new mechanisms to solve, and explained that the planning processes of public spaces has an age and gender problem, with teenagers often seen as a complicated and contested presence. Julia concluded by referencing the wider societal issues facing women and girls, stating that ‘we must go beyond urban design to the deep structural reforms that are needed’.



Photo 7 Dr Julia King, LSE Cities, outlines her peer-research with girls

Dr Amanda Seims, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, concluded Session 2 by presenting her research into park usage in Bradford. Her work compared the views and behaviours of boys, White British girls and South Asian girls, as well as the parents of these children. Amanda shared that adolescent girls were less likely to be active than boys, and South Asian girls were less likely to use parks than White British girls. Amanda revealed how some parents felt concerned about the safety of their children in parks, voicing worries around drug-dealing and neighbourhood threats. It was also found that nature made parks more appealing to girls, and that they were more likely to attend spaces that were well maintained.



Photo 8 Professor Conor O-Reilly, University of Leeds, Chairs questions from the audience

Key learnings from Session 2

1. Intersectionality must be considered for the barriers to women and girls feeling and being safe to be understood and addressed. This includes considering the experiences of minority groups and how characteristics such as race, ethnicity, disability, age and gender identity can impact safety.
2. Viewing women and girls' safety as a matter of collective responsibility is crucial to resolving the problem.
3. Parks can operate as "spaces of hyper-unsafety" for women and girls, with a significant number of incidents of violence occurring in such areas.
4. Stereotyping what girls want can be problematic; engaging with local communities is a good way to access the views of women and girls and learn how parks can be better designed to accommodate for diverse requirements and interests.
5. Urban design can play a valuable role in advancing the safety of women and girls but the extent to which it can dismantle wider societal issues rooted in patriarchal attitudes and structures is limited. It thus remains important to continue to challenge these wider issues.
6. Austerity has had significant negative impacts on park management and maintenance, contributing to contemporary issues around safety in parks.

7. Research into parks and outdoor spaces consistently finds that people value nature, and parks should incorporate natural elements to encourage use.
8. The preservation of nature may present some degree of challenge in the design and development of urban spaces, particularly when creating spaces which advance the safety of women and girls but considered planning can enable both to be achieved.

Session 3: How Can We Create Safer Parks?

The third session took a deep dive into what practical changes should follow the evidence. Discussion centred around how the findings can be practically implemented to invoke change and progress. The session was chaired by **Allison Ogden-Newton OBE, Chief Executive, Keep Britain Tidy**.



Photo 9 Tracy Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire introduces the new Safer Parks guidance

Tracy Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire, emphasised the importance of listening to the lived experiences of women and girls in relation to park safety. She noted that parks are often designed with men in mind, with the needs of women serving as an afterthought. Tracy stressed how change should not be the responsibility of women and girls, nor should it be their behaviour targeted by reform efforts, affirming that ‘we don’t need to fix the girls’. Tracy also spoke to the matter of intersectionality,

highlighting the need for improvement of safety in parks for all, and the importance of executing and operationalising reform, stating that the new practical guidance 'can't be something that just sits on the shelf. It... needs to be implemented'.

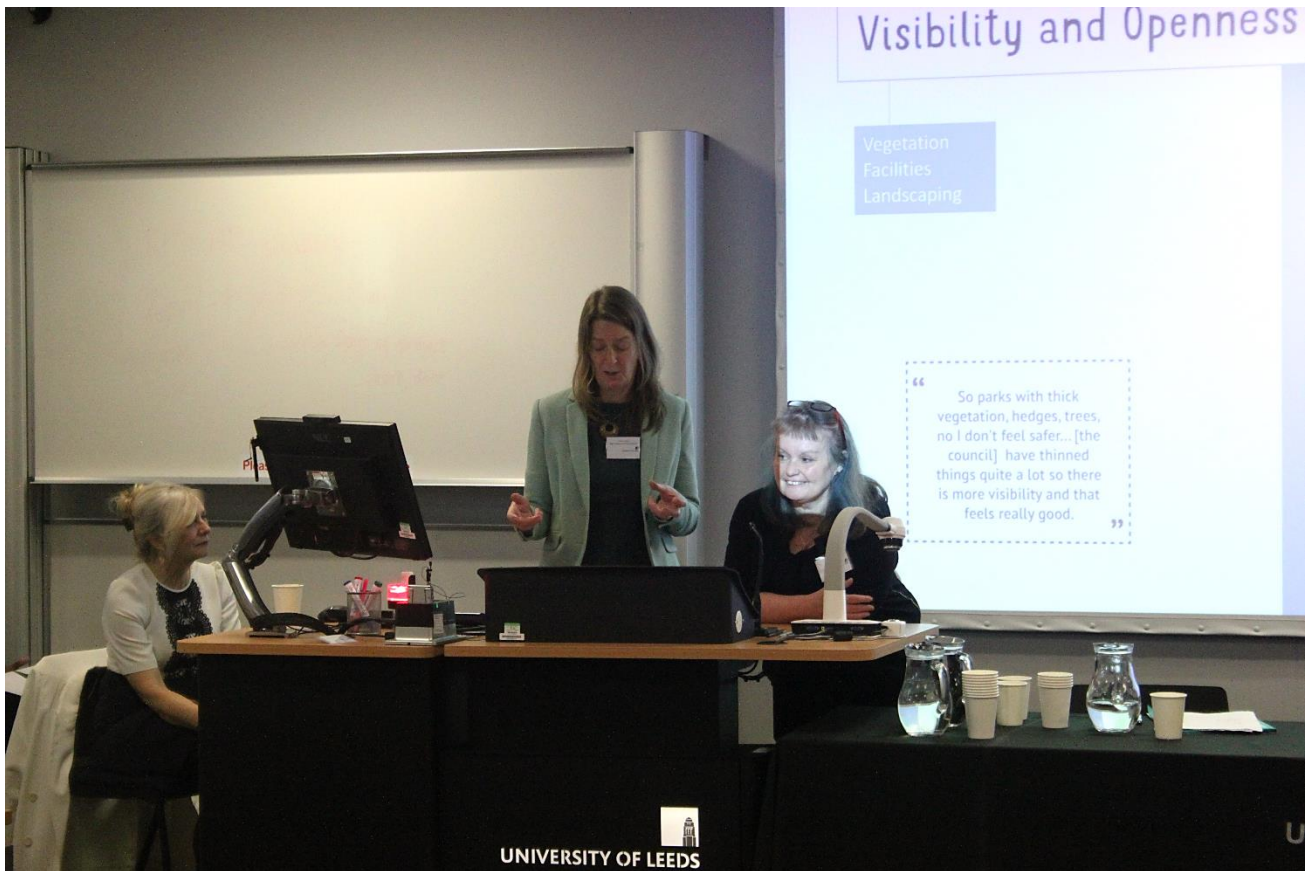


Photo 10 Helen Forman, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, and Susannah Walker, Make Space for Girls formally launch the guidance on behalf of the partnership

The next presentation, delivered by **Helen Forman, West Yorkshire Combined Authority**, and **Susannah Walker, Make Space for Girls**, formally launched the new practical guidance, *Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls*. Informed by Dr Anna Barker's teams research in West Yorkshire, and developed in consultation with a variety of groups, such as architects, planners, academics, park managers, neighbourhood policing officers, and park friends' groups, the document focuses on three main themes: eyes on the park, awareness, and inclusion. From these, ten principles are derived. Helen and Susannah summarised these themes and principles, covering topics including the presence of other park users and staffing, escape, visibility, lighting, wayfinding, image, co-production and community engagement. The guidance is designed to be used by practitioners to make parks and green spaces safer and more welcoming for women and girls, encouraging community engagement and coproduction in the design of these spaces.

Then two case studies from the guidance were presented:



Photo 11 Abigail Gaines, Friends of Rowntree Park, illustrate her ongoing work to make space for older girls in the park

Abigail Gaines, Friends of Rowntree Park, then introduced her ongoing project, which commenced in Autumn 2021 and centres around local views of girls towards the council-managed Rowntree Park in York. Abigail shared how park use lowered due to matters such as unclean toilet facilities and feelings of discomfort in certain areas perceived to be dominated by males. She also shared participants' positive views which included the park's wide paths, seating areas, natural areas and the running of community events. Abigail reiterated the importance of asking what park users want and raising awareness of these preferences in efforts to raise funds to pay for them.

Session 3 was concluded by **Marina Milosev, London Legacy Development Corporation**. Marina shared her research conducted to challenge the idea that urban planning and public realm design is gender neutral. She argued that cities generally work better for cisgender men than for women, girls, and other marginalised groups. Her research on Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park identified key themes impacting on the safety of women and girls in this space, including a lack of sufficient lighting, fear of harassment and groups of men, anti-social behaviour and crime, isolation and fear, and poor management and litter.



Photo 12 Marina Milosev, London Legacy Development Corporation, outlines lessons learned

Key learnings from Session 3

1. Involving women and girls with lived experience in the research and solution-finding process is needed to understand the problem and improve their safety in parks.
2. Invoking positive change should not rely on women and girls; reform efforts must continue to target systemic issues rather than just individual behaviour.
3. Learnings from research should be used to underpin reform proposals so that the lessons can be operationalised and converted into practical guidance.
4. Longitudinal research is a useful way to track changes in how women and girls experience and feel about parks and public spaces.
5. Urban planning and public realm design are not gender-neutral, tending to work less well for women, girls, and marginalised groups compared to cisgender men.
6. Improving the experience of women and girls in public parks creates a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all.
7. There is a pressing need for continued action aimed at improving the safety and inclusion of women and girls in public spaces, and it is crucial that efforts continue to be drafted, shared and implemented.



Photo 13 Allison Ogden-Newton, CEO, Keep Britain Tidy, Chairs questions from the audience

Session 4: Lessons from Practice

The fourth and final session of day one explored further lessons that have been learnt from practice. Discussion reflected upon the use and success of practical interventions designed to improve the safety and inclusion of women and girls in parks. The session was chaired by **Paul Todd, Green Flag Award, Keep Britain Tidy**.

Paula Appleton, Director of Evergreen Active, discussed the Empower Project - Women of Wakefield which was carried out in Spring 2022. The project, also a case study in the new guidance, offered a programme of free activities (including Boxercise, Menopause Mayhem, TikTok Treks, yoga and mindfulness) designed to build local women and girls' confidence in using outdoor spaces in Wakefield. Paula shared the results of a survey which found that 87% of respondents felt more confident accessing green and open spaces after attending the project's activities. Reflecting on the project's success, Paula highlighted the value of multi-agency collaboration, effective marketing and communication and observing change in order to improve women and girls' safety in parks.



Photo 14 Paula Appleton, Evergreen Active CIC, presents the EMPOWER project

Elettra Bordonaro, Light Follows Behaviour, discussed how lighting can be used to make spaces more attractive, safe and equal, improving the experiences and security of those using it. Elettra highlighted issues surrounding light and safety, including extreme glare, missing wayfinding, facial recognition, extreme darkness and bad visibility, and lack of uniformity. She emphasised that there is 'no copy-and-paste solution'; locally determined responses are needed and best facilitated through open community dialogue, especially with young people. Elettra also highlighted the constraints on implementing lighting in public spaces, such as conforming with ecological and preservation standards and laws.

Speaking as the strategic lead for violence against women and girls, **Detective Superintendent Vanessa Rolfe. West Yorkshire Police** considered the force's Operation Soundwood project. The project began in 2019, originally conducted in Bradford and involves the use of a public space protection order (PSPO) to tackle catcalling and harassment from vehicles. Vanessa described the project's aims as providing a proactive policing footprint, reassuring members of the public, preventing incidents of anti-social behaviour and crime, and identifying and arresting offenders. Vanessa revealed that 27 operations have been carried out so far, in which officers have detected 24 breaches with 14 in relation to inappropriate behaviour towards women and girls. The PSPO is set to go city-centre-wide in Leeds soon.



Photo 15 Detective Supt Vanessa Rolfe, West Yorkshire Police, outlines work to improve women's safety using Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs)

Gabi Howard, Camden Council, concluded Session 4 by discussing the work of the Parks for London Women's Safety in Parks Action Group which aims to balance the narrative on women's safety in public green spaces through the use of reliable data. Gabi explained how the work is designed to improve the perception of public safety in and around parks and green spaces, reflecting on the importance of accessing reliable crime data, engaging with communities, adopting a multi-stakeholder approach and tailoring local-level strategies. She also emphasised the importance of supporting facilities and activities in green spaces for women and girls, promoting more equal access to parks.

Key learnings from Session 4

1. Programmes and activities targeted at women and girls can help build their confidence and encourage them to use their public parks.
2. Local problems require local solutions, and a multiagency approach can significantly aid how a response is developed and delivered.
3. Engaging with people who do and do not use their local park(s) can help to identify and address the perceived and real barriers to park use.
4. Effective marketing and communication are valuable in promoting community involvement.

5. Funding and budget constraints limit what safety measures can be implemented in parks, but statutory funding for parks could ensure sustained investment.
6. Lighting can enhance the safety and equality of public spaces, but its use must balance interests and comply with ecological and preservation standards and laws. New technology can help to achieve this by make lighting more efficient and eco-friendlier.
7. Proactive policing projects can help to contribute to the prevention of anti-social behaviour and harassment in public spaces, making them safer for users.
8. Reliable data and reporting mechanisms are crucial to build a better-informed narrative around women and girl's safety in parks.



Photo 16 Paul Todd, Green Flag Award, Chairs questions from the audience

Closing remarks

Concluding day one of the conference, **Sue Morgan, Chief Executive, Landscape Institute**, thanked the speakers for the breadth of topics discussed and summarised the day. She reiterated the value of sustainable investment, community engagement, co-design and co-production, informed governance and proactive leadership in advancing women and girls' safety and inclusion in parks and public spaces. Sue also highlighted the importance of feminist research and perspectives, appreciating that safety must be understood as a gendered matter and a shared responsibility. Sue

concluded by encouraging the audience to speak up and be advocates for change, to continue to stand against the normalisation of harmful behaviour and harassment, and to promote allyship.

Sue captured some key quotes from across the day:

“Women have a right to access public space.”

“Austerity is violence.”

“Feminism is good for everyone.”

“Safety is a gender issue.”

“We don’t need to fix girls.”

“Safety is everyone’s responsibility.”

“We need to educate and change behaviours.”

“We need men and boys as allies and advocates.”

“There is a joy in freedom and to be active.”

“We want to design interesting not boring parks - this includes nature and beautiful design.”

“Language IS important. Gender language sends clear messages.”

“Tell girls that spaces are well looked after.”

Day Two: Women and Girls' Safety in Parks: Learning from different perspectives, methodologies and context

The second day explored the lessons learnt from different approaches to studying and understanding women and girls’ safety in parks, drawing upon research from the UK and beyond. Discussion included recent Swedish and Australian research into women and girls’ safety in public spaces. With findings generally corroborating those present at the national level, discussion contributed to the building of a wider, international picture.

Session 1: Researching Women and Girls’ Safety in Parks and Public Spaces: Approaches, Methodologies & Reflections

The first session on the second day explored research methods and approaches. Discussion revisited some of the work of day one speakers to evaluate and reflect upon their chosen approaches. The session was chaired by **Dr Anna Barker, University of Leeds**.



Photo 17 Day 2 kicks off Day 2 with the Safer Parks video

Professor Rachel Pain, Newcastle University, discussed the need for approaches and methods on women and girls' safety in parks to be more responsive to the needs of diverse representation. She highlighted the importance of considering intersectionality and going beyond the questions asked in research to better understand emergent issues. The need for 'real' coproduction to consult those at the 'sharp end' and create long-term relationships between organisations and communities was also emphasised, along with an interesting question of whether reformism or abolition would be more effective in addressing women and girls' safety in public spaces.

Professor George Holmes, University of Leeds, discussed Q-methodology used in the West Yorkshire research with Dr Anna Barker. It is an approach which uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to study the subjective views of a given population. It involves participants ordering statements in alignment with their own views, clustering responses into a small number of groups, producing an ideal-type distribution and highlighting areas of convergence and divergence. He noted that the methodology was designed to study experts, and that women and girls can be considered experts on their feelings of safety in public places.



Photo 18 Professor George Holmes, University of Leeds, provides an overview of Q methodology as a way of understanding consensus and divergence in women's views of safety on parks

Dr Julia King, LSE Cities, London School of Economics discussed the benefits and risks of conducting 'peer research', which involves people with lived experience doing research on their own lives. She emphasised the importance of researchers being accountable to research subjects and the politics of participation, stating that 'participation without redistribution of power is a con'. Julia considered the method's benefits to include democratisation of the research process, building capacity, and facilitating opportunities to co-produce knowledge before listing ethical issues around community control and power dynamics as concerns in peer research.

The work of **Dr Amanda Seims, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust**, consisted of co-designing green spaces with adolescent girls as a way to improve girls' safety and inclusion in parks. Amanda shared how the method involved invited girls to a workshop to discuss their perspectives on their local park. She relayed how age-appropriate swings, social spaces and nature were important to the girls, and that they also considered what would be suitable for parents and younger children. Feedback from the workshop found that the girls appreciated collaborative working, sharing ideas and engaging in creative activities. Amanda reflected on the importance of making participation convenient and appealing and sustaining engagement with the girls for future work.



Photo 19 Dr Amanda Seims, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, outlines a method for co-designing parks with girls

Key learnings from Session 1

1. Research should strive to foster a long-term relationship with communities. This benefits the researchers and participants by making the work more ethical and informed.
2. It is imperative that women and girls feel valued in research and empowered in the process of finding solutions.
3. Research must address the challenge of trying to cut across findings to seek consensus whilst also allowing space for diversity.
4. Q-methodology is a good approach to accessing a wide array of participant thoughts and drawing commonalities between them. Its findings can be a useful starting point for implementing change.
5. There are core considerations to using participatory and peer research which include issues relating to ethics, power dynamics and the extent to which a sample can represent a wider population.
6. Using an array of approaches to study and understand women and girls' feelings and experiences of safety in parks is a good way to overcome the limitations of individual methodologies.

Session 2: Learning from beyond the UK: research and practice on women and girls' safety in Sweden and Australia

Session 2 took on a hybrid format to access the research, learnings and contributions from those present at the event and beyond. The session was chaired by **Professor Adam Crawford, Co-Director, ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre.**

Offering a Swedish perspective, **Professor Vania Ceccato, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm**, called for a wider perspective on who is responsible for women's safety in public spaces. She also stressed the limits of comparative statistics, explaining their capacity to provide only a condensed insight of a larger picture. Vania cautioned against the generation of country-level statistics on women's experiences, challenging the assumption that conclusions can be generalised and emphasising the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding women's experiences and perceptions of safety in public spaces. She asserted the need to explore safety along the 'trip' as well as within different spaces.

Dr Linda Sandberg, Umeå University, Sweden, spoke about the importance of planning for and with teenage girls in Sweden, emphasising the need to view them as experts and involve them in the designing process. Linda reiterated that ensuring teenage girls are visible and safe in public is beneficial for everyone and that places for them should be tailored to their wants and needs. Linda also called for a norm-critical understanding in the planning process, adopting an approach which focuses not just on what girls are believed to want, but one which actively empowers them to determine the design themselves.



Photo 20 Professor Vania Ceccato, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, and Dr Linda Sandberg, Umeå University, present perspectives from Sweden

Professor Romina Rodela, Södertörn University, Sweden, discussed the importance of involving children and youth in spatial planning in Sweden, and the legal reform in this area. She highlighted the need for attractive and safe spaces for young people whilst acknowledging the challenge of designing urban spaces which cater to the temporariness of childhood and adolescence. Romina also stressed the importance of seeing young people as an emerging social group and society's future citizens, calling for better recognition of their potential to bring about positive change.



Photo 21 Dr Romina Rodela, Södertörn University, presents the Swedish planning context

Offering an Australian perspective, **Estelle Grech, Churchill Fellow, New South Wales**, identified three essential ingredients of an equitable public space that includes women and girls: good meaningful engagement; investment; and empathy from decision-makers. Estelle spoke of the importance of hearing the stories of women and girls in research and allowing them to co-design the spaces they use. She stressed the importance of allocating resources for creating safe public spaces and the need for those in positions of authority to show compassion towards the needs and experiences of women and girls.



Photo 22 Estelle Grech, Churchill Fellow, outlines essential ingredients of equitable public space

Key learnings from Session 2

1. Research must be careful in seeking to develop generalised, large-scale statistics on women's experiences in public spaces and should consider adopting a more nuanced perspective.

2. The international findings shared generally corroborated the national picture, suggesting that lessons can be learnt from the interventions and approaches taken elsewhere in the world.
3. The youth is an important emerging social group with a powerful voice. Research and society should strive to better understand their capacities and capabilities to invoke change.
4. Research must prioritise involving and empowering teenage girls in the planning process, acknowledging their position as experts on feelings and experiences of safety.
5. Research would benefit from adopting a more norm-critical understanding in the planning process, enabling spaces to be specifically designed by and for women and girls.

Session 3: Knowledge & Evidence Gaps: New Directions for Research

The final session adopted a different format as attendees partook in group discussions. The purpose was to identify gaps in current research, consider priority questions for future research on women and girls' safety in parks and public spaces and discuss how these research questions may be taken forward in practice. A facilitator guided discussion in each group.

Attendees identified the following as current evidence gaps in research:

- There is a lack of research exploring intersectional matters; women and girls are not a homogeneous group and research must do better in accommodating and reflecting the diversity existing within this population.
- Research into women and girls' safety and inclusion in public spaces does not, at present, sufficiently consider the experiences and feelings of those also belonging to other minority groups.
- More could be done to build the connection between research and its impact; it is important that research continues to be used to implement change by informing policy and practice.
- There is a lack of evidence exploring men and boys' perceptions, roles and contributions in the context of the safety of women and girls in parks and public spaces.
- Much of the existing research consists of self-selecting participants who are often accessible and recruited due to their presence in public parks. There is less research into the views and experiences of women and girls who do not attend public parks.
- Research has not yet comprehensively explored the use of parks after dark, specifically in terms of who attends them and when, why and how these spaces are used in the dark.
- Effective measures of change and progress with regard to interventions designed to improve women and girls' safety in parks have not yet been sufficiently developed or evaluated, so there is a lack of certain knowledge around which practices work and which are less effective.
- Research would benefit from having more statistics and data to produce more informed and implementable conclusions.



Photo 23 Group discussion to identify future directions for research

On considering directions for future research, the following ideas were put forward:

- Research should make more effort to speak to individuals that don't use parks or are infrequent users to understand who avoids these areas and their reasons for doing so. This can help inform design, enabling these spaces to be more inviting and encourage people to use them.
- Research could focus more on changing politics, making efforts to lobby politicians and enable the safety of women and girls to gain traction as a political priority. This could be enabled through the production of local evidence to which local politicians can connect.
- Mainstreaming research can help it to affect change. Widespread advertising and marketing, along with local community engagement, can help to spread research and spark reform.
- There is space for more research into creating effective reporting mechanisms that encourage people to report matters which in turn can be used to develop the existing evidence base.
- Intersectional research should focus on the different experiences and feelings of subpopulations more specific than just women and girls, for example exploring groups of women of different ages, (dis)abilities and ethnicities. The views of transgender and non-binary communities should also be explored.
- Future research should investigate how parks and public spaces can be made better for everyone, as it cannot be assumed that parks designed to be safer for women and girls will automatically be safer for everyone, especially members of minority groups.
- Researchers must continue to produce simple guidance that park managers and local authorities feel incentivised to use.

- Longitudinal research into women and girls' safety in parks could be conducted to better measure change in perceptions and/or behaviours overtime, revealing which interventions are effective.
- Limited budgets and resources will continue to impact research opportunities so developing affordable interventions remains crucial. Education is one example of an accessible, cost-efficient intervention.
- Research into the use of parks after dark could be conducted to improve understanding and assist in making these spaces better and safer during all hours.
- Future work could recruit boys and men under a peer research approach to explore their attitudes and behaviours in public parks. Its findings could be used to develop existing understandings of the safety and experiences of women and girls in these areas.
- Ideas should be piloted and tested more often; taking action is beneficial to build up the knowledge base and reveals effective practices and lessons to inform future efforts.

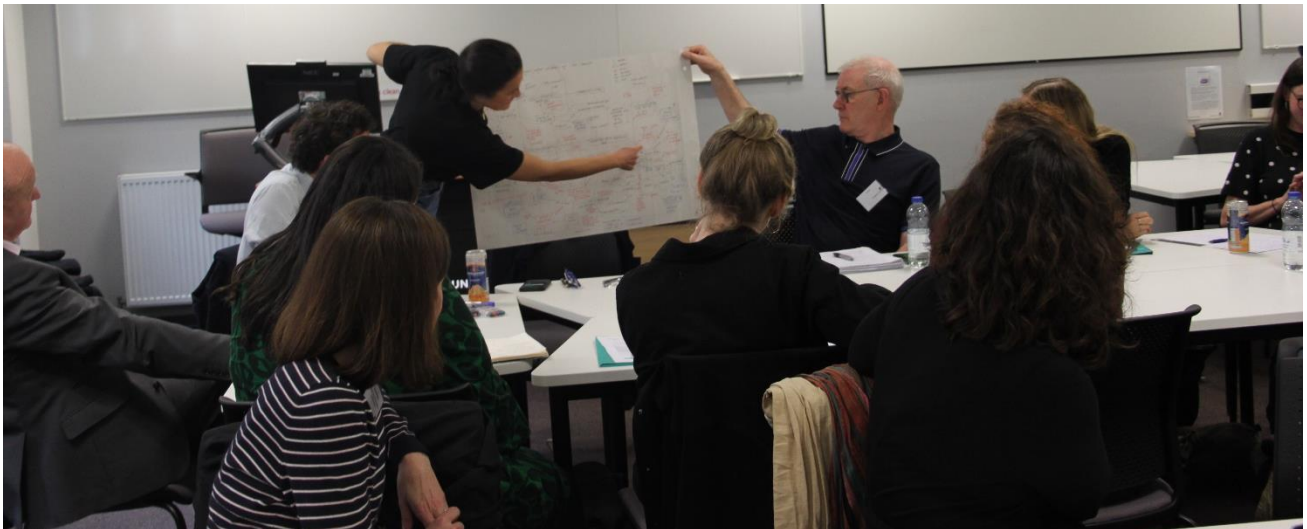


Photo 24 Dr Julia King, LSE Cities, wonderfully captures the group discussions

Conference Feedback

In total, 56 feedback forms were completed and returned across the two days of the conference.

Using a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' (5) to 'strongly disagree' (1), attendees were asked to determine the extent to which their views aligned with statements about the conference. When asked if they felt 'more informed about the issues facing women and girls' safety and inclusion in parks', attendees responses averaged 4.6, sitting between 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. 100% of responses also agreed or strongly agreed that attendees gained 'valuable learning from the research and practice examples on women and girl's safety in parks'.

When asked if they or their organisation will use the new *Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls* guidance, 91% agreed or strongly agreed that the guidance would be used by themselves or their organisation.

When asked how the guidance might be used by attendees and/or their organisation, responses said:

- 'Better customer consultation – changing our developments and designs to meet their needs'.
- 'To inform initial design and consultation, through to construction and monitoring and assessing'.
- 'To influence funding, policy and services locally'.
- 'To make more specific questions for women and girls in parks when carrying out participatory consultation'.
- 'It will be considered when developing placemaking [and] infrastructure strategies'.
- '[It] will be used as part of development team training and considered when starting new projects'.

Feedback also revealed that 100% of attendees agreed or strongly agreed that Day 2 of the conference provided a 'valuable opportunity to discuss different approaches and perspectives for researching women and girls' safety', with the majority strongly agreeing. The same applied to answers about whether the conference enabled them/their organisation to develop new ideas and foster partnerships.

Attendees were also asked for the top learning points they would take away from the conference.

Responses included:

- 'Built environment factors only do so much. We have to use these to facilitate social changes and every space needs a unique solution'.
- 'Education is key to bringing equality'.
- 'Engagement and application at a hyper-local level leads to understand and success'.
- 'The points raised today can be reflected in practical solutions across the placemaking sphere, not just parks'.
- 'Keep asking to keep informed'.

Responses reflecting on the conference as a whole were overwhelmingly positive. Of those collected, comments included:

- 'It has been an incredibly well organised conference and amazing to see so many disciplines and professions come together to start developing solutions'.
- 'Such a hopeful and powerful space. Massive credit to all organisers'.
- 'Looking forward to evaluations of implementations and success'.

- 'I was impressed with the variety of audience members from practice and really enjoyed the discussion'.

Press Coverage

Publisher	Title / programme
BBC News, 11 May 2023	'Women should be involved in park design to combat safety fears, says study'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-65544868
ITV1 Yorkshire West, 7 June 2023	ITV Calendar News, broadcast
The Guardian, 10 May 2023	'Women should help design UK parks to tackle safety fears, says study'. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/may/10/women-should-help-design-uk-parks-to-tackle-safety-fears-says-study
The Guardian, 13 May 2023	'By our own design: this is how we can make Britain's parks safe for women' by Tracy Brabin. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/13/britain-parks-safe-women-girls-public-spaces
Daily Telegraph, Edition 1, Scotland, 12 May 2023	'Teenage girls need bigger swings to enjoy parks'
Daily Star, Edition 1, National Edition, 11 May 2023	'Women need an escape'
BBC 1 Yorkshire, 10 May 2023	Look North programme
BBC Radio 2, 11 May 2023	Jeremy Vine Programme
BBC Radio 4, 11 and 12 May 2023	Today Programme
BBC Radio Lincolnshire, 11 May 2023	The Evening Show
Society and Politics News, University of Leeds, 10 May 2023	'Making Parks Safe for Women and Girls'. Available at: https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news-society-politics/news/article/5295/making-parks-safe-for-women-and-girls

Resources

A recording of the conference sessions and speaker slides, alongside more resources and information can be found on these websites:

- Green Flag Award Resources Hub: <https://www.greenflagaward.org/news/new-guidance-launched-to-create-safer-parks-for-women-and-girls/>
- Make Space for Girls: <https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk/resources-library>



Both Make Space for Girls and the Green Flag Award have Resources sections on their websites with links to a wide range of additional information on data, engagement and methodology.



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@ University of Leeds, June 2023

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