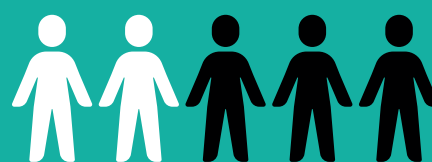# Women's views on safety in parks

**Parks benefit health and wellbeing. Yet concerns about safety can constrain women's use and experience of them.**

4 out of 5 women

2 out of 5 men

in the UK felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or open space (ONS, 2021).

## THE RESEARCH

### What makes parks feel safe and unsafe?

67 women aged 18-84 years from across West Yorkshire rated their agreement or disagreement with 49 statements about their local parks, which they arranged on a grid according to their own subjective viewpoint. Afterwards, women reflected in one-to-one interviews on why the statements were 'like' or 'unlike' their views. Women who rate statements in a statistically similar way share a viewpoint.

We found that women perceive safety differently in parks. Women's views clustered into 3 distinct viewpoints. Across these viewpoints, there were 8 areas of agreement.

## WOMEN AGREE:

1. Parks that are busy throughout the day feel safer.

2. Organised group activities support women to feel safer and more confident using parks.

3. The presence of women in parks are a sign of safety. But, women-only areas aren't the solution.

4. Seeing other users of a similar identity in parks is reassuring, though a diversity of users suggests parks are inclusive.

5. If a woman is being harassed, other nearby park users cannot be relied upon to intervene.

6. Women should not have to use mobile safety apps and give up their freedom to feel safe.

7. It is safer to ignore than challenge unwanted comments or attention in parks.

8. Fences and walls around the edges of parks limit escape, visibility and being heard.

## VIEWPOINTS

Women agree that parks were unsafe after dark but had different solutions:

### 1. Reassurance & independence



Women being able to use parks alone throughout the day is an indicator of park safety. Parks should be better designed and managed with women's safety in mind, particularly after dark. Lots can be done, but authorities are not doing enough.

Improved lighting, the presence of police officers or park staff, cutting back vegetation, and facilitating use of the park so it is busy, are practical ways to improve park safety.

Visible reassurance measures, particularly lighting and staffing, help women feel safer and more confident using parks alone after dark. Women visit familiar and busier parks as a strategy to feel safe.

Design solutions empower women to use parks and enhance quality of life, but male behaviour and social attitudes need to change to address the foundations of women's fears.

### 2. Change society



The pervasive threat of violence and harassment (sexist and racist) against women makes them feel vulnerable anywhere. This threat feels amplified after dark and in secluded spaces, like parks.

Women's fears cannot be designed-out. Lighting and visible security measures may give a 'false' sense of safety. Nothing can be done to parks to make them feel safe enough to use after dark. Neither will personal safety measures make women any safer.

Lone men in parks are not to be trusted. Men and boys' behaviour and attitudes must be addressed, shifting the burden from women to men and society.

The past experiences and identities of women affect their experience of parks. Young women, women of colour, and those who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to experience abuse, whilst older women and those with health conditions are less likely to escape.

### 3. Familiarity & Danger Spotters



Women distinguished between 'safe' and 'unsafe' parks. Parks can be safe if they are busy, well kept, and used by people who have legitimate reasons to be there.

They tend to avoid parks with a bad reputation - scruffy, disorderly parks with teenagers drinking, using drugs or engaging in anti-social behaviour.

Being able to see a good distance to spot dangers, having alternative routes to navigate and lots of exits in parks is important for feeling and staying safe. Cut back vegetation where people can hide.

Going to familiar parks and visiting with friends and family is a way to manage risk and feel safer. Improving parks and the behaviour of users is prioritised over changing the broader social context.