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GIRL  
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# HOW TO MAKE YOUR SPACES SAFER FOR WOMEN: A CALL TO ACTION FROM THE 51%



## INTRODUCTION

In November 2021, ukactive and the This Girl Can campaign collaborated to publish a practical guide, "**How to improve your services for women and girls: As told by the 51%**", based on research that was commissioned to better understand the experiences of women and girls using fitness and leisure facilities. The purpose of the guide was to help facilities create a more welcoming environment for women and girls and it covered a variety of issues that women identified as barriers to being active in this environment.

Since the release of the guide, ukactive has continued to consult with its members to understand how to support them to improve their facilities and services for women and girls. This work has also involved consultation with partners and consumer campaign groups in this space, in order to establish a full picture. The issue of how to tackle safety concerns has been raised consistently as an area where additional support from both ukactive and This Girl Can would be valued.

As a result of this feedback, further research was commissioned by ukactive and This Girl Can to gain an even deeper understanding of women's experiences in fitness and leisure settings, and what actions they want the sector to take to make them feel safer. The research found that four in 10 (42%) women surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment or intimidation, and this rises to 83% among 16–24-year-olds.

The key findings of this research are included in this new guidance along with recommendations on how to create a safe environment for women. Although many gyms and leisure centres have already taken steps to ensure women feel safer within their facilities, we wanted to ensure the guidance covered all aspects of what women shared with us about their experiences and therefore this guide covers a range of advice, from basic to more complex steps.

While gyms and leisure facilities provide some of the most popular activities among women and help to keep millions active every week, there remains a gender gap in the nation's activity levels. If women know that the sector is tackling safety issues and will support them in a consistent manner then this will help lead to sustained engagement in physical activity within these facilities. By taking concrete steps to address sexual harassment and intimidation, you can create a space that's inclusive, welcoming, safe and empowering for all.

**Let's work together to make this happen.**



## TERMINOLOGY

The following acronyms are used throughout our guidance and within the data referenced.

- **SHI:** sexual harassment and intimidation
- **FLC:** fitness and leisure centres

For our research we gave participants the following definitions:

- **Sexual harassment** is defined as any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which: violates your dignity, makes you feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated, creates a hostile or offensive environment.

This can be further categorised into:

- **Physical sexual harassment** (including unwanted touching, standing uncomfortably close)
- **Verbal sexual harassment** (including cat calling or wolf-whistling, sexual 'jokes' or innuendos, suggestive comments, unwanted comments on your body or appearance)
- **Other sexual harassment or intimidation** (including staring or suggestive looks, unwanted sexual advances, photography/filming without consent).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research approach was conducted, by research agency **Walnut Unlimited**, that consisted of a national survey followed by an online community with women aged 16 and over who were current users of facilities (must have visited an FLC once a month for a time period in the past three years).

- A 10-minute online survey was carried out with a nationally representative sample of 752 women aged 16 and over in the UK, with a boost of 150 women aged 16-24 in October 2022.
  - All of the women spoken to had used a fitness and leisure centre on a monthly basis at some point within the past three years.
  - The majority (69%) are currently visiting an FLC at least once a month, while 31% are lapsed, meaning they had used an FLC on a monthly basis at some point within the last three years.
- This was followed by a 3-day online community in November 2022 with 20 women aged 16 and over which was used to delve deeper and further understand experiences of and views on sexual harassment in fitness and leisure centres.
- **All statistics presented in this report are from this sample, unless otherwise specified.**

## WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

All fitness and leisure centre staff - from reception, to the gym floor and group exercise instructors - to ensure that women and girls feel supported by the whole system.



# SECTION 1

## CODE OF CONDUCT:

Raising awareness of your stance on sexual harassment & intimidation



This section includes practical guidance on how you can demonstrate your position on SHI to your members in a way that provides reassurance to those with concerns, without appearing judgmental, and demonstrates that such behaviours are prohibited.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Raise awareness of SHI through visible policies around 'code of conduct' to increase understanding and shift social norms

## WHY?

Good levels of awareness and understanding are key factors to building capability to promote behaviour change; in simple terms, people won't change their behaviour if they aren't aware it is a problem.

However, there is a disconnect between what is perceived by wider society to be SHI (the more extreme, easily identifiable behaviours) and what many women feel is SHI and are likely to experience on a daily basis (for example staring or unwanted comments). This was highlighted in the reporting behaviours of women in our survey where 68% of women who experienced SHI never reported and with the number one reason being that they didn't think it was serious enough (43%).

The need for greater clarity on what is reportable was further highlighted in our focus groups. One woman aged 29, said: "I wouldn't be 100% positive that what I have experienced would be classed as reportable - I'm still not sure".

While another woman, aged 23, explained:

"I don't always know how to pinpoint a behaviour as harassment specifically. Like does it have to be a repeated behaviour or even just occur a single time? Is it language used or how it makes you feel?"

Our research showed that women also feel that men can often be unaware of how women are made to feel by their behaviour, so education around this could go a long way. Additional focus can be placed on areas of the gym where behaviours that can be interpreted as SHI are more prevalent. For example, our survey found that more than a third (39%) of SHI is experienced in the weights area.

The common theme emerging from women's responses in the survey was that it is about the experience rather than a rigid set of behaviours, for example if there is intent behind the action such as staring. As this can be a confusing area for all, a code of conduct could help explain this for both men and women.



## WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A CODE OF CONDUCT?

**Reminder:** A code of conduct is a set of guidelines and rules that outlines the ethical and behavioral expectations for individuals or groups within a particular organisation, community, or profession and serves as a framework for establishing and maintaining a culture of respect, integrity, and professionalism. Its purpose is to promote accountability, transparency, and trust, while also providing a means of addressing and resolving disputes or violations of the code.

It is important that a code of conduct is easy to understand by all members and therefore should include the following (in relation to SHI):

- Statements clearly indicating that all members should be respectful and courteous to other members at all times
- Examples of what is considered unacceptable or disrespectful behaviour
- Examples of actions that could be taken by an FLC or have been taken in the past when the code of conduct is violated
- Contact numbers for support if needed
- Clear signposting to a range of reporting mechanisms and clear encouragement to report incidents
- Notification of when code of conducts have been updated

## HOW SHOULD YOU COMMUNICATE YOUR CODE OF CONDUCT?

One of the most important steps is around communication- people cannot be expected to follow a code of conduct if they are not aware of its existence or content, and they are unlikely to listen to it if it is delivered in an accusatory or judgmental way.

### Recommendations:

- Include your code of conduct as part of the induction process for all new members, ensuring new members agree to adhere to it
- Ensure the code of conduct is easily found on your website
- Send communications via email or social media to remind members to familiarise themselves with the content of the code of conduct and maintain awareness ensuring the message is non-judgemental
- Display simplified and condensed versions clearly throughout the FLC e.g. using posters or digital ads on machines
- Include visual cues such as posters in male-dominated areas e.g. the weights area or male changing rooms, to highlight etiquette, behaviours and raise awareness

**TOP TIP:** Women are aware that SHI is a complex issue to communicate about, so incorporating information about SHI into a wider set of etiquette principles is a good way to avoid putting too much attention on a potentially sensitive issue. Try to centre communications around being “safer for everyone” in order not to victimise certain groups.



## TAILORING YOUR MESSAGE

One option to consider is implementing customised messaging in areas that are specific to a particular gender (such as changing rooms). This can be a valuable opportunity to communicate with these audiences on an individual level.

Our research indicated a strong rationale for developing some information specifically for men, delivered in a non-accusatory style and acknowledging that most men behave appropriately. This could include:

- Providing examples of more subtle behaviours for men to reflect upon and to spot in others e.g. staring, unwanted comments, unrequested assistance (with equipment or technique), following on social media, encroaching on personal space and taking women's weights which are in use
- Explaining the negative effects these behaviours can have on women
- Stating that your facility is committed to a safe environment for all users, and highlighting the part that men are able to play in supporting women and making sure it is an equal space for all.

## HOW TO INTERVENE SAFELY

Despite our best efforts to reduce incidences of SHI, the reality is that these may still occur within facilities so it is important for staff members and customers to understand how they can intervene safely if they do witness an incident.

The Enough campaign from the UK government provides guidelines on how to safely challenge abuse, using the STOP mnemonic.

**S**ay Something  
**T**ell Someone  
**O**ffer Support  
**P**rovide a Diversion

You can find more information and campaign resources on the campaign website:

**ENOUGH.**

## TONE OF VOICE

All communications and activity should have a supportive, inclusive tone. As SHI is broadly something that happens to women, the tone of any communications tackling the issue can be seen to represent them.

Getting the tone wrong can create a sense of alienation, particularly if it includes a harsh tone of voice, and could be confusing for the audience.

Communications and activity that highlight the value of 'support' can work well, as this can make women feel empowered, and less likely to feel ashamed or to adapt their behaviours. Equally, support can be adapted to include the male perspective – rather than placing the blame on all men, as it may help men to develop more positive behaviours.



### Recommendations:

- Don't use extreme or accusatory language - communication should be open and inclusive
- Communications should be framed from a learning and education perspective rather than judgmental
- Ensure that any new messaging is tested with both men and women to ensure it is received well by both audiences
- Try to centre communications around being "safer for everyone", to avoid victimising certain groups

### NEXT STEPS

It is important that your code of conduct is backed up with professional and empathetic reporting procedures to avoid losing credibility if it is not seen to be enforced. You need to feel prepared to move swiftly onto this stage if it arises.

# SECTION 2

## REPORTING:

Increasing confidence in your commitment to women's safety



This section includes recommendations on how you can follow through on your policies by offering robust reporting processes that meet the needs of your members.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Embed clear, responsive and empathetic reporting processes that encourage members to come forward to report incidents.

## WHY?

Forty-two per cent of women in our survey reported experiencing at least one form of SHI in their FLC, rising to over four in five (83%) among women aged 16-24. However, of the 42% of women who have experienced SHI in their FLC, only 25% of those reported it.

### Top three reasons for women not reporting SHI were:

1. Not thinking it was serious enough (43%)
2. Not thinking anything would be done (34%)
3. Not feeling confident enough to report (27%)

When shown these findings in our focus groups, one woman, aged 36, told us: “Not being taken seriously and nothing being done stand out to me as the reasons why I would not [report SHI] as when I did before this is what happened.”

Another woman, aged 33, said “I can imagine feeling uncomfortable but worrying I was just making a fuss. If it happened to me and I felt genuinely scared I'd be worried about reporting it and possible repercussions.”

You can play a meaningful role in supporting women to feel confident enough to report negative behaviours they experience within your facilities and you can encourage this by improving awareness of your processes for reporting SHI. 'Not knowing who to report SHI to' was the reason that 15% of women in our sample gave for not reporting an incident they experienced.

As so few women actually report sexual harassment and intimidation, if they do, it is likely to be a new experience for them, therefore if reporting processes do not meet expectations or deliver appropriate outcomes, this could cause cultural, longer-term problems.

Reporting can also help take the onus away from women; choosing to share incidents means that women do not have to take action into their own hands in the form of changing their own behaviours, as our survey highlighted that three in four (76%) women who have experienced sexual harassment or intimidation at a fitness and leisure centre have changed their behaviour as a result.

Examples of changes in behaviour from our survey include, but are not limited to:

- Changing the time/day I go to the FLC (24%)
- Avoiding the areas with more men e.g. weights area (23%)
- Avoided dressing in a certain way (18%)
- Stopped using the FLC permanently (5%)

Women told us how they would like to see reporting processes improved.

One woman, aged 33, said: **“Make it easy to find reporting procedures on their website as well as their apps as a lot of people now use these to book classes etc.”**

Another woman, aged 23, said: **“Just making us aware that we can report it, and something would actually be done about the situation.”**



## TOP TIPS FOR BEST PRACTICE REPORTING PROCESSES

### Reporting principles to stick to:

- Show respect for everyone involved, and ensure any investigation is conducted with discretion and anonymity to stop potential retaliation
- Offer a flexible process that adapts to the person reporting, their needs, the type of SHI and the situation. For example, offer a range of reporting methods including in person, email, telephone or feedback form, as well as options to report an incident to someone of the same sex.
- Show empathy and a lack of judgement with a focus on encouraging members to be able to report anything that makes women feel uncomfortable
- Give women control and autonomy in the process
- Keep a record of reports and identify any repeated behaviours and ensure records comply with data and confidentiality guidelines



### How to communicate about and throughout the reporting process:

- Ensure that clear guidelines on the reporting process are easily accessible to all members on your website or app
- Give clear and regular communication and feedback throughout the reporting process
- Give clear outlines of next steps, outcomes of investigations, clear action plan and signposting to support. Communicate what they can expect from the process

## HELPFUL LINKS

[HM Government: Enough Campaign Hub](#)

[Stay Safe Global Charitable Trust: Abuse Awareness in Sport Training](#)

[White Ribbon: Accreditation and Programmes for Organisations](#)

[Child Protection in Sport Unit: Leisure Sector Safeguarding Checklist](#)

[Child Protection in Sport Unit: Preventing Abuse in Positions of Trust](#)

[ukactive: Sexual Harassment Policy Template](#)

