

Report on Women's Running Safety in Gwent and Surrounding Areas

Introduction

It's Sunday 2nd March 2025. Runners are lining up in the starting pens to run the Newport Half Marathon. Two men from a Welsh Athletics affiliated club in South Wales are stood behind me gearing up to run the 13.1 miles, discussing their race strategies.

"I just find something nice to look at in front of me and then I try and keep up with that", one laughs.

"Nice, nice plan," the other laughs back.

This small moment reflects a much wider issue; a pattern of behaviour that female runners experience regularly. In an organised event – a space that should be safe and where runners ought to be allies – this comment highlights how normalised the objectification of women is within public spaces. These everyday acts sit on a broader continuum rooted in societal gender inequality, often described as rape culture: the normalisation, trivialisation, and minimisation of behaviours that objectify, harass or intimidate women.

This report explores not only the experiences of female runners, but the underlying patriarchal structures and cultural norms that uphold these behaviours. It recognises that women's safety while running is not just a policing issue, but a community responsibility requiring cultural change, early intervention, and shared ownership.

Background

The fear that female runners and those exercising outdoors face is not isolated; it's a shared and pervasive reality. A UK report produced by SportsShoes.com in 2025 shows that 70% of women have experienced an intimidating incident when out running. Incidents ranged from staring, being followed, beeping, cat-calling and verbal abuse.

While both men and women report incidents of harassment, the severity, frequency, and behavioural adaptations made as a result are disproportionately experienced by women. This unequal reality is not accidental; it stems from long-standing societal norms that position women as responsible for avoiding harm, rather than addressing the harmful behaviour.

The issue of female safety with specific reference to street-based harassment, is not a new concept. Academic work emerged through the 1980s and 90s with many researchers citing that any campaign aiming to reduce women's fear of crime must include a commitment to improve their quality of lives, free from violence and harassment (Stanko, 1995).

Growing awareness of public safety issues for women have undoubtedly led to some successful frameworks and policies; for example - the [Safer Streets](#) initiative,

the Violence Against Women and Girls ([VAWG](#)) agenda and changes in [sexual harassment legislation](#) following the [Me Too](#) movement.

Data collected by Miles et al (2025) on experiences of abuse by female runners in the UK, showed a pattern of trivialisation and normalisation of abuse, along with high levels of non-reporting and barriers to reporting. Their data also draws on the adaptions and invisible safety planning that female runners do; not just the physical adjustments such as the tracking devices used and the clothing worn, but the self-defence techniques that are considered, the memorising of vehicles and distinctive features of passers-by – everything that women consider is not just what we *do*, but who we *are*.

Furthermore, as Vera-Gray (2018) noted, the amount of time that goes into feeling safe goes largely unnoticed by the women doing it, along with the wider world, yet women and girls are first to be blamed when safety planning fails.

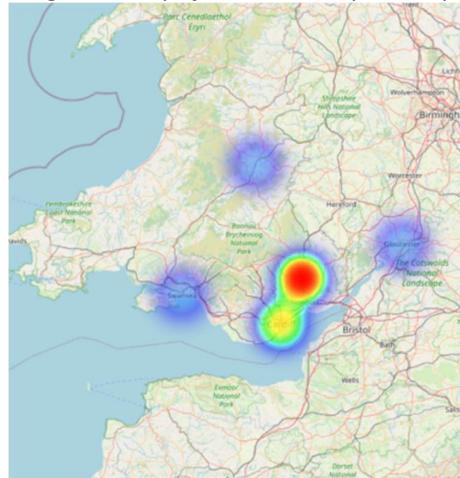
Crucially, there is far less evidence of efforts to address male behaviour or challenge the cultural attitudes that permit harassment, which is a central limitation of current approaches. There also remains a lack of national or local policy for women using public spaces for exercise.

The Local Picture

A survey conducted in Gwent, South Wales between late February and March 2025 explored trends in behaviour and societal attitudes around female runner safety.

The findings were predominantly obtained from Gwent residents, with some from neighbouring or closely surrounding boroughs. The below heatmap represents responses based on postcode prefixes, however, it is worth noting that many of the CF postcodes that are shown as Cardiff (Vale of Glamorgan) could actually be from Caerphilly (within Gwent). Whilst location data is useful information, issues of safety for women who run extends beyond any single area and is a national public safety concern.

Image: heatmap of locations – respondent postcode prefixes



Key Findings from the Survey

- **56.2%** of women reported experiencing harassment while running.
- Only **8.4%** reported incidents to the police.
- **89.9%** felt female safety should be *everyone's business*.
- **69.7%** believed education should start early to address harmful attitudes.
- **40.4%** felt police could do more to engage men.
- **78.5%** believed more preventative work should be undertaken.
- **51.5%** restricted their exercise due to fear.

Safety measures – those taken by respondents include:

- Route planning and/or avoiding certain areas
- Notifying others of whereabouts including use of tracking devices
- Wearing specific clothing i.e high-viz, no shorts or cropped tops
- Not running with music or adapting volume levels
- Looking at number plates and clothing
- Crossing the street from pedestrians or parked vehicles
- Saying hello to passers-by to make themselves more memorable in the event of something happening
- Running with dogs
- Running only with others
- Carrying something that could be used to defend themselves
- Running faster
- Running slower in order to be able to sprint away if needed

Community Voices - some participant quotes from the survey include:

1.

It starts with education at a young age and built in respect - unfortunately too many are not raised correctly which I don't believe can be corrected later in life. I can't see myself ever feeling safe exercising in the dark alone unfortunately!

2.

It's not just the education of young children but older men too. It's the older men that can be more of an issue in not understanding how just simple things like crossing a road, or not walking to close can help.

3.

I feel that there is an unspoken rule that women choosing to go out alone are responsible for what happens to them and at least in part share blame for the appalling actions of others (most often men). It is glaringly obvious that everyone needs to learn that women are not in any way to blame when they are assaulted. It is always the actions of the perpetrator that are at fault. There is a lot that can be done by councils to ensure that public spaces are well lit and safer however, the largest problem lies in attitudes towards women and their right not to be harassed or assaulted no matter what they are doing or wearing.

4. More people should be educated to keep themselves safe by being cautious before exercising alone. It is very scary for women to be running or walking alone, I think it is a good idea to educate young males in school to teach them it is wrong to mistreat women, But there will always be strangers you cannot trust.

5. I like the solitude of running as well as running with friends. I like running in the dark as well as daylight. I don't appreciate being told to "Be careful!"

6. I was followed once, when out running, by a man on a bike, but he rode away when I approached a main road. I didn't report it to the police, because in the retelling it sounded less significant than it felt when it was happening. I have also had cars beep at me and males shout out of car windows as I've been running.

7. It's infuriating that for 6 months of the year we essentially have to stick to a curfew. Why aren't we making the men stay inside as they're the problem then women can exercise safely? (Very broad generalisation but I get very angry about this)

8. When will we see a campaign on how to stop men from being perpetrators rather than women having to safety plan around their behaviour

9. As a young female runner who runs daily at all different times of the day i have honestly feared a few runs throughout my times and it's normally a fear of what men will do has even in daylight hours I've had men beeping their horns and whistling I think this sport is a lot worse for women than men during dark hours and it should never be like this and I think it's unfair that women runners need to put so much in place before going for a run I share my location with my husband and family and if it's a early morning run which seems to be when I feel most scared my husband stays on the phone throughout the run or I phone a friend I'm actually glad there's a survey being taken for this and there's someone who's looking into how we feel thanks 😊

Respondents' quotes show a consistent desire for:

- Education for boys and men
- Cultural change
- Challenging harmful norms
- Shifting responsibility away from women
- Perceived 'curfews' during winter months to be lifted

These lived experiences illustrate why safety advice aimed *only at women* reinforces inequality. It maintains the expectation that women should change *their behaviour* instead of men changing *theirs*.

Findings Analysis: harassment as a cultural issue, not just a criminal one

The behaviours described by women in Gwent who run mirror a broader societal pattern rooted in:

Patriarchy - systems that privilege men and subordinate women.

Misogyny - attitudes that devalue or objectify women.

Rape Culture - normalised behaviours (e.g., catcalling, staring, 'banter') that trivialise harm.

Harassment while running is therefore not a series of isolated incidents; it is a manifestation of cultural norms that teach boys and men that women in public spaces are available for commentary, interaction, or control.

Examples reported - being followed, shouted at, approached, or beeped at - are expressions of entitlement. These behaviours stem from the same societal foundations that underpin wider VAWG issues.

Importantly, the aforementioned *VAWG Framework for Delivery (2024–2027)* recognises that VAWG is 'rooted in misogyny' and demands early intervention, cultural change and multi-agency collaboration. The findings of this survey align directly with that national strategy. These findings strongly support a community-wide prevention model, rather than an approach focused solely on policing or individual safety-planning behaviours.

Local Initiatives

An initiative by Gwent Police and Welsh Athletics, launched in Autumn 2024 has sought to work with female runners across Gwent to help them feel empowered to continue to run through darker mornings or evenings, and to report any concerns or incidents of harassment or inappropriate behaviour from anyone.

This particular work has seen officers from Gwent Police meet with over 300 runners (as of summer 2025), by visiting running clubs and networks, to give talks on safety issues and how to report concerns, supporting one another and potentially utilising tech devices and Apps to enhance their sense of safety.

This initiative was recently re-launched ahead of the winter months and can be found [here](#). The initiative acknowledges that women are more likely to feel vulnerable or unsafe than men when out running during the winter months, and Gwent Police want to reassure people to continue to exercise whilst implementing some steps to feel safer. Their 'Top Five Tips for All Runners':

1. Keep to well-lit routes and avoid secluded areas
2. Wear bright clothing and lights to stay visible
3. Tell someone where you're going and when you expect to return
4. Share your route with someone or run with others
5. Always carry your mobile phone

Further similar work is underway in other areas of South Wales, empowering female runners to '[Own the Night](#)' – to increase confidence and sense of safety and continue to be active throughout the autumn and winter months.

Welsh Athletics notes that the key aims of the Own the Night campaign are to raise awareness of women's safety concerns, to empower women to continue running throughout winter, to educate running communities and wider public on allyship and ways to support women, and to encourage a virtual group run for when the clocks changed on October 26th. While these efforts are valuable, they primarily focus on safety tools, route choices, visibility and reporting guidance

These strategies support women but do not challenge the underlying issue: male behaviour that causes harm. By reinforcing women's responsibility to adapt to unsafe environments, these initiatives risk replicating the problem they aim to address. A complementary approach is needed; one that places primary prevention at the front and centre of the work, tackling the root causes of harassment.

Good Practice Examples

A pro-active example of how both sides of the problem can be addressed is through the work of West Yorkshire Police in their [Jog On](#) campaign, launched in 2024, addressing catcalling behaviours within the community and delivering Active Bystander training to over 600 people – educating them in how to notice and tackle anti-social behaviour such as catcalling and similar behaviours to women.

Media outlets covered the Jog On campaign by Surrey Police that was carried out in 2025 – reporting on the [female under-cover officers](#) who experienced harassment whilst out jogging. During the operation, uniformed colleagues were able to address harassment on-the-spot – educating those who had cat-called or beeped their horns, on how their behaviour impacts women and the potential legal implications.

One part of this initiative was to work with women to enable them to feel safer by considering protective measures they could take, but a large focus was also on spreading awareness and messaging to the wider public. Inspector Jon Vale of Surrey Police said of the work:

“We have female officers and staff members who have been the subject to such [harassment] behaviour when off duty. The message I would like to impart to perpetrators is this; your actions will not be tolerated. Please reflect and ask yourself ‘is this how you would treat or want your partner, mother, sister to be treated?’

“The next time you see a female jogger, just think, they could be a police officer with colleagues nearby ready to stop you. Your behaviour is not welcome in Surrey.”

Examples such as West Yorkshire Police's Jog On campaign and Surrey Police's undercover operation help illustrate how enforcement and cultural messaging can work together. These initiatives differ because they address perpetrator behaviour directly, use public messaging aimed at men not women, highlight legal consequences and centre societal attitudes, not personal safety.

Such models could be further be expanded by including a multi-agency approach; including community-responsibility, education and early intervention.

Conclusion

Harassment and intimidation of women while running are not isolated events but expressions of broader cultural norms rooted in patriarchy and misogyny. The data shows that women in Gwent are habitually changing their behaviour to adapt to risks posed by men. Efforts to empower women to continue to exercise do not diminish the risk: the risk remains the same unless cultural and societal norms are changed.

Women in Gwent and surrounding areas are clearly asking for cultural change, community responsibility, education and prevention of harmful behaviours, more male engagement and a shift away from women shouldering the burden of safety.

The evidence shows that policing alone cannot address a problem that is fundamentally cultural.

Recommendations

This set of recommendations reflects the survey findings, incorporating a feminist analysis and multi-agency responsibility.

1. For Police

- i. Recognise harassment of runners as a public-safety issue rooted in gender inequality.
- ii. Improve reporting mechanisms (online, app-based uploads, GPS-linked evidence).
- iii. Use targeted patrols informed by community feedback.
- iv. Engage men and boys proactively in prevention.
- v. Run campaigns aimed at perpetrators, not women.

2. For Schools & Education Providers

- i. Integrate education on gender equality, respect and consent from early years.
- ii. Teach active bystander intervention.
- iii. Challenge harmful stereotypes that reinforce gender roles.
- iv. Invite runners/women's groups to deliver assemblies on public-space respect.

3. For Local Authorities

- i. Conduct lighting and safety audits with women runners.
- ii. Improve path visibility, signage and CCTV.
- iii. Include women's safety in all planning processes.
- iv. Create public-awareness campaigns challenging harassment.

4. For Running Clubs & Sports Organisations

- i. Develop codes of conduct addressing harassment and respect.
- ii. Offer male allyship workshops.

- iii. Train run leaders to respond to harassment disclosures.
- iv. Use signage at popular routes encouraging community accountability.

5. For Community Groups / Neighbourhood Networks

- i. Establish women-led community safety walks/audits.
- ii. Create community reporting channels beyond policing.
- iii. Develop public messaging reinforcing collective responsibility.

6. For Local Businesses & Transport Providers

- i. Establish "safe spots" for women who feel unsafe.
- ii. Provide staff training on responding to reports of harassment.
- iii. Improve CCTV and visibility around business fronts.

7. For Men's Groups (e.g. rugby teams, dads' groups)

- i. Deliver workshops on entitlement, respect, and oppression.
- ii. Promote a culture of calling out harmful behaviour among peers.
- iii. Share women's experiences to build empathy and accountability.

8. Suggested Local Pilot Project

A community-led pilot in Gwent could include:

- i. Women-led route audits.
- ii. Men's allyship training.
- iii. Collaboration with Cyfannol Women's Aid.
- iv. Public-awareness campaigns.
- v. Combined recommendations produced with police, councils and running groups.

Final Statement

Women's safety while running is not solved by safety alarms, apps, or warnings to 'be careful'. These solutions, while helpful in moments, reinforce the idea that women must adapt to men's behaviour. Real change comes when communities recognise harassment as a cultural issue requiring collective action.

Women should not have to safety-plan their routes and health routines around men's behaviour. The responsibility for change sits with society; people of all ages, genders and backgrounds

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