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**SAFE CITIES**

**FOR WOMEN  
AND GIRLS:**

**Can dreams come true?**

**POLICY BRIEF**





# INTRODUCTION



# Introduction

Government of Vietnam (GOV) has ratified the international conventions prohibiting violence against women in both private and public places such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This shows that the Government of Vietnam demonstrated commitment to comply with international regulations for fair and just treatment to promote women's rights. The Vietnamese government has also successfully promoted women's rights in economic development, with 46.6% of women participating in the labour force, according to a 2010 report by UNIFEM (now UN Women).

Despite these achievements, however, Vietnamese women remain vulnerable to daily challenges fuelled by violence, discrimination and a lack of economic opportunities. Of particular worry is the high level of sexual discrimination and violence suffered by women in public places and at work. This report will show, for example, that 87% of women and girls have encountered sexual harassment in a public place, while 89% of men and bystanders have witnessed acts of sexual harassment against women and girls. These disturbingly high figures are compounded by a lack of action on the part of both men and women - 66% of women and girls say they do not take action when confronted with acts of sexual violence, and the majority of men and bystanders - 65% - do not take any serious action. Such lack of action means perpetrators are rarely brought to justice. And more worryingly, this has been "accepted" as normal by people.

Sexual harassment and violence impacts immensely not only women and girls themselves, especially on their ability to work, their confidence, and their mental and physical health, but on society as a whole. It is imperative that we make our cities safe places for women and girls, where they can move freely without fear of rape, harassment or sexual assault. Developed mainly from the survey conducted by ActionAid Vietnam and the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development, this policy brief covers eight crucial aspects concerning the safety, security and dignity of women and girls in urban public areas:

- potential risks for women and girls in urban public places
- forms of sexual harassment faced by women and girls in public places
- areas where sexual harassment mostly occurs
- time and frequency of sexual harassment
- perpetrators of sexual harassment
- reaction of victims to acts of sexual harassment

- reaction of bystanders to acts of sexual harassment
- measures adopted by women and girls to avoid acts of sexual harassment in public places.

## Visions of a safe city – can dreams come true?

For ActionAid, in a safe city for women and girls – whether they are born in the city, have travelled to the city as migrant workers and students or are tourists – can: travel without experiencing violence, dress without facing discrimination, go to school without being excluded, work safely in the knowledge that employment rights will be upheld, access and use public services such as education, health, shelter and water provision without fear or harassment. There they can enjoy recreational activities, approach justice services and the police without suspicion, judgment or fear, contribute to planning the future of the city, speak out about issues which are important and have confidence in government institutions. Women and girls feel safe in their homes, at school, at work and travelling with freedom around their neighbourhoods during the day and at night. Women and girls feel valued as equals and their voices are heard. They are proud of their city.

## Methodology

This survey on **“Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?”** was conducted jointly in 2014 by ActionAid Vietnam and the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED). Over 2,000 people from urban spaces in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi were asked a series of questions regarding attitudes to and experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces. The survey design was based on guidelines of ActionAid International’s Safety Audit Participatory toolkit<sup>1</sup>, as well as on experiences from other countries where ActionAid has applied this toolkit. The report highlights urgent need to improve current policies to ensure safety for women

<sup>1</sup> Safety Audit Participatory toolkit provides guidance on the safety audit process taking users from guiding principles and the four stages of planning and design, implementation, analysis and report writing and monitoring and evaluation. It also provides a selection of tools that can be used in carrying out the safety audit.

and girls in urban public places, and makes specific policy recommendations to protect and guarantee their basic rights, particularly those of women and girl migrants in urban areas of Vietnam.

## Terminologies

- **Violence** in this policy brief covers forms of sexual harassment and assaults against women, mostly on women and girl migrant workers in public areas.
- **Sexual harassment** includes gestures or acts that make others feel sexually and psychologically uncomfortable, such as men staring, intentionally exposing sexual organs, whistling, teasing, and passing sexual remarks on the appearance of a person, flirting or sending sexual SMS.
- **Sexual assault** includes actions physically committed on others causing harm towards them mentally and physically, such as touching, rape or forceful sex.
- **A public place** is understood as a place outside home where people meet, study, relax and engage in social activities such as streets, bus stops and stations, public transport, offices, factories, markets/supermarkets, schools, hospitals, exhibition centres, restaurants, parks, stadiums, and cinemas etc.<sup>2</sup>
- **Safety** of women and girls in public places means women and girls feel comfortable, cheerful and confident instead of feeling worried, vulnerable and highly vigilant when out and about in public places.<sup>3</sup>

## Respondents

The total number of respondents was 2,046, categorised into two types: women and girls, and men and bystanders. All respondents were aged 16 and above. The category of bystanders included both women and men who are often present in the survey sites and have a high probability of witnessing acts of sexual harassment on women and girls. The distribution of respondents is presented in table 1 below.

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2 This definition was made by women and girls in the rapid assessment carried out by ActionAid Vietnam on violence against women and girls in public places on Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in May 2013

3 *ibid*

**Table 1: Total number of respondents per district**

Districts		Women and girls	Men and bystanders	Total
Ho Chi Minh City	Binh Tan	150	51	201
	Go Vap	187	52	239
	District 1	149	50	199
	District 4	137	55	192
	Thu Duc	131	50	181
Hanoi	Cau Giay	147	58	205
	Hai Ba Trung	155	60	215
	Long Bien	154	54	208
	Tay Ho	149	51	200
	Thanh Xuan	147	59	206
Total		1506	540	2046



# KEY FINDINGS



# Key findings

## 1. Potential risks to women and girls in urban public places

According to the survey results, 45% of women and girls and 45% of men and bystanders reported sexual harassment as the highest risk to women and girls in urban public places, compared to other risks such as traffic accidents, robbery and pick-pocketing. The fear of being sexually assaulted or raped among women and girls is also relatively high as reported by 17% of women and girls and 14% of men and bystanders.

**45%** of women and girls and **45%** of men and bystanders reported sexual harassment as the highest risk to women and girls in urban public places.

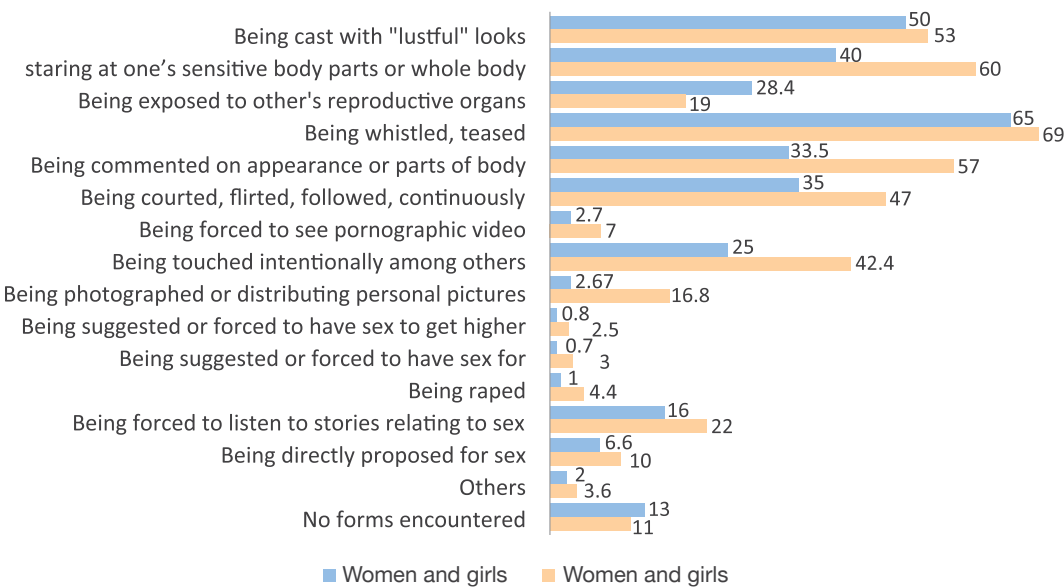
## 2. Forms of sexual harassment faced by women and girls in public places

**87%** of women and girls confirmed that they had encountered sexual harassment, **89%** of men and bystanders reported witnessing acts of sexual harassment against women and girls. The harassment was committed in the forms of whistling, teasing, passing remarks on appearance, staring at one's sensitive body parts and touching intentionally among others.

Majority of respondents in all groups ***had seen or experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public place***. While 87% of women and girls confirmed that they had encountered sexual harassment, 89% of men and bystanders reported witnessing acts of sexual harassment against women and girls. The harassment was committed in the forms of whistling, teasing, passing remarks on appearance, staring at

one's sensitive body parts and touching intentionally among others. In addition, 50% of women and girls noted being subjected to inappropriate 'lustful' looks by men.

Figure 1: Forms of sexual harassment faced by women and girls in urban public places (%)



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

Different occupational and age groups experience different forms of sexual harassment. The survey found that 73% of school children/students aged 16-23 often experience more whistling and teasing, civil servants often receive comments on their body and general appearance, and office staff mainly experience harassment via text messages (SMS), emails, and pictures and at times verbally.

3. Areas where sexual harassment mostly occurs in urban public places

**Streets are considered the most notorious places for sexual harassment to occur**, as confirmed by 57% of women/girls and 47% of men/bystanders. This is followed by parks with 11% and 19% respectively. Twenty percent of girls (16-18 years old) experience sexual harassment at school, while 11% are sexually harassed on public transport. Work places are also noted as places where sexual harassment takes place, as indicated by 18% of women and girls and 15% of men and bystanders.

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Many of those public places considered unsafe for women and girls in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are either very solitary or very crowded places. Some examples are listed in the table 2 below:

**Table 2: Unsafe places in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi**

Ho Chi Minh City	Hanoi
<b>Bus station</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mien Dong bus station</li> <li>• Bus terminal (Kinh Duong Vuong Road)</li> </ul> <b>Parks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phu Lam, Gia Dinh park</li> <li>• Roads</li> <li>• Tu Xuong Road (District 1)</li> <li>• Ten Lua Road, Ten Lua Road surrounding areas, Tan Binh District</li> </ul> <b>Others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cho Lon area</li> <li>• Slum areas in Tan Binh, Binh Chanh, Thu Duc District</li> <li>• Highway 1A crossing Tan Tao industrial park</li> <li>• Railway stations, public WCs</li> <li>• Phu My bridge</li> <li>• Central library of Ho Chi Minh City national university</li> <li>• University campus from 18.00-22.00p.m</li> </ul>	<b>Bus station</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yen Nghia – Ha Dong bus station</li> <li>• Long Bien bus station</li> <li>• My Dinh, Nuoc Ngam, Giap Bat bus station</li> <li>• Giap Bat–Nhon bus route</li> </ul> <b>Parks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ha Dong park</li> <li>• Thang Long North industrial park</li> </ul> <b>Roads</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Khuat Duy Tien Road tunnel</li> <li>• Pham Van Dong Street, Pham Hung Road</li> <li>• Linh Dam Road</li> <li>• Au Co, Lac Long Quan – Xuan Dinh Road</li> <li>• Extended Le Van Luong Road</li> <li>• Trieu Khuc – Thanh Xuan Road</li> <li>• Thang Long Boulevard, Thang Long bridge</li> </ul> <b>Others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thanh Cong, Yen Xa slum areas</li> <li>• Nghi Tam, Long Bien market, temporary market at Nga Tu So</li> <li>• Nha Xanh – Dich Vong, Nga Tu So, Phung Khoan</li> <li>• Long Bien Boarding Houses</li> <li>• Public WCs</li> </ul>

Numerous factors make cities unsafe for women. For example, inadequate or inaccessible public services such as poor lighting, shortage of signs and information, lack of clean public toilets or separate toilets for women, lack of policing and legal recourse, and a sense of impunity enjoyed by perpetrators. However, even where services are better quality and accessible, women will still

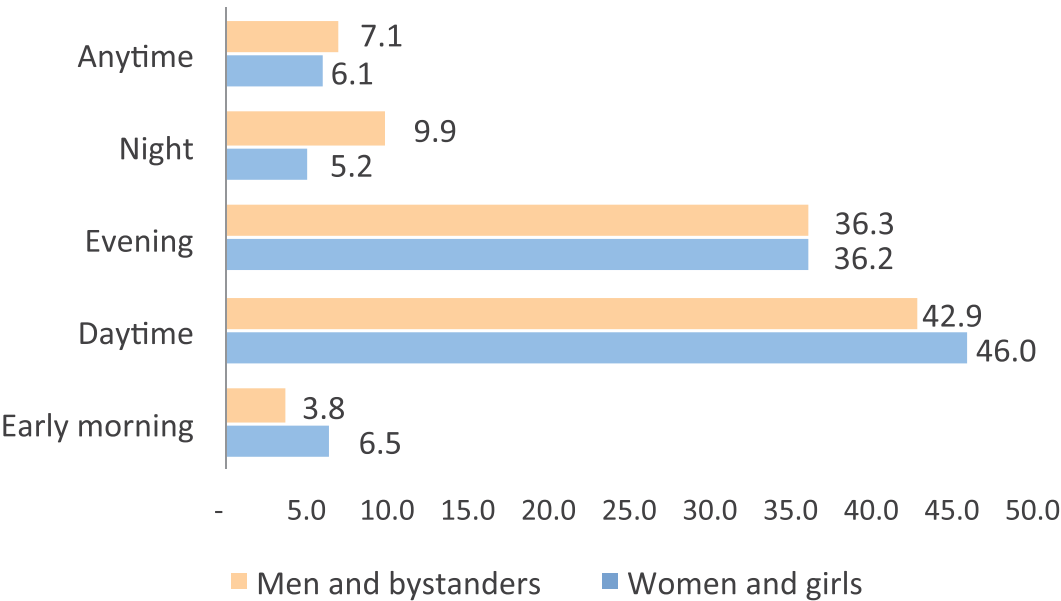
experience sexual violence as a society-wide presence of institutional sexism and gender bias means that men consider women to be subordinate. They try to control what women and girls wear, they belittle women's experiences and blame women for any violence they experience. Women migrant workers are particularly stigmatised as they have travelled away from their homes to work, to a place where they do not feel belonged and secure.

#### 4. Time and frequency of sexual harassment of women and girls in urban public places

The survey shows that women and girls face sexual harassment at any time of the day.

The survey shows that **women and girls face sexual harassment at any time of the day**. Forty-six per cent of women and girls and 43% of men and bystanders observed that sexual harassment often takes place during daytime. The time between 18.00-20.00 hours also sees a fair degree of sexual harassment, as noted by 36% of women and girls and 36% of men and bystanders.

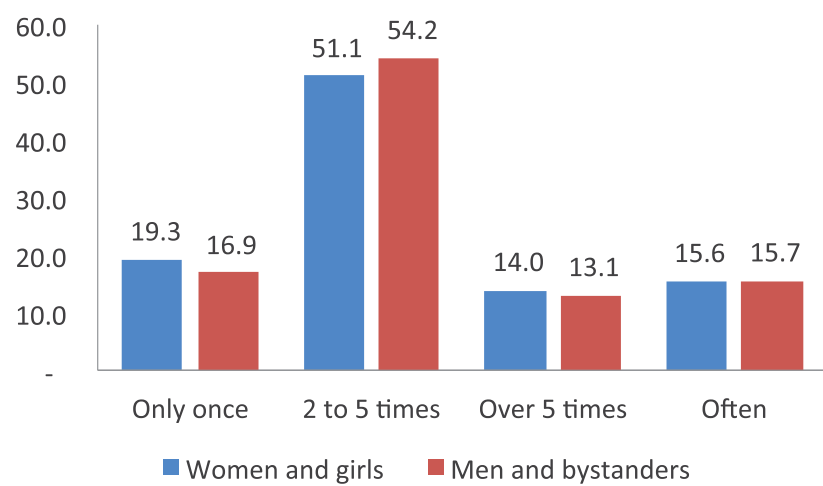
Figure 2: Time when women face sexual harassment in urban public places



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

Over half of all women and girls – 51% – reported having experienced sexual harassment more than three times in broad daylight in their lifetime. In addition, 16% of women and girls noted having generally faced harassment on a regular basis.

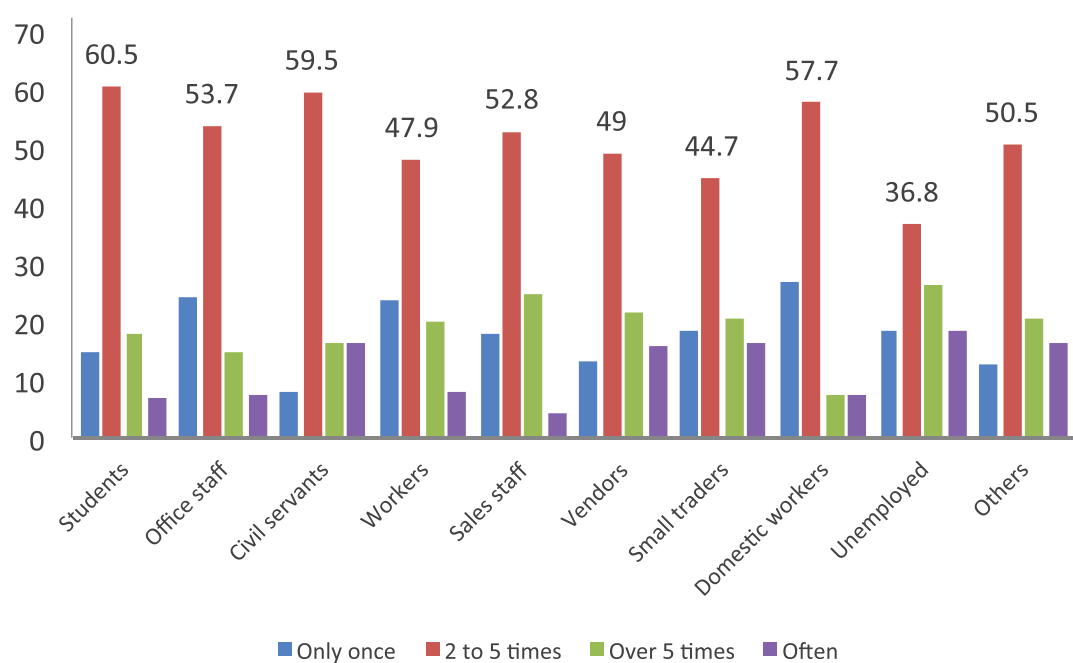
**Figure 3: Frequency of sexual harassment often faced/witnessed in urban public places in the course of a lifetime.**



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

The survey further reveals that all women and girls, regardless of their occupations, experience sexual harassment between two and five times in their lifetimes. This demonstrates the extent of sexual harassment crosses economic and age barriers. School girls and college students experienced it most frequently (60%) followed by civil servants, domestic workers, office staff, sales staff and the unemployed respectively with 59%, 57%, 54% and 53%.

**Figure 4: Frequency of occupational sexual harassment**



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

## 5. Who is perpetrating sexual harassment?

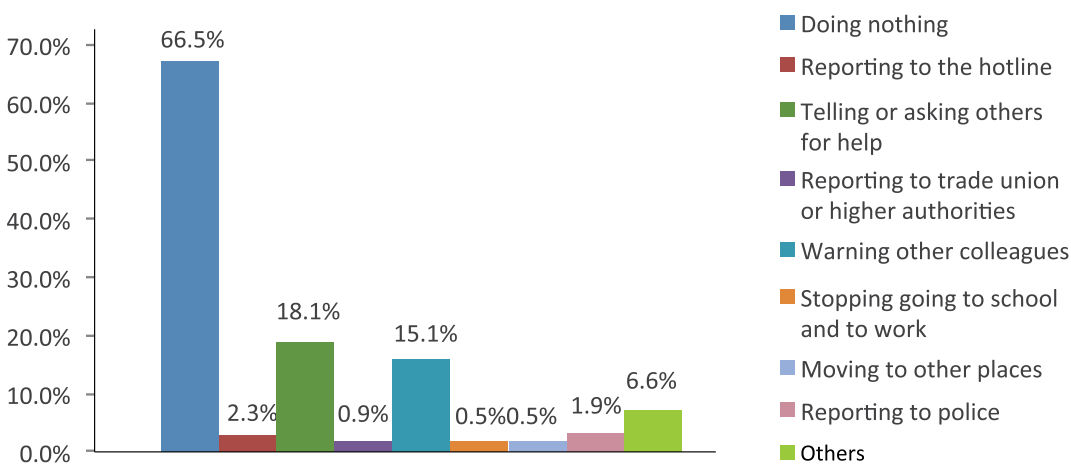
- **Most perpetrators of sexual harassment are young men, in the 15-25 age group.** This was confirmed by 41% of women and 52% of men/ bystander respondents, while those in the 36-55 age group came second with 24% confirmation by women and 7% by men and bystanders. Sexual harassment is perpetuated by both individuals and groups. Almost two thirds of women respondents (65%) said that sexual harassment perpetrators are individuals and 48% of men and bystanders shared this observation. On the otherhand, just over a quarter (26%) of women and 40% of men and bystanders pointed out that major perpetrators of sexual harassment conducted their acts in groups.
- According to 91% of women aged 18-23, perpetrators are mostly strangers. However, according to 86% of men and other witnesses, perpetrators are mainly employers.

## 6. Reaction to acts of sexual harassment in urban public places

On average, 67% of women and girls say they do not take action when confronted with acts of sexual harassment. However, this picture shifts slightly across different groups - 17% of the unemployed take actions, 29% of domestic workers' groups take action and 30% of civil servants chose to seek help or share with colleagues when they encountered sexual harassment.

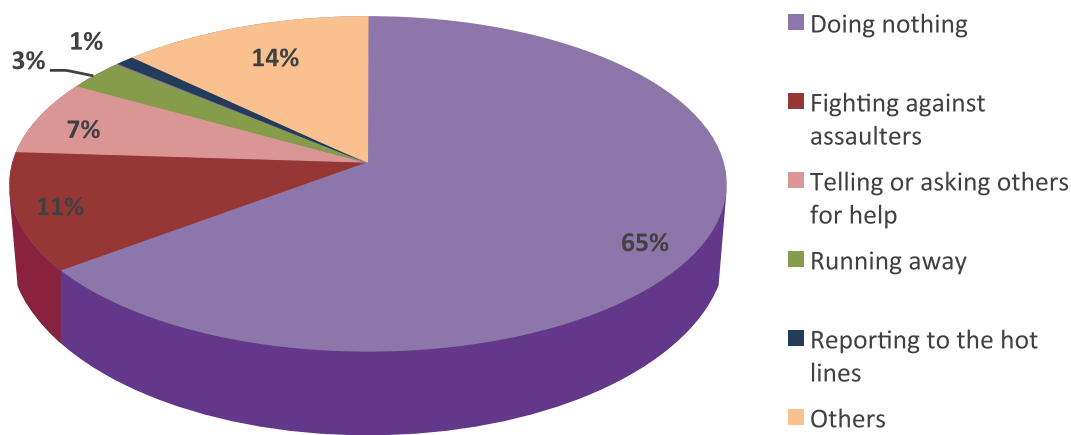
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Figure 5: Reaction to sexual harassment (Women and girls)



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

Figure 6: Immediate reaction to acts of sexual harassment (Men and bystanders)



Source: Street survey on “Safe cities for women and girls: can dreams come true?” - 2014

The majority of men and bystanders– 65% – do not take any serious action when they witness acts of sexual harassment. A mere 0.8% of men and bystanders reported calling government reporting hotlines.

There are many reasons why no actions are taken against sexual harassment and sexual assault: neither women nor men take action against acts such as **whistling and teasing** and **inappropriate lustful looks because these acts are normalized** by many men and women. Most respondents thought that such gestures are a simple expression of masculinity and manliness or sometimes even fun.

Acts of sexual harassment in public places often happen very quickly. It is difficult to gather evidence and witnesses since such acts are not considered a serious breach of law, and thereforetherefore there is little in the way of a deterrent. .

General lack of trust in the authorities is another reason for inaction among victims and witnesses. For example, 34% of women think that even if they report sexual harassment to the police, no action will be taken. Besides, the reporting procedure is long, complicated and tiring.

In many instances, reporting acts of sexual harassment comes with some degree of shame and stigma from the community, as if women and girls have done something wrong in order to attract sexual harassment from men. This further explains why many women and girls choose to ignore harassment, while others are simply afraid of approaching the police. Only 1.9% of women respondents said they would report to the police for help, while the rest said it was not worth report incidents of harassment to the police.

## **7. Measures adopted by women and girls to avoid acts of sexual harassment in public places**

### **Women and girls are increasingly adopting different measures to avoid acts of sexual harassment**

These measures include: not going to solitary or deserted places, minimizing travel at night, avoiding wearing low-necklines and sleeveless t-shirts, and carrying self-defence objects in case of physical attack.



# CONCLUSION



# Conclusion

Ha Noi as a City for Peace cited by UNESCO and Ho Chi Minh City used to be as Pearl of the East are lands of dreams for millions of lives. People wish to have a safe environment for themselves and for their children to live with safety and pride.

**The real picture of the cities as shown by this survey runs counter to the hopes and dreams of the women and girls. The public places such as the city streets, public transports and even offices turn out to be unsafe and harmful for them as they are subjected to a life of physical assaults and mental suffering on a regular basis.**

The women migrants often leave their villages to these cities seeking jobs and decent lives in a supportive environment. These cities also attract a large number of tourists who come to explore and enjoy their holidays; and the young female students love to acquire knowledge and skills to develop their full potentials and also have fun without worries and finally the Government's institutions are happily run in cities of peace and civilization.

The real picture of the cities as shown by this survey runs counter to the hopes and dreams of the women and girls. The public places such as the city streets, public transports and even offices turn out to be unsafe and harmful for them as they are subjected to a life of physical assaults and mental suffering on a regular basis.

Women and girls living in poverty suffer even more. Public services such as education, transport, security, lighting and toilet either lack quality or are insufficient, which increase even more the vulnerability of women and girls. This situation is exacerbated by difficulty in accessing gender responsive public services and efficient programs that tackles violence against women in public spaces.

More importantly, the attitude and behavior of men and the culture of impunity must change. To that effect, the government must enact effective laws, monitoring and policing to make our cities livable, and the dreams of millions of people to have a life of safety & pride can come true.

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## Policy recommendations

**It is constitutional and legal rights of women and girls to have a guaranteed safety and security at all places and at all times. To ensure these basic rights we make the following recommendations for different stakeholders to take effective actions:**

## Public lighting

- Install and maintain public lighting, extending lighting reach to all streets, alleys, parks, communities, public transport stops as well as to other relevant public institution such as schools, universities and hospitals.

## Public Transport

- Increase number and improve the quality of public transport facilities, prioritizing more routes to the outskirts and poor communities.
- Increase number of buses to cater for the rush hours, and for women working at night shift to better transport women safely and in places with difficult access.
- Consult with poor communities to get suggestions for new routes and bus terminals
- Organise campaign and intensify communications to stop gender based violence and harassment on the public transport.
- Provide training for drivers and bus attendants to develop their capacity to handle cases of harassment and sexual violence inside the transports.
- Increase numbers of toilets equipped with safe doors and latches, separated for women and men at every public bus stops.
- Cameras (CCTV) should be installed in public transport and in other hot spots to gather evidences for legal action and to deter the harassers.

## Policing and law enforcement

- Train and mobilize police officers to understand and respond properly to cases of violence against women and girls and take actions against the perpetrators of sexual harassment without blaming, intimidating or ridiculing women and girls as victims.
- Increase number of police patrols in both busy and quieter areas to stop violence and crime.
- Raise public awareness to stop violence against women.
- Enforce laws to punish violence against women and girls in public spaces and everywhere.
- Increase number of women police with gender sensitive professionals to respond to cases of violence.
- Ensure 24 hours women police services because sexual violence against women can happen at any time of the day.
- Establish hotlines to which women can call to report violence against them and demand action.
- Ensure standard procedure in place to respond to incidences of violence against women and girls in public places
- Maintain regularly participatory survey (like once every two years) on issues related to safety of women and girls in public areas for timely actions
- Ensure the integration of specific definition of sexual harassment in the legal framework.

## Education

- Develop and implement strategies for non-sexist and inclusive education from government consultation with education workers and social organizations.
- Identify and punish violence in schools by setting up clear rules, procedures, guidelines and systems for dealing with perpetrators including teachers and other people in authority who commit sexual violence against women students for any purposes.
- Develop teachers' capacity to better deal with sexual violence at schools or campus.
- Establish forum/debate for school and parents to address issues of drugs and early pregnancy.
- Establish media and schools/university association to undertake training to ensure media report on sexual violence and women's rights to be gender sensitive in addressing the root causes of gender violence without victim blaming
- Educate boys and men to understand that sexual harassment and assault against women and girls are uncivilized, unacceptable and legally punishable.
- Identify ambassadors to sensitize public about sexual harassment against women and girls in the public space.
- Sensitize the law makers and public that sexual harassment should be a crime and not only a normal and natural reaction of men towards women.

## Health

Although the survey did not cover the issues related to health, it is important to ensure quality and gender responsive health services for women and girls who suffer from gender based violence in the public areas such as physical violence and sexual assaults.

- Make information available at all times for women residents on how and where they can receive health care and specific treatment in cases of violence.
- Build capacity to improve health agents approach to women's health preventive treatment in public health care facilities.
- Train health agents to develop sensitive gender treatments at the public health units.
- Increase the quality of hospitals with appropriate equipment and sufficient number of doctors.

## Participation

- Conduct dialogue among government, public services providers, communities and their agencies to identify existing unsafe cities issues and find appropriate responses.
- Organize public meetings in which poor residents and migrants can address unsafe cities situations and the have their rights to the city ensured.
- Organise women's and men's neighborhood groups to be vigilant and tackle cases of violence and make their areas safe for women and all.
- Increase and strengthen participation of local organizations to interact with People's Councils to reflect the issues of the cities and their recommendations.

Individuals everywhere, women and men, young and old, need to use their voices to call for an end to harassment and abuse against women, and make our cities safe, secure and inclusive places for women to live in.

**ActionAid and CGFED call for support and participation of individuals, organizations, companies, media, who care about safety and rights of women and girls in the city to join the program “Safe City for Women and Girls - Can dreams come true?”.**

Please contact us at: [Safe.city.Vietnam@actionaid.org](mailto:Safe.city.Vietnam@actionaid.org).

A full report can be downloaded from <http://www.actionaid.org/vietnam/publications>.

*Ha Noi, 2014*

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ActionAid Vietnam is an international non-governmental organization working to end poverty. Working in Vietnam since 1989, it sides with poor and marginalised people, and commits to the sustainable development of the country.

For more information, please check ActionAid's official website:  
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Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) is a Vietnam non-governmental organization. Founded in 1993, CGFED has been carrying out social scientific research and intervention activities, targeting at women's development and gender equity.

For more information, please check CGFED's official website:  
<http://www.cgfed.org.vn>

The report was prepared with financial support by Irish Aid and ActionAid.



LUCK HOUSE

